



# City of Death

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**Category:** Thriller, Action, Suspense, Mystery

**Description:** In the rough streets of 1920s New York City, 34 year-old Ava Gold, a widower and single mom, claws her way up to become the first female homicide detective in her NYPD precinct. She is as tough as they come, and willing to hold her own in a man's world.

When a black musician is accused of murdering a wealthy white Manhattanite, Ava senses all is not what it seems. Determined to track down the real killer, Ava dives back into her old life: the Harlem world of clubs. But her time is short, and there is only one thing she can be sure of: this killer will strike again.

**Total Pages (Source):** 65

## CHAPTER ONE

Buster Jones was running late, as usual. He didn't have spare cash for a cab and it wasn't like he could bum a ride from someone. Even in Harlem, most folks were hesitant to let a strange black man into their car. He thought it was ignorant, but he understood. In a city that seemed to be growing rapidly by the day as the 1920s were steaming on ahead into the '30s, he understood just how hard it was to trust anyone anymore.

He figured it was just as well. A cab had to wait for traffic, had to stop at intersections and be careful not to strike pedestrians. On the other hand, a black man's feet were much faster on the streets of Harlem. Buster could take alleyway shortcuts a cab couldn't, and he could dance and dash his way along the sidewalks while those cabs remained stuck on the streets. The trick, of course, was not to drop his trumpet case or accidentally slam it against the side of a building. And not to get blasted by one of those treacherous automobiles that were already starting to take over the streets of New York City.

He was sweating through his suit—a cheap little number his father had passed down to him—and he knew he was going to be stinking something awful by the time he got to the Candle's Wick. But that wasn't important. He had an entire band waiting for him and if he let them all down, he'd probably never play in this town again. The jazz circle in this city had ears and it was very good at picking up on bad news and reputations.

After cutting through a back alley behind a barber shop and butcher, he came out across from the Candle's Wick. The club wasn't open yet, but he could hear the rest

of his band warming up. Not only warming up, but auditioning for the club's owner. The sound of the music was muted, but there was one very noticeable thing missing: his trumpet.

Buster dashed across the street, nearly colliding with a woman and her young son holding hands. His trumpet case came dangerously close to hitting the boy in the face. "So sorry," he called out over his shoulder as he made a direct line to the club's front door.

As he pushed it open, the band stopped immediately and looked at him. Buster was fully prepared to take a verbal lashing from them all, but then he realized there was someone else missing as well. Carter, the saxophone player, wasn't standing in his usual spot directly to the left of the drummer.

"Sorry I'm late," Buster said, hoping the trio staring him down had already taken their frustrations out on Carter.

"Hey, it is what it is," Ma said. She was a rotund black woman, always eager to hug just about anyone. Buster wasn't even sure what her real name was; he'd only ever heard her called Ma. She had one of the most gorgeous voices Buster had ever heard.

"Yeah," the drummer said, tossing a stick back and forth between his hands. "Carter kinda ended practice way too early on us."

"Where is he, anyway?" Buster asked.

"I'll you where he is," came a loud, antagonistic voice from the right. Buster watched as a large Italian man came out of the entryway that connected the club to the dining area. His name was Tony and he wore a finely maintained moustache on his chiseled face. He was wearing a suit, as he always had when Buster had seen him, and he looked irritated.

“Sorry, Mr. Tony,” Ma said, still standing on the stage. “You should know that we’re usually tight as a drum. No nonsense or foolery.”

“Foolery?” Buster asked as he stepped up onto the stage and unclasped his trumpet.

“Yeah,” Ma said. “The damn fool apparently got a white fella mad at him. They’re fussing at each other like a pair of cats and dogs.”

Buster was about to ask where Carter and his angry friend were right now, but he got an answer before he could open his mouth. He could hear two men arguing intensely about something off in the distance. It seemed to be coming from behind him, on the other side of the Candle’s Wick’s rear wall.

As Buster started walking to the door that led out back, the argument seemed to escalate. Several curse words were lobbed, a few from Carter’s unmistakably gruff voice. And then, just as Buster reached the door, the other voice came to a sudden stop; they could hear its abrupt pause through the door. It stopped mid-sentence as the other man, apparently the white man who had come into the Candle’s Wick to yell at Carter, fell instantly silent.

“Well, that didn’t sound good,” Ma said as she sidled up next to Buster.

“Nah, it didn’t,” Buster said.

Already not liking the feel of the situation, Buster opened the door. He stepped out into a thin alleyway littered with garbage cans and random detritus scattered here and there. But most noticeable of all, Carter was standing about ten feet to the left. He was looking down to the ground and appeared to be in a state of shock.

“Carter?” Buster said.

Carter turned around and looked at him. A tall, thin black man with close-cropped hair and wide eyes, he usually carried enough energy and enthusiasm to pick up anyone's spirits. but right now, he looked panicked. Hell, he looked scared.

And no wonder.

At his feet, a white man was lying on the ground. His hair was gray, his suit looked expensive, and he looked somewhat out of place in this part of town. The man wasn't moving and there was a blossoming stain of blood spreading along the back of his shirt.

"Carter...?"

"Hey!" Another voice filled the alleyway, coming from the right. Buster looked in that direction and saw another white man pointing into the alleyway. "Murderer! I saw it! Don't you even try to run, boy!"

"Carter," Buster said. "What did you do?"

"Nothing! I didn't do anything."

Thinking quickly and without much reason, Buster raced over to Carter and yanked him back into the building. As he closed the door, the white man who had accused Carter of murder was dashing down the alleyway.

Buster slammed the door and pressed himself hard against it. "Carter, what the hell?" It sounded silly—an almost crude question. Buster knew Carter pretty well. He wasn't sure the man had ever thrown a punch in his life, let alone had the gumption to actually kill someone.

"What is it?" Ma asked. "Carter, did you....did you kill that man?"

But Carter said nothing. He just looked around the empty club with wild, wide eyes as the accusing man outside started to hammer on the door.

### CHAPTER TWO

Ava now had a name to assign to her husband's killer: Jim Spurlock.

For a while, she'd had something of a trail on him. She'd been following him, waiting for him to slip up so that she could bust him within reason and not just under speculation that he'd murdered Clarence. But in the midst of her trailing him, a few things had happened. A case had come up and she and Frank had gotten much closer. As a result, she'd shared her pursuit of Spurlock with Frank, and though it had caused a bit of tension between them, they seemed to have worked it out.

But then the trail went cold. Where Ava had been able to find and follow Spurlock with ease three weeks ago, the man seemed to have vanished. It was almost as if he knew Ava was on to him. And because the infamous Ava Gold was often in the papers and gossiped about on the New York City streets like some sort of fable, Ava supposed that might be exactly what had happened. He may have heard he was being tailed and had switched up his routines.

It was irritating, sure, but there was also an easy fix for it. Instead of focusing on Spurlock, she turned her attention to two different men she'd seen him spending time with over the course of the weeks she'd followed him. One of those men was a fifty-year-old bricklayer named Harlan Moody. He worked in the factory for a small, up-and-coming contractor, helping on the masonry side of things. That said, he was more of a brick maker than a brick layer.

Regardless of what he did for his employer, his routine schedule made him predictable. So at exactly 5:02 in the afternoon, Ava watched him come out of the

factory. He had his lunch pail in his hand—a lunch pail she'd seen him use in the past to store special packages that Jim Spurlock and a few of his other criminal friends handed him. She hadn't seen Moody meet up with Spurlock lately, though—not since Spurlock seemed to have disappeared. She supposed Moody was a little too predictable. It was best not to spend time with creatures of habit when the police were after you.

Ava watched from across the street, sitting on a bench in front of a seamstress shop and pretending to read the newspaper. The city buzzed with life around her. The putter of car engines, the faraway hammering and hollering as another building was going up despite the terrifying financial crisis that had befallen the city. People moving in all directions, business being conducted...the literal heart of the city beating harder as it had more people and responsibility to support on a daily basis. She wondered if New York City would ever stop growing. There were some days where she thought it might very well take over the entire northern point of the country.

When Moody was half a block ahead of her, his back completely away from her, she set the newspaper down and crossed the street. She was getting very good at tailing people, a skill she'd honed thanks in part to following after Spurlock.

After another two blocks, Moody stopped and entered a deli. Ava waited outside for him and when he stepped out five minutes later, she approached him. She did so without any great fanfare or drama. She simply walked up to him and fell in by his side.

“Hello, Mr. Moody,” she said.

He turned to her and looked confused at first. It wasn't every day a pretty young woman fell in beside him on his evening walk home. “Hello to you as well, dear,” he said. “Do I know you?”



“Oh, I imagine you’ve at least heard of me,” she said. “My name is Ava Gold. I’m a detective with the NYPD.”

The recognition was instant, even before she identified herself as a detective. She saw the flicker of worry on his face and then of confusion as he tried to determine how to address her. “Oh, I see. And how can I help you, Detective?”

“I’m curious to know if you have any idea where your friend Jim Spurlock has gone off to.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know anyone by that n—”

“If you lie to me, it’s going to make things much harder for both of us, Mr. Moody.” They walked along as if they were fond acquaintances, crossing the street together as Harlan Moody made his way home. “I’ve seen you with him at least five times in the past five weeks or so. I see him hand you little packages which you stash away in the very same lunch pail you’re carrying with you right now. Now, I can press you pretty hard about what’s in those packages or you can stop lying to me. You choose.”

Moody’s face was filled with anger as he glared at her. He knew he’d been caught, and it was clearly so much worse to be trapped in public as hundreds of people walked the streets. When he spoke again, it was in a completely different tone. His words were harsh and compressed; he barely opened his mouth at all.

“I don’t know where he is. I haven’t seen him in almost two weeks.”

“No calls or messages delivered by others, either?”

“No.”

“Come on now, Mr. Moody. You both seemed very friendly with one another. You

have to know something. Does he have any place he likes to escape to?"

"I'm sure he does, but he never tells me things like that. Jim and I only get together to play poker and do...well, a bit of drinking, if you must know."

"Well now, if you're talking about drinking alcohol, that's illegal, Mr. Moody. It also makes me wonder what sorts of things Jim Spurlock hands off to you that goes into that lunch pail of yours."

When Moody stopped walking and wheeled around on her, she saw that worry and panic had replaced his anger. It was enough to make her wonder if there might be something incriminating in the lunch pail right now. She nearly asked, but figured she needed to play her cards right and not push him beyond the point of reasoning with her.

"What do you need from me to just stop asking questions?" he asked. "What is it you want?"

"I told you. I need to know where Jim Spurlock has gone to. Help me out in that regard and I'll be on my merry way. I mean, think about it, Mr. Moody. I could go after that bootlegger you're buying from, make it real clear where I found the lead. I imagine that would make him pretty mad. Could be a lot of trouble for you. More trouble than giving me an answer."

"I told you, I don't know." But he was scared now, which made her think he really didn't know. What she did think, though, was that Moody might be the kind of man who would happily throw someone else to the wolves if it meant getting the heat off of him. So she tried a different tactic.

"Do you perhaps know of someone who would know?" she asked.

Moody's eyes wandered a bit and he seemed to realize the awkward expression had given him away. He sighed and sagged his shoulders in defeat when he said, "Kenny Sanderson. That's the only person that I know well that is close to Jim. The only problem with that is that Kenny was busted for bootlegging and busting up two cops last weekend. From what I understand, he's locked up over on Welfare Island."

She recognized the name, as she'd come by it a few times while digging through police reports looking to find links and connections for Spurlock. She didn't, however, recall any instances where his name had been connected with Spurlock. But given the rate of crime in the city and the secrecy among the mob and those close to them, this was really not much of a surprise.

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“But listen,” Moody said, his expression going sour now. “You...you can’t use my name, okay? Jim is mixed up with some bad cats, you know?”

She hated the idea of people linked to Spurlock—the man who very likely killed her husband—begging favors from her. But at the same time, she knew it might be in her best interests to keep Moody’s name out of it. She was starting to understand that was how you sometimes got inside scoops on criminal dealings. There were several men back at the precinct who had men just like Moody in their back pockets. Some called these sorts of men stool pigeons.

“So long as this works out and I don’t find you’re lying to me, I don’t see why your name would have to come up at all, Mr. Moody. I do thank you for your time.”

Moody stared at her for a moment, as if he didn’t quite trust that she was going to let him go so easily. He finally gave her a little nod and turned to continue on his way. He walked a bit faster than before, maybe wondering if Ava was going to change her mind about letting him off so easily.

She wondered if it might be to her benefit that her next stop in locating Spurlock was to see a man currently locked up at Welfare Island. It may be a little unjust, but she supposed any criminal might always wonder in the back of their heads if a visiting cop might be able to lighten their sentence or, at the very least, improve their conditions.

She wasn’t sure, but she had some time to think about it. It was after five in the afternoon and the day had been a slow one. She wanted to get home to see Jeffrey and to make sure her father was taking care of himself. Frank would be there, too,

eventually. He'd started coming around a lot in the past two weeks as Jeffrey had warmed to him.

In a strange way, their little misfit group was starting to feel like a family—a strange dichotomy indeed, given that she was still knee-deep in trying to find Clarence's killer. Still, having lost Clarence had opened her eyes to just how much more she needed to start valuing relationships. And with that lesson in mind, she gave one final look to Harlan Moody's back before crossing the street and heading in the opposite direction for home.

### CHAPTER THREE

“I’ll take two,” Jeffrey said, removing two cards from his hand and laying them facedown into the discard pile.

“Two it is,” Frank said. Performing his due diligence as dealer, he plucked the first two cards off the top of the deck and slid them over to Jeffrey. “And to the lady?” he asked.

“Just one,” she said. Working on a flush, she removed the one off-suit card and tossed it into the discard pile. Frank handed her one card back, a diamond that did not complete her heart-flush.

Ava sat across from Jeffrey, eyeing him suspiciously. On the other side of the kitchen table, Jeffrey sat beside Frank. Jeffrey was holding five playing cards in his hand and Frank was leaning over to whisper something into his ear. Frank managed to also eye Ava the entire time he whispered to Jeffrey.

Jeffrey had been asking to learn how to play poker for a few days now. Apparently, some kids at school had picked the game up from their fathers and the idea of a card game that could be played by both grown-ups and kids was very appealing to him. It was evident in the cunning smile on his face as Frank helped him to work on his hand. Smiling subtly, Frank finally backed away from the boy’s ear.

She looked over to Jeffrey and learned right away that her son did not have a poker face. He was grinning from ear to ear and nudging Frank conspiratorially. Frank then whispered into the boy’s ear again and they both regarded the small pile of buttons

they were using for their wagers.

“All in!” Jeffrey said, pushing all of the buttons they’d taken from the sewing kit to the center of the table.

Knowing that it was nearing his bedtime, Ava grinned and matched him. “Oh, I think you’re bluffing.” She pushed her buttons to the center of the table as well. “What do you have?”

Jeffrey cheerfully laid down his hand to reveal that he had a full house—three jacks and two nines.

“Well played!” Ava said, showing her busted flush. “Now when you get caught up in the gambling scene later in life, hopefully Mr. Frank will be there to bail you out.”

Jeffrey swept all of the buttons up and brought them over to his side. “Sorry to take all your buttons, Mom.”

“Eh, I’m a good sport about losing. No big deal to me. Now, enjoy your winnings and get to the bathroom and get ready for bed.”

“Okay,” he said with a tone of disappointment. “Thanks for the help, Mr. Frank!”

“Any time!”

Jeffrey made his way slowly out of the kitchen, sighing deeply as a last complaint that he wasn’t ready for the night to be over. Frank reached across the table and took one of Ava’s hands in his. “Are you really that bad at poker or did you just want to get him to bed?”

“Both,” she said.

“That’s sweet. Hey...can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“I feel strange being here without your father here. Especially with Jeffrey about to go to bed.”

“There’s no need to worry,” she said. “I don’t intend to let you take advantage of me.”

“No, no, it’s not that—though that is a little disappointing. I don’t know...I know it’s your apartment and he’s only living here, but still. I mean, you’re his daughter and if he’s under the same roof as you...”

“Well, if you like, you can run that by him when he gets home. Although I don’t think it’ll be much of an issue for much longer. This new fighter he’s training has the goods to go all the way. A real tough bruno, from the way Dad tells it. He’s being paid really well for his training.”

Jeffrey came rushing back into the room. He came around to Ava’s side of the table and leaped up into her lap. He was getting big, getting heavy. And as he was going on nine years of age, she ate these moments up. Who was to know how much longer he’d find it acceptable to sit in his mother’s lap?

“Head on back, and I’ll be there in a second, okay?”

He nodded, kissed her cheek, and got down. When he passed by Frank, Frank gave him a manly pat on the back, which seemed to send Jeffrey off happy. Ava followed Jeffrey and they went through their nightly routine: Ava crawled into bed with him for a few minutes, he said his nightly prayers, and Ava tucked him in.



“Hey, Mom?” Jeffrey asked as she made her way to the door. “Is Mr. Frank going to be living with us soon?”

“No, sweetie. Why would you think that?”

“I dunno. He’s here a lot now. I was just wondering.”

“Is it okay with you that he’s here all the time?”

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“Yeah! I really like him. It’s weird, though...sometimes when he’s here, it makes me miss Dad.”

This hurt her heart, but she understood it. If things with Frank were going to continue to advance, it was something the three of them may have to discuss together.

“I miss your dad all the time,” Ava said. “But yeah...I like Mr. Frank, too. G’night, Jeffrey.”

She left the room, realizing just how much of a relief it was to have heard Jeffrey give such approval of Frank—the first man to come into their life (aside from her father) since Clarence had died. And when she walked back into the kitchen to find Frank tidying up the cards and buttons, it did feel normal. He was a part of their life now and she supposed the acceptance of that fact was a huge step in allowing herself to officially move on from Clarence.

Well, that was part of moving on. The rest of it came in finally wrapping the case and bringing his killer to justice. And given the little conversation she’d had with Harlan Moody earlier in the afternoon, she knew she had to strike soon. Moody had mentioned Kenny Sanderson—a man currently locked up at Welfare Island. And she still thought she could use his current position behind bars to her advantage—albeit a bit dishonestly.

“So, I think I should tell you that I found out something new today,” she said as she entered the kitchen. She started wiping down the counters from dinner, wanting an excuse not to see him when she ventured into details of what she was thinking. “Something new about Clarence’s potential killer.”

“I thought you were dead set on Jim Spurlock being the killer.”

“I am. But seeing as how he’s basically become invisible, I’m trying to flush him out. And I got a tip on a man who may know more about Spurlock than anyone else. I’ve heard the name before but don’t know much about him. You ever heard of a guy named Kenny Sanderson?”

“I have. He’s one of those scum of the earth types. He’s got at least one rape on his record and I know at least two or three attempted murders. Who on earth gave you his name?”

“Harlan Moody.”

Frank cocked his head to the right and shrugged. “Makes sense. From what I gather, he’s not the most honorable of men. As for Sanderson, though...I’d stay away. He’d not going to care too much that you happen to be a cop. He’s capable of some pretty severe things.”

“Well, from what I understand, he’s currently doing time on Welfare Island. So I rather like my chances.”

Frank thought about it for a while, finally letting out a sigh.

“What?” Ava asked.

“I don’t like it,” he said simply. “I think there’s too much danger involved in this. And I think you need to leave it for—”

He stopped here, perhaps realizing the error he was about to make.

“Leave it for who?” she asked. “More experienced police? A police force that looked

into the case for about a month and then just gave up on it?” She swallowed down the anger she felt rising up and did her best to keep her tone level. She knew he was only trying to look out for her, but he did have a bad habit of instantly going into knight-in-shining-armor mode—always warning to protect the poor, defenseless woman.

“The force gave up because there were no answers. If you really do think Jim Spurlock is the guy, maybe I can talk to Captain Minard. Maybe I can—”

“No. If he knows I’m still digging on this, he’ll be furious. This is something I need to do.”

“What about your job? If you’re ultimately successful and bring Clarence’s killer to justice, then what? You think Minard is just going to forgive you for essentially working a case in private behind his back?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I suppose I’ll have to find out for myself.”

“Ava...are you sure this isn’t just emotion pushing you? You understand how dangerous this is, right?”

She nearly told him to get the hell out of her apartment at that comment. But again, she kept her anger in check. “I can’t let this go, Frank. And if you can’t accept that...then maybe we need to reevaluate some things.”

He went quiet at that comment. He started aimlessly shuffling the deck of cards as one of the heaviest silences they’d experienced settled in between them. And strangely enough, she was reminded of why she was attracted to him in that moment. He was a man who thought things through and did his best to respect her decisions no matter how strongly he disagreed with them.

She was quite sure she was falling for him for those reasons and multiple others, but

moments like these brought a very polarizing thought to the center of her mind. Maybe, Ava thought, I wasn't as ready to move on as I thought.

Because if she had to choose between Frank and nailing Clarence's killer, it just wasn't a battle Frank was going to win anytime soon.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Ava sat at her desk down in the basement, in the office of the Women's Bureau. It was one of the rare occasions where no one else was in the office, all of the desks empty. She'd heard rumbling about a sting operation that hoped to use female officers to lighten the tongues and morals of bootleggers. It was, as she understood it, quite hard for men to deny a willing woman alcohol.

She didn't mind being down in the WB offices, though. It gave her a chance to discreetly look over the records of men like Jim Spurlock and Kenny Sanderson. So far this morning, Ava had been doing a deep dive on Sanderson and finding out just how right Frank had been. Sanderson was a real piece of work and as far as she was concerned, a man like him should be locked up in Welfare Island. For the rest of his life if possible.

He did have a physical assault charge on his record, filed by a woman. She also found one case of carrying a concealed firearm, a charge for inciting a small riot, and an aggravated assault charge that was filed by the proprietor of a small tobacco shop when Sanderson thought the man had shortchanged him by twenty-two cents. And then, of course, his charges from just a few days ago, involving bootlegging and trying to fight two cops.

While it did make her just a bit more cautious about going to visit him, it also made her feel more confident that Moody had been right. Sanderson certainly fit the bill for the sort of person who would run in Jim Spurlock's circles.

As she was reading over the details on the aggravated assault charge, a loud, rapid

knocking sounded out from behind her. She turned and found the door open, Frank peering in with his knuckles still on the doorframe.

“You got a minute?” he asked.

“Yeah, come on in.” Being that it was only Frank, she made no huge stride to hide what she was looking at.

As he entered, he showed her a sheet of paper he was holding in his other hand. “I overheard Minard talking about this case this morning and thought you’d want it. A murder case—a wealthy white man who was killed in Harlem yesterday afternoon. So far, the only suspect is a black saxophone player. The murder occurred in an alleyway behind a jazz club called the Candle’s Wick. The suspect is currently in a holding cell. Seems like a simple case but I thought you might want to poke at it because of the jazz band link.”

Ava knew the name of the place; she’d seen a few shows there in her time but had never had the privilege of singing there. Good Lord, she thought. Singing. Remember that? Seems like a lifetime ago now, doesn’t it?

“Let me guess,” she said. “A black man kills a rich white man. No one upstairs was willing to take it.”

“Well, they took it long enough to make sure the black man spent the night in a cell even though there’s no real proof he did it. But yeah, a few of the other guys were griping about who’d take it, so I snatched it up before Minard had the chance to task it out to someone else. Besides, I think he would have given it to you—the jazz connection and all.”

As she took the paper from him, Frank started to recite the facts of the case as he knew them. “The victim is Monty Lincoln, age fifty-one. A banker who was suddenly

looking for other streams of revenue now that the stock market has gone to hell. The suspect is Carter Epps, twenty-nine years of age. Sax player by night, and unloads crates down on the docks by day.”

“I know him,” she said, eyeing the name on the paper with sadness. “Not well, but enough to be shocked he might have killed someone.”

“Epps? You played with him?”

“No. But I saw him play a few times and knew a few musicians who had played with him. He was...huh. This is a strange one for sure. The Carter Epps I know was not a violent man. I don’t know that I ever saw him not smiling or joking around. Again, though...like I said, I don’t know him well at all.” She considered this for a moment, trying to draw up a better picture of the man she remembered. “No details yet?”

“Just that a white man was found dead with a black man standing over him. The only initial witnesses were the other band members and the owner of the club.”

“The Candle’s Wick is owned by a huge Italian guy—Tony something or another,” Ava said. “Again...someone I barely know. But I think he’d be on the up-and up regardless of the color of a man’s skin.”

“Want to pay him a visit?”

Ava paused before responding. She could feel the tension between them, a tension that had never truly let up the night before. Even after he’d left an hour after the poker game at the kitchen table, Ava had felt it.

“Did you take this case so eagerly hoping to distract me from Jim Spurlock and Kenny Sanderson?”



“No,” he said, with a flare of irritation in his voice. “I took it because I thought you’d want the opportunity to give this Carter guy a fair chance. I think you and I are the only ones out of this building that would, sad as that sounds.”

“In that case...thank you. Do you have anything better to do right now? Want to take a trip into Harlem with me?”

“Yeah, I’d love to go.” He grinned and she thought it felt a little forced. “You know, as far as Minard and anyone else in the precinct knows, we’re partners.”

“At work or away from work?” she asked.

“You know, surprisingly, I don’t think anyone has any idea that there’s anything going on between us.”

“Then they’re not very good cops.”

They headed for the doorway and when she was about to pass through, Ava felt Frank’s hand fall on her shoulder. “Hey, I do think I need to apologize for last night.”

“Why? You did nothing wrong. You just expressed your opinion. And while I understand it came from a protective place, I just happen to disagree with it.”

“So you’re not angry?”

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She had to think about it for a moment. While she knew she wasn't angry exactly, there was indeed a feeling she could not quite identify. "I think maybe I'm disappointed. A few weeks ago, you seemed on board with helping me with Clarence's case. It seems that you've sort of backtracked on that a bit. Almost like you want a way out."

"It's not that at all, Ava. I think I just—"

She shook her head, not in a dismissive way but in a polite gesture. She placed her hand on his arm and offered a small smile. "We can talk about it later. Right now, I'd like to get to the Candle's Wick before the court of public opinion already decides this case is closed."

"You don't want to speak with Epps first?"

"Honestly, no. Shouldn't we get the story from everyone else but the suspect? I mean, if he's already in a cell, he's not going anywhere, right?"

"So you want to go back and interview the rest of the band, I take it? People who have already been interviewed by other cops?"

"I do. Come on, Frank. You read the same lazy reports I read. There's nothing there."

He chuckled at her and said, "Yeah, I'll give you that. It was one of the briefest reports I ever saw." He then looked to the floor for a moment. She understood the polarizing nature of their relationship and tried to remind herself how hard it must constantly be for him. Frank was a no-nonsense kind of fella—a man's man that a lot

of the other dicks in the station looked up to. So for him to be playing catch-up on the emotional status of their relationship had to be hard. Hell, to be on the second tier of anything was certainly hard for a man like Frank.

“I assume you know the way to the Candle’s Wick?” he asked, again stepping to the side to let her take the lead on yet another aspect of their relationship.

“I do.” And then, because she felt it was appropriate and he at the very least deserved it for making sure she got this case, she leaned in and gave him a quick kiss—just a little peck on the lips. “Come on, Detective Wimbly.”

Together, they left the office of the Women’s Bureau and headed out into the city where another case was waiting for them among the quiet chaos of a creeping financial ruin that seemed to quietly haunt every block.

### CHAPTER FIVE

Frank did his very best to put his protective nature in his back pocket as he and Ava drove into Harlem. Because he'd been a detective within the city for nearly a decade now, he had a decent knowledge of most areas of New York City. To think that Ava knew these Harlem streets more because of life experience than out of necessity was a little startling to him. He wasn't so sure why it was so hard for him to envision her in a life before her time on the force, a time when she'd frequented clubs like the Candle's Wick. He supposed it was because when he tried to think of her life before she'd become a detective, she'd been married to Clarence—a man he'd known and respected. And, he knew, a man Ava still missed and loved.

What he'd not been able to tell her last night, and what she'd not allowed him to say before they left the station, was that he wanted her to stay away from Spurlock and Sanderson because he was starting to care too much about her. He didn't want her sticking her nose into dangerous business because he was starting to fall in love with that nose—and the rest of her as well.

This was yet another emotion he tried to keep stuffed down as he pulled the patrol car to the side of the street. He was just now starting to get used to the ease and convenience of having an automobile at his disposal almost anytime he needed it. They were proving to be a huge benefit to the police and the last he'd heard, there would be one available for each cop and detective on the force within the next year or so.

It was just after ten o'clock when they stepped out of the car. Though clubs like this usually didn't open until around dinnertime, Frank saw a man moving around inside

through the single window along the front wall. He supposed if there had been a murder on his premises the night before, the owner would likely want to arrive as early as possible to catch any looky-loos who might want a peek at a potential crime scene. He'd also likely want to do what he could to get in front of any bad press before it hit the streets.

Frank found the door locked, so he knocked. When a large man opened it and peered out, he eyed them with caution. "Yeah?"

"Detectives Wimbly and Gold," Frank said. "You mind if we come in and have a word with you about the murder that happened here yesterday?"

The large man opened the door and allowed them inside right away. Frank noted the way the man looked at Ava, as if they had maybe met once upon a time but he could barely recall the meeting.

Ava returned the familiar gaze and said, "You're Tony, right?"

"Yeah, that's me. It does seem like I know you. Or have seen you before, at least."

"I used to be a singer in a few groups," she said. "I never performed here, but I caught some shows. You and I spoke once or twice as I was rubbing shoulders with the bands."

"Yeah, I remember that! It's been a while." He chuckled and asked, "How did you make such a career change? Canary to detective?"

"Long story."

Frank walked slowly along the length of the main room as Ava worked her magic. The Candle's Wick was a small club, with just enough room for maybe ten tables on

the floor, facing the stage. The stage was also small; if there were more than four people in a band, they were going to be very cramped.

“Tony,” Ava said, taking a seat at one of the tables, “what can you tell us about yesterday?”

“I can gladly tell you, but you know I already spoke to the cops, right?”

“Yes, that was just for the preliminary report. We’re on the case right now.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I can tell you right now that the fella they’re saying offed that old guy...he didn’t do it. I’ve known Carter Epps for a year or so now and that just isn’t like him. No way in hell did he do it.”

“That’s what we’re trying to determine,” Frank said, figuring he should participate in the conversation in some way, no matter how minor.

“So what exactly did you see, Tony?”

“Not much, really. By the time I got to the door”—he stopped and pointed to the exit door all the way in the back, to the right of the stage—“the rest of the group had already pulled Carter back inside. But even what they said they saw did not look good: Carter, standing sort of shocked over this dead white man.”

“And they didn’t see the actual murder, either?” Frank asked.

“No. We all heard Carter and this other man yelling in the alley but then the other guy—the white guy—stopped all of a sudden. The band went to check it out and that’s when they found Carter standing over the dead man.”

“The dead man was Monty Lincoln,” Frank said. “He was a very successful banker

until recently. Any idea why he was out there with Carter?"

"No," Tony said. "I wasn't even aware he was here until I heard the commotion out back."

"And you heard nothing Mr. Lincoln said to Carter?" Ava asked.

"A bit of it, sure. But he was really just calling Carter names and cussing him out. I have no idea why, though. I asked the band afterwards and none of them knew, either."

"They were the only other ones here when it happened?" Frank asked.

"I had a bouncer here, in the back. He sometimes helps with maintenance stuff, and I had a leaking toilet. "But he never even saw the body."

"Tony, do you think you could get the band back down here? I'd like to talk to them all at once if that's possible."

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“Well, you’re in luck. They’re due back here around noon or so. They were hoping to get together and talk about everything one more time, making sure they have their stories straight, just in case people like you came by to ask questions of them.” He looked to them, puzzled, and said: “Carter still in a cell?”

“As of this morning,” Ava said. “We’ll be speaking with him later to get his side of the story. Right now, I’m more interested in this witness that claims he saw the murder happen. What can you tell us about him?”

“I haven’t seen him since he left here yesterday. I saw him speaking to the cops when they got here but after that, he seemed to have just kicked dust.”

“Was the band still here when the cops arrived?”

“Yeah, and I think that was smart. They hung around to make sure it didn’t seem suspicious. Didn’t work out well for Carter, but I still think it was the smart play.”

“Did it seem to you that there was ever a moment when the police that were here got agitated with either the band or the witness?”

“Oh, the band for sure. The coppers just straight out assumed the band was lying to them. But I think even they realized that there was absolutely no evidence. There was the one guy off the street who claimed to have seen it, but like I said, he was nowhere to be found not too long afterwards. Still...no evidence, and they still took Carter. I guess the dead man was enough evidence.”

Something about the coming and going of so many people in a short period of time



didn't sit well with Frank. He supposed he could find out which cops had been on the scene and find out why things had been handled so sloppily. It would be as simple as looking back through the report. He also wondered if the only witness had been escorted away for his safety, being that Monty Lincoln was a wealthy white man.

There was too much here that didn't make sense. On its face, there seemed no real mystery involved. But given the statements of Tony and the thin details in the report, he felt there was something deeper. He could only hope that speaking with the other members of the band might clear some of it up.

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"I know what it looks like," the singer, a rotund woman known only as Ma, said. She plopped herself down in a chair directly across from Ava. "Just a bunch of colored musicians trying to stand up for their bandmate. Of course we're going to say Carter didn't do it. I told Carter not to be scared, that there was no evidence against him. Just a white man claiming to have seen the murder. When they put the bracelets on him, though, he was shaking...almost crying. I just...I can't believe Carter would do such a thing. It ain't like him. It's not in his nature."

The band had showed up right on time. There were four of them, and their emotions seemed to be split right down the middle. Two of them seemed sad and worried, whereas the other two looked quite angry. All four members of the band were black: the drummer, an older gentleman named Sam; the piano player, a young and stocky man named Henry; a wiry-looking trumpet player named Buster; the vocalist, a gorgeous and rather rotund young woman that everyone simply referred to as Ma. None of them seemed especially nervous or scared that there were two detectives waiting for them. In fact, Ma seemed almost relieved, though she was one of the two who looked angry.

"Just so we understand correctly," Frank said, "Carter was the only one of you who

actually saw what happened?”

“Seems that way,” Buster said.

“But he wouldn’t tell us what happened,” Ma said. “Another thing I know makes him look bad.”

“You’ll have to forgive me on this,” Ava said. “But he was the only one who saw what happened but won’t give details? You understand how bad that seems, right?”

“We do,” Henry said. “And him not saying anything about what really happened is why the cops came down so hard on him.”

“They say that white man was whacked on the head,” Ma said. “There was a big bruise and his skull was cracked...blood coming out the back of his head. But there was nothing on Carter that would have done that. They searched him and found nothing. And there wasn’t anything out there in the alley, either.”

Ava caught the briefest of glances shared between Ma and Henry. It appeared to be rather conspiratorial in nature and made Ava quite certain that they were hiding something. She started to grow very sad that the more she heard, the more it seemed like Carter Epps had indeed killed Monty Lincoln.

“What are you not telling us?” Ava asked, looking at all four of them, one right after the other.

“That’s all of it, the entire story,” Sam, the drummer, said.

“Buster was running late,” Ma said, leaning in with a bit of ire in her expression. “And Carter was out back jawing with what white man. Me, Sam, and Henry, on time and ready to rehearse, were real mad because it just seemed like that particular

rehearsal was going to hell. Buster came in and by then, Carter and the white man—Monty Lincoln, as you say—were out there basically yelling at each other. The yelling stopped and when we went out there, we saw Mr. Lincoln just as dead as can be at Carter's feet."

Frank eyed Ava with what almost looked like sympathy. He then turned his attention to the members of the band, shaking his head. "You four have to understand just how suspicious that all seems, right?"

"Yeah, I reckon we do," Ma said. "But those are the facts."

"Facts that are bad enough for Carter Epps to currently be holed up in a cell," Ava said. "I'm sorry, guys, but this all looks very—not great. And we're going to have to speak with him. So if there's something you're not telling us..."

Out of the very corner of her eye, she saw Tony's face shift a bit. He looked...almost relieved. It was very much a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment, but Ava just happened to catch it. She subtly reached out and tapped Frank's knee as she did her best to keep her attention on the band for a few more seconds.

"You can either tell us what you're hiding, or we can do the work ourselves," Frank said. "But it's going to look a lot better if you just tell us. So...think about it. In the meantime, Tony, would you mind if we had a word in private?"

Any relief that might have been there faded right away, but he nodded. "Yeah, come on back to my office."

He led them to the right side of the building, where a concave space that could almost be called a hallway gave way to a restroom and a small office. Tony entered the office and, though there was a desk in the back corner, he did not take it.

There was just enough room for the three of them to cram inside. Frank had to basically stand just inside of the doorway.

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“How well do you know this group?” Ava asked.

“Honestly, not too well. I know Henry a fair amount, and I’ve seen Ma around quite a lot.”

“What about Carter Epps?”

“I’d only gotten to know him recently,” Tony said. “Just over the last few months. I’ve been sort of going through these bands, making sure I can find talented musicians that’ll stick around, you know?”

“And what about this bouncer you said was here when it all went down?” Frank asked. “Where is he today?”

“Right now, he’s probably at home. He has a second job on top of this one. It’s pretty common that his day doesn’t end until three or four in the morning. So he might very well be sleeping.”

“Can you get in touch with him?” Ava asked. “We’d like to speak with him.”

“Yeah, I can get him on the phone. But honestly...he never saw anything. He was—”

“Fixing the toilet, yeah, I remember you said that,” Ava said. “And speaking of which, I think we need to ask you some questions, too.”

“Me?”

“Yes,” Ava said. “You were here, and it just doesn’t make much sense to me that you had no idea why a wealthy white man would come yelling at a lowly jazz player. I think you know more than you’re letting on, Tony. And I need you to start talking.”

It was clear that Tony was not accustomed to people speaking to him in such a way. He looked at Ava as if he wanted to throw a punch at her and at that same moment, Frank managed to press himself further into the office.

“Calm down, Tony,” Frank said. And then, leaning against the doorframe and adjusting his coat a bit so that his sidearm showed, he grinned. “Maybe we just all stay here in this cozy office until you can spell some things out for us.”

And then, after looking at them both with a flare of anger so intense that Ava thought the room grew a few degrees warmer, Tony began to talk.

### CHAPTER SIX

Tony had the look and build of a man most people would clearly not want to mess with. As he filled in a few of the blanks concerning what he knew about the inner workings of what had happened in the alley behind his club yesterday afternoon, he looked larger somehow. His shoulders tensed up and even his forearms seemed to grow in size as he clenched his fists on his desk. While it was very clear that he resented the fact that he was being questioned like some common criminal, he managed to get out helpful information without letting his anger out.

“Monty Lincoln was coming by to look the place over,” he said. “His whole stock market catastrophe has me thinking about selling the place—and it also has men like Monty thinking about new avenues of income now that everything seems so uncertain when it comes to cash.”

“Hold on...did you know Monty Lincoln well before yesterday?”

“No. Actually, I’d never met him. Just heard about him. One of my food suppliers knows his brother and we got to talking about all of this stock market nonsense—how it’s all crashing down and these rich bankers are offing themselves. So some calls were made and he’d already been by here two times to check the place out. Just so happens I was away both times—at the bank on one occasion and then out of town, down in Boston, on the other. So we finally scheduled to meet face-to-face. He was supposed to come by here yesterday and he wanted to talk money. I had this particular band in the building because from what I hear they’re supposed to be amazing. I wanted him to see the quality of music coming out of here, you know? Sort of an extra bonus.”

“But instead, he came in screaming at Carter Epps?” Ava asked.

“Seems that way.”

“And you have no idea why?”

“I really don’t. And even after it all happened, I grilled the hell out of the other members of the band. They all swore up and down that they had no idea what the commotion was about. Said as far as they knew, Carter had never even seen Monty Lincoln before.”

“Do you believe them?” Frank asked.

For the first time since he’d started to speak, Tony leaned back a bit. Some of the anger was gone as he looked to the wall to his left, as if trying to glance through it and at the band members.

“That’s the hell of it. I do believe them and I honestly don’t think Carter killed Monty Lincoln. But based on the story they’re telling...what other possibility is there?”

“After the band brought Carter inside, what did you see take place?” Frank asked.

“Well, the witness came to the front door and when he saw that I was here and already on the phone with the cops, he seemed satisfied. Being that the cops were able to speak with him when they got here, I assume he just hung around outside.”

“So he never came into the club between the time you called the police and when the police arrived?” Frank asked.

“No, he did not.”



“And he was the only one, right?” Ava asked. “No one else was around the club during the time immediately after the murder?”

“Nope. Just Leon, the bouncer. Back in the restroom, fixing the toilet.”

“Can you get him down here?” Frank asked.

“Yeah. And he lives pretty close by, too.”

“In the meantime,” Frank said, “we’ll go have another round with the band.”

“Well, hold on a second,” Ava said. “They’re clearly keeping a secret. Or, at the very least, not telling us something. I say we wait. Let’s talk to the bouncer and then maybe even the witness before really plunging down deep with the band. If they’re trying to protect Carter, they’re doing a strange job of it. I think they’re hiding more than we might even suspect.”

“So...you want to what? Scare it out of them by questioning other people?”

“Not exactly. I want to give them some time to decide to do the right thing. And I want to give Carter some time to come forward on his own.”

She could see that Frank wanted to say something but was choosing to stay quiet. Instead, he nodded his head and gestured to the phone on Tony’s desk. “Call Leon, would you?”

Tony picked up the phone, some of that anger coming back as he lifted the receiver to his ear.

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Tony hadn't been exaggerating. Leon was quick to respond, showing up at the club just eighteen minutes later. When he saw that most of the band was also there, he gave them all a skeptical look but said nothing. Ava watched the entire exchange from the small hallway.

"Leon?" she said, waving him forward. "Back here, please."

He came with a bit of caution, not easing up until both Ava and Frank showed their badges. He was a very large black man. Ava wasn't sure she'd ever seen such large, muscular arms on a man before. He had thick, wiry hair and stood somewhere just north of six feet tall. When he joined them in the vicinity of Tony's office, they no longer tried to pretend they'd all fit. Frank remained in his spot by the doorway while Leon remained just outside the door. He peered in at Tony and gave a half-hearted nod.

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“Thanks for getting down here so quickly, Leon,” Ava said.

“Yeah, no problem.”

“Tony tells us that when the man was killed in the alley yesterday, you were in the restroom, working on the toilet. Is that right?”

“Yeah. Damn thing wasn’t wanting to flush.”

“Were you able to fix it?” Frank asked.

“Yeah. Got the floor pretty wet, but I fixed ’er.”

“When exactly did you come out of the restroom?”

“Well, the folks in the band were getting kind of loud, but I figured that was normal. Musicians tend to get loud and rowdy. But then I heard Mr. Tony shouting about something, and he sounded worried. And then there was this other voice—a voice that turned out to be a white man, the man that said he saw the murder happen.”

“Did you know this witness?” Frank asked.

“No, never seen him before.”

“And what about the victim? Had you ever seen him before?”

Leon shook his head and gave a nervous smile. “I don’t...uh, I don’t do dead bodies

well. I never even saw it. But Tony told me it was some rich white man, name of Monty Lincoln, right?”

“That’s right,” Frank said. Just like Tony moments before, Frank glanced back in the direction of the main room where the band was still waiting. Ava could hear the sounds of a drum kit being assembled as they chatted back and forth.

“How long have you been a bouncer around here?” Ava asked.

“About five or six months.”

“Coming up on six months next week,” Tony confirmed.

“You see many wealthy white men in here?”

“No ma’am. The only whites I catch in here are pretty plain, you know? Not poor by any means, but...you know...”

“Normal,” Frank clarified. “Not rich.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ava considered something for a moment and gave Frank a questioning look. He seemed to understand where she was going with it because he gave her a nod and a smile, essentially saying: Go ahead and run with it. She had no illusions that it was because he wanted her to take the lead; he simply knew that she fit in better with this crowd, that she had once been a part of it and would likely connect with them much better than he ever could.

“Tony, I wonder if you’d be willing to help us out?”

“Sure,” he said, hesitant but obviously interested.

“If Frank and I head out to hunt down this witness, can you make sure you know where the band is at all times? Maybe convince them to stick around to rehearse or something?”

“I can do that. For how long?”

“I’m not sure just yet. As long as possible without getting suspicious.”

Frank, already on the same page with her, made his way out of the doorway, excusing himself past Leon as he went. As Ava and Frank made their way out of the club, Ava noticed Ma watching them from out of the corner of her eye as she spoke quietly with Buster about something.

When they were back out on the street, Frank chuckled slightly. “You think it was Carter?”

“I don’t know. I’m willing to admit that the evidence makes it appear that way, but something about this whole thing isn’t quite lining up.”

“Can I ask you something that might come off a little offensive?”

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“You can. Whether or not I take offense, though, remains to be seen.”

“Okay. If the suspect here wasn’t a jazz musician and all of the pieces of the puzzle were the same, would you be so hesitant to go ahead and speak with them? Would you be so willing to assume it’s not them?”

The question didn’t anger her, but it did make her a bit resentful. Did Frank really think she was that biased?

“Probably,” she said. “Right now, I’m more interested in a witness who was so quick to say Carter murdered someone and then made off as quick as he possibly could. That seems weird to me.”

“Yeah,” Frank conceded. “I thought so, too. I mean, I don’t expect that he’d hang around after questioning, but to be in such a hurry after supposedly witnessing a murder...I don’t know. Maybe he was worried his so-called good name would be sullied if it was caught up in a murder investigation taking place in Harlem.”

“So let’s see if we can’t get his name and have a little chat with him. Maybe after that, we’ll talk to Carter Epps.”

She caught the flicker of a smile at the corner of Frank’s mouth. She’d seen it before, usually coming in a moment when she surprised or impressed him. It made her confident, sure, but she also wondered when he’d stop being so impressed and simply see her as his equal.

Together, they got into the car and headed back to the precinct. Before pulling away

from the curb, Ava looked back out at the club, wondering what sorts of secret conversations the band was having now that they were gone.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Though Ava was starting to earn the respect of some of the men at the station, she and Frank both knew they'd have a much easier time of things if Frank was the one who went searching for the information regarding yesterday's witness. It was easy enough to do: just a simple check of the logs from the day before and then speaking to the officer on the scene.

They had a name and address within five minutes. As they headed back out to the street, Ava took a moment to appreciate the way in which she and Frank were starting to work very well together. It made her wonder if the romantic spark between them might actually be something of a hindrance. The argument from the previous night still hung between them, but they both seemed to have done a good job of letting it take a back seat as they forged on with this case. A case, she reminded herself, that Frank had made sure they got.

"The witness's name is Albert Long," Frank said as they got back into the car. "Interestingly, he lives just about two miles or so away from the Candle's Wick."

"Any explanation as to why he didn't stick around for very long?" Ava asked.

"No, and I did ask that very same question. The only answer I got was that Mr. Long was in a hurry—he had places to go and people to see. Was in the middle of business errands. And because the story was so basic and easy to believe, they let him go."

"Yeah, that sounds about right."



“What do you think about the rest of the band?” Frank asked. She could tell he was simply trying to get in the way of her anger toward the way most of the precinct approached these things. And that was fine. Maybe they did need to reanalyze things before they spoke with Albert Long.

“I think they’re trying to protect their friend, first and foremost,” she said. “But I think they also might be hiding something as well.”

“It’s the witness who is throwing me off. That part of town, a wealthy white man calling out that he saw a murder and then wanting to get away as quickly as possible once the cops show up. In my experience, it’s usually the other way around. Anything they can do to seem important or to feel as if they’re helping...they’re never going to miss that opportunity.”

“And alternatively, the band doesn’t seem to be all that hung up on it at all,” Ava pointed out. “The one man who claims to have seen the murder and could prove it is nowhere on the scene and they just...what? Accept it?”

There were just too many questions remaining for Ava to feel as if she could get any sort of handle on it. She thought it through as Frank led them back in the direction of Harlem. She also started to contend with the fact that every time she stepped back into a club, she realized just how much she missed performing. It opened her eyes to the idea that maybe she wasn’t ready to put that part of her life behind her after all. Of course, she had no idea how she’d also manage to include singing in her now-packed schedule—not if she wanted to remain a somewhat present mother to Jeffrey.

She wrapped these thoughts up as Frank pulled the car along the side of the street. The building they’d arrived at was a two-story brick building. In the main window along the front were the words Banking Solutions and Trust. Frank led the way and Ava did not complain. She’d grown accustomed to it in situations like this. Much like most manual labor, the financial field was another area where women simply weren’t

treated as equals. She thought it was stupid, especially given the shape the stock market and banks were currently in. Still, she understood the social structure and also knew when not to upset conventions.

Immediately upon entering, they stepped into a sizable foyer. The floors were made of a sleek wood and there were two very nice, elegant chairs in the back corners. The place smelled of papers, cigars, and pipe tobacco. Directly off of this foyer was a large room occupied with just three desks and several polished filing cabinets. Only one of the desks was occupied, taken up by a spindly man with gray hair. He was scribbling something down in a ledger while a pipe lolled out of the side of his mouth.

He barely looked up as they entered, though he gave a very vague greeting. “Good afternoon,” he said. “Can I be of some help?”

“Yes,” Frank said. “We’re Detectives Wimbly and Gold, NYPD. We’re looking for a fellow named Albert Long.”

At this, the man looked up. He offered a confused smile but little else. “That’s me. Detectives, are you? Is this about the murder I witnessed yesterday?”

“It is,” Frank said. Without being invited to do so, he stepped out of the foyer and into the larger room.

When Long got up from his desk, he did so with the gait and annoyance of a man who wanted it to be well-known just how inconvenienced he felt. “Well, I’m not sure what else you need me to say,” Long said. “I told the two officers that arrived all I had seen.”

“We understand that,” Frank said. “But we also understand that you got out of there pretty fast.”

“I did. I’m very busy these days. With the banks in crisis and money taking a nose-dive...things are quite busy. It’s just been me these last two weeks. One partner quit and the other...well, if you must know, he hung himself in his bathroom. So it’s been me, trying to salvage all of this work by myself as of late.”

“Okay, so let’s make this very quick,” Frank said. “As you can imagine, we have a man currently being held in prison over a murder you say he committed. But you are the only man who saw the murder. So I need you to go back through what you saw. Every little detail you can recall is going to help us tremendously.”

Long sighed, but put his hands in his pockets and reclined against his massive oak desk. “I was coming back from a client’s office. It’s a smaller financial firm, just getting up on its feet about two blocks over from the club—the Candle’s Wick. As I was coming along, I saw a colored man in an alleyway, standing over what looked to me like a dead body. From where I stood, it looked as if the colored man was in the middle of his attack.”

“And you’re sure the man was dead?” Ava asked. “You never heard the two men speaking?”

“No. I just saw the colored man standing by a fallen white man. I was close enough by that point that I able to look down the alleyway and actually see them. And the moment they came into view, the colored man not only saw me, but he was in the middle of his attack.”

“And how did he attack?” Frank asked.

“There was something in his hand. I’m not sure what it was. Maybe some sort of musical instrument. He used it to hit the man over the head. The man dropped right away. His knees sort of went to jelly, you know? And right away, I yelled. I’m ashamed to say that was about all I did. I’m not exactly young anymore, not in great

shape, so I wasn't going to run up there and assault the man. I'm not the police, of course. So I simply yelled."

"And what happened then?" Ava asked. She thought she saw a piece from his testimony that didn't line up at all, but she needed to analyze it a bit more.

"And then two people came out of the alleyway door. They saw what had happened and yanked him back inside."

"And you stayed there until the police arrived, right?" Ava asked.

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“Yes, I did. I tried going into the club, but the owner wouldn’t let me. There was also some very large man poking about—a bouncer, I assume. So I didn’t want to start trouble. I simply walked back outside and waited for the police to arrive.”

“Sir,” Ava said, “in that entire time, did you ever see the man you accused of the murder try to leave?”

“You know, I didn’t,” he said thoughtfully. “I don’t know if the owner made him stay there or if the other colored folks talked him into staying but now that I think of it...no. He never once tried to leave.”

“And were you still there when the man was arrested?”

“No, I wasn’t. But one of the officers assured me that the murderer would be taken to prison.”

Ava looked to Frank to see if he had any further questions, and when it was obvious he didn’t, she turned back for the foyer.

“That’s all, then,” Frank said. Then, tipping his hat, he added: “Thanks for your time.”

When they were back outside, standing in front of the building, Frank peered back through the window. “You believe him?”

“Not really,” Ava said. “He says Monty Lincoln was hit over the head with something large—and that does line up with what the band said about the condition

of the body. Cracked skull, bruise on the head...”

“But there was no heavy weapon found in the alley or on Carter Epps,” Frank said.

“So what the hell is going on here?”

“Not just that, but he says he thinks it could have been some sort of musical instrument. And I can tell you right now that a jazz musician who is struggling to pay the bills is not going to take their instrument out into a dirty alley without a second thought. So I doubt that part of it, too.”

“Why would he lie about such a thing, though?”

“Not sure,” Ava said. She knew what came next and she was starting to feel a bit of panic about it. Epps came next, of course. And she was starting to worry what it might mean if she turned out to be wrong and Carter Epps was guiltier than she thought. Because so far, everything they knew to be facts seemed to point directly to this conclusion.

“You ready to talk to Epps?” he asked.

She swallowed down her fear, trying to seem as unaffected as possible. “Yeah,” she said. “I think we have to.”

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Ava was slightly surprised that Carter Epps was only being held in a holding cell at the precinct. She'd heard of men being tossed into the city prison for far less without much of a trail, almost overnight. It sickened her and she hoped that this treatment of Carter Epps, with no real evidence against him, was a sign that things might be changing.

Imagine, she thought as she and Frank walked back to the holding cells in the back of the building. A female detective on the force and proper treatment of a black man with no evidence against him. Maybe there is some hope for the future.

Yet, at the same time, she had to remind herself that the case did seem like a sure thing. Carter had been heard arguing with Monty Lincoln, and there was at least one person who claimed to have actually seen the attack. And then there was even Carter's entire band reporting that they had seen Carter kneeling by the freshly killed body. It was going to be a hard one to prove otherwise, and she wasn't sure why she had such a hard time keeping that in mind. Perhaps it was because now, as a detective, she was getting a firsthand look at some of the racist behaviors within the precinct and the city that Clarence had often complained about.

The hallway containing the holding cells was in the back of the building, isolated far away from the central hub. It was quiet in this part of the building, the only sounds coming from one of the prisoners snoring and another whistling a sad tune. Given that Carter Epps was a musician, Ava was not at all surprised to find the whistling coming from his cell.

She recognized his face at once, having seen it a few times in the past. Though it had been barely over a year since she'd last seen him, he looked much older. When he saw them approach and he, too, recognized her, his eyes lit up a bit but the smile that touched his lips didn't remain there for very long.

"Ava Gold," he said, looking at her through the bars. "You know, word on the street was that you'd stopped singing and had become a boxer. But then that word switched and we started hearing you were working with the heat. I didn't believe it, but...here you are."

"Hi, Carter. Sorry to see you again under such terrible circumstances."

He laughed nervously as he looked away from Ava, taking the time to study Frank for the first time. "Yeah, I'll say."

"Carter, we're going to need to know what happened in that alleyway yesterday. The rest of your band said you wouldn't talk about it with them."

"Well, it wasn't quite like that at all. I mean...I was in shock. I couldn't really string a sentence together."

"Okay," Ava said. "So tell us what happened. You arrived at the Candle's Wick to rehearse, right?"

"Yeah. That's right."

"And what happened after that?"

"Well, we were setting up, talking about the set list. And...it's embarrassing, but I felt the call of nature, you know? But there was some big fella in the back fixing the toilet. So I snuck out into the alleyway to relieve myself." He looked embarrassed as



he said this, as if this in and of itself were a terrible crime. “But before I could start, I saw this man...lying there on the ground. There was blood coming out of his ear and his head had been...well, he’d been hit really hard on his head.”

“So...wait. You’re saying the man was already dead when you stepped out into the alley?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you see him before you found him dead?”

“Yeah, he was in the club for a bit, sort of here and there. I didn’t think anything of it. I figured he was one of Tony’s friends, you know? He did get awful angry at me for a second when I didn’t refer to him as ‘sir,’ though.”

“Okay,” Frank said. “Now, tell us what happened after you found his body in the alley.”

“Well, when I knew what I was seeing, I sort of hunkered down over him, trying to see if he was still alive. But before I had the chance to even check, there was this other man that came around the corner, off the street. He saw me and the dead man and started yelling at me. He said that I did it, called me a murderer. He got real loud.”

Already, the story didn’t line up with what they’d gotten from Tony and the rest of the band. It also veered from the story Albert Long had told them.

“When you found the dead man,” Ava said, “did you have anything in your hand? Anything that might have looked like a weapon to the witness?”

“No, there was nothing. I don’t...he said I had a weapon?”

“He did. He says you had something large in your hand, something that he supposed could have been a musical instrument.”

“But that’s...no. There was no weapon. Even the police checked me over. They went out and looked in the alley, too. I never had any kind of a weapon.”

“And what about the man who saw you there?” Frank asked. “Had you ever seen him before?”

“Not that I can recollect. But, you know...look, I’m not dumb. I can see why he’d think I might have done it. I mean, the man had only been dead for a little while, you know? But he was insisting that I did it.”

“Did he confront you?” Ava asked.

“A bit. He took a few steps into the alley like he planned to fight me, but backed off at the last minute. He just kept yelling at me. When I slowly got back to my feet, he backed away.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:45 am*

“At what point did the back door to the club open?” Ava asked. “When did your bandmates haul you back into the club?”

“It couldn’t have been more than a minute or so after I stepped out. I suppose it was the man yelling at me that drew them out. But by the time I realized they were trying to haul me back inside, the man—the so-called witness—had just about made it back to the street.” He laughed rather nervously and said: “I guess he was afraid I was going to kill him next.”

“Mr. Epps, you understand that a lot of what you’re telling is doesn’t line up with what the other witnesses heard and saw—and that includes your own band members. You understand that, right?”

“I do. But...I’m telling the truth. I was the only one out there. I was the only one that saw the body before anyone else.”

Ava thought this all over, trying to think of some way to find out what truly happened. There were just enough things about the three stories they were hearing that differed to make it pretty much impossible to prove anything. And the way the face of the law appeared these days, she knew that meant a guilty verdict was quite likely. Crimes like this had to come down to the word of reliable witnesses and the most relatable telling of events. And for black people, she knew the legal system was very much under a guilty-until-proven-innocent approach.

“Detective Gold...I know we don’t know each other all that good, but...you have to know I didn’t do this. I didn’t even know that man! I had no weapon, and nothing was taken from him. Like I said...the coppers that showed up and spoke to us looked

me over. They didn't find anything."

She wanted to believe him. In fact, her instincts told her that he was telling the truth—or most of the truth, anyway. The facts of the case conflicted with the prevailing theory. There had been no blood on Carter despite the blood spilled from Monty Lincoln's head. The witness reported seeing something in Carter's hand, but the police never found any stashed weapon within the alleyway.

But she thought back to how the rest of the band was acting, how they'd seemed to be hiding something. It wasn't any one thing she could quite put her finger on. Maybe Carter wasn't the killer at all, but someone was hiding something.

"What can you tell me about the other members of the band?" she said. "Did the five of you get along pretty well?"

"As well as you can expect five picky and particular musicians to get along."

"Would you be at all surprised if I told you that when we spoke to them, I got the distinct feeling that they were hiding something from me?"

Carter seemed legitimately baffled by this. He did take some time to think about it before attempting to answer, though. "Well, that doesn't make sense to me. I mean...they weren't out there when I found the man. Unless they know something I don't...yeah, I don't really understand what they'd have to keep from you."

"Mr. Epps, be honest now," Frank said. "We're trying to help you here."

"Oh, I know. I believe it. But I really don't know what anyone else in the band would have to hide. Buster...I think he got busted for having moonshine on him not too long ago. But I think that's the only trouble any of them have ever been in."

Ava watched him closely, looking for any indicators that he might be nervous. She wasn't nearly good enough to be able to tell when someone was blatantly lying, but she had managed to learn subtle nervous tics in people. But as she looked at Carter through the bars of the holding cell, she saw nothing at all.

"Anything else you want to add before we leave?" Ava asked.

Again, Carter gave it some thought but ended up shaking his head. "No, nothing I can think of. But Detective Gold...Ava. I didn't do this. You have to get me out of here."

He looked scared and, in that moment, almost like a frightened child. She still believed him but there was a kernel of doubt still lodged in her mind.

"We're going to do our best," she said.

Though, looking helplessly at him through the bars, she realized she had no idea where to go next.

### CHAPTER NINE

Ava retreated to the break room where she poured herself a cup of coffee. Frank came in behind her and sat down at one of the small tables. There were two other officers in the room, quietly discussing something.

“You told me you knew him a bit this morning,” Frank said. “But he was talking to you like you were friends back in the day or something?”

No, not friends,” Ava said, shaking her head. “But you know how it is....you meet someone with a similar interest and you feel like you know them better than you actually do. Add that to the fact that he likely just wants a friend—someone who can show him some form of support through all of this—and of course he’s going to try appealing to me.”

Frank sighed softly and came closer to her. As he did, Ava watched the two officers at the able, trying to see if they noticed. From what she could tell, though, they were oblivious.

“You can level with me, Ava,” Frank said quietly. “How well do you know him? We’re not about to step into a case where there’s going to be a conflict of interest, are we?”

It slowly sank in. She understood what he was asking her—almost accusing her of telling lies about how well she knew a murder suspect just because they’d had a few passing moments in the past. Apparently, he thought she was covering for him.

“Frank...if you think I’d keep something like that from you in regards to a case, you don’t know me as well as I thought you did.” Biting back anger, she picked up her cup of coffee and walked away from him. “So maybe think of another line of questioning and let’s try this again.”

“Ava, you have to think of—”

“No,” she said, making her way to the door. “Not right now.”

Making her way across the backside of the bullpen, she was very aware that Frank had come out of the break room and was following along. She had nearly made it to the stairs that would lead her down to the Women’s Bureau when he reached out and took her shoulder. It was gentle and almost kind, but there was enough firmness in it to annoy her.

“Ava.”

She wheeled around on him, now not really caring if some of the anger slipped out. “What?”

“Maybe I was wrong to bring this case to you. Maybe it’s...well, maybe you’re just too close to it, just like with Clarence’s case.”

She gritted her teeth and stepped closer to him. She’d never been this mad at him before and in a very strange way, it almost felt good. “How dare you,” she said. “You brought this case to me. And I think you did so because you were trying to earn points. Putting this case aside, I’d really appreciate it if Clarence’s name never came out of your damn mouth again.”

The look of shock on his face was so jarring that she figured she may as well have slapped him; it would have gotten pretty much the same effect. “Ava, I swear to you

that I meant no disrespect. But a case like this—”

At the same moment, another officer went walking by. He was on his own little menial task but happened to see them out of the corner of his eye. As he passed, he reached out and nudged Frank in a good-natured way. “Heard you and Gold landed that case with the already-guilty thug. Good work, man. How long do I have to work here to get that sort of duck soup?”

The words were like a magnet for Ava’s anger. Even as she wheeled around on the officer, she knew she shouldn’t. And though she tried to keep her mouth shut, the pressure built up by the anger was just too much to contain.

“Thug?” Ava asked. “What makes him a thug?”

“Well, he’s a killer, right? Another black goon littering up the street. Make sure you keep him in that cell, yeah?”

“You ignorant bastard,” Ava said. There was a bit of bass and volume to it. “The story currently being presented against him doesn’t make sense. And unlike some, I’m not willing to just accept flimsy testimony. I’m certain Carter Epps is not a perfect man and has his faults. But in terms of this case, he’s only guilty of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“God, Gold...don’t get your panties in a bunch.”

She felt her hands creating fists, but that wasn’t what helped her to realize that she was on the verge of stepping out of line. It was the fact she’d slightly shifted her left foot back and was starting to stretch the arch, prepared to send the full force of her body into a punch. He’d never see it coming and she’d likely knock him out cold.

So she stepped away. But, as immature as it seemed, she could not help but release a



final statement as she made her way down to the Women's Bureau offices.

"White men only, I see. You boys have fun dividing and conquering the world while the women, colored people, and immigrants sit quietly in the dark."

She heard a few snickers and some collective murmuring as she made her way down the stairs. And though she was filled with anger in that moment, the rage spiraling and stinging like bees, she found herself near tears when she reached the WB offices. She stormed over to her desk, barely even registering that Lottie was sitting at her desk.

"Hey, Ava," she said, not noticing there was something wrong until she'd started on the word Ava. "Oh...oh, is something wrong? Sweetie, what is it?"

"A bit of everything," she said, wiping a tear away as it managed to escape the corner of her eye.

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"No, thank you."

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:45 am*

But the hell of it was that she did want to talk about it. She needed to talk about it. Because the longer she was on this job, the more she was beginning to understand just how broken the world was—and not just out there on the streets, either. It was just as broken within the walls of every police station in the city, in every conversation with well-to-do men of European descent. And here she was, somehow mixed up in the middle of it and mixed up with a man who, though he was trying very hard to break through that barrier, still had tensions pulling him backward.

“Well,” Lottie said, clearly uncomfortable that she couldn’t help, “you let me know if you change your mind. I’d offer to go beat someone up for you, but I feel like you’d never need that sort of help.”

Before Ava could say anything in response, there was a knock at the door. Before either of them could call out for the knocker to enter, the door opened. It was Frank; of course it was Frank.

Lottie looked back and forth between the two of them and then sneered at Frank. “You. Are you the cause of this?”

Frank held his hands up in mock surrender. “I swear I come only as a friend.”

“Sure,” Lottie said. She then looked over to Ava and gave her a frown. “You need me to scram for a while?”

Ava nodded. “Yeah, if you don’t mind.”

Lottie got up from her desk, taking a piece of mail with her. As she passed by Frank,

she gave him that same sneer again and pointed at him. “I’m sure you’d take me in a fight, but I can still hurt you. I know how—and where—to scratch, mister.”

She made her exit and as her footfalls clicked up the stairs, Frank stepped into the office. He kept his distance, only coming a few steps inside.

“You’re right,” he said. “I’ve never lost a loved one like you have. And no matter what things look like between us, I have no right to mention him. For that, I am deeply sorry.” He stopped for a moment, giving her a chance to speak, but Ava chose to remain quiet. Frank cleared his throat and went on: “I do stand by my worry that you may have already made up your mind about Carter Epps—that’s he’s innocent just because you’re familiar with the world of struggling bands. It wasn’t an issue I thought about when I brought the case to you. And you know what? Yes, I did nab that case because I was looking for...I don’t know...maybe approval from you.”

“Approval?” Ava asked. “What do you need my approval for?”

“Okay, maybe not approval. Maybe your favor. I don’t do relationships well, which I suppose is why I’ve never married. So when you and I had the argument last night, I quickly acted in a way that I thought might mend it.”

“Handpicking cases you know I’ll have an attachment to may not be the best way to do that. Just so you know for the future.”

“I’ve taken note of that. That being said, I think we should stick with this case.”

“Oh, I plan to. There’s just too much that doesn’t make sense. And I’m willing to give you an out if you want it. If you think my judgment is skewed and you want no part of it, I get it.”

“No. I want to come along. I’d like to see how this pans out, too. If Carter Epps isn’t

the killer, that means the guilty party is still out there somewhere. And I wouldn't be a very good detective if that didn't bother me."

"No, you wouldn't."

"Speaking of bad detectives," Frank said, "we were talking about how the dicks upstairs don't have a clue about us. So how is it that Lottie knows?"

"Because she thinks like a compassionate human first, and a cop second. Plus, women are just smarter than men when it comes to that sort of thing."

"Is that supposed to be an insult?" Frank asked with an uncertain smile.

Ava got up and walked to the door, passing by him without so much as a look. "If you want it to be...sure. Now come on. Let's go figure out if Carter Epps is guilty or if there's a killer currently lurking the streets."

### CHAPTER TEN

As Frank drove through the midday New York City traffic, he did his best to keep up appearances. Ava was used to seeing him cool and collected no matter what sort of situation they were in. This was true of both their professional lives together and their romantic life. However, while his façade looked mostly put together, he felt slightly torn apart on the inside.

He'd been truthful when he told her than he wanted to stay on the case because he needed to see it through until the end. But what he'd downplayed was the fact that he did still think she needed a more objective perspective on Carter Epps and what he may or may not be capable of. And then there was the fact that he didn't want to let her out of his sight when she was upset with him. He knew it was immature and maybe even borderline obsessive, but he'd also told her the truth about how he dealt with relationships. He'd only ever cared this much about one person before and that had ended badly when that particular woman had found another beau. And until they had settled things between them, he honestly didn't know if he'd be able to keep his mind clear for work. So keeping her by his side seemed like the only fitting solution.

Frank had gotten the address of Monty Lincoln before they'd left the precinct. It seemed like a bit of a shot in the dark, but they figured it might be worth checking to see if the family knew of any potential links between Monty and Carter Epps. This led them in the direction of Manhattan, where the automobile traffic grew thicker. Driving through the Manhattan streets gave something of a glimpse of what the future would be like, Frank supposed. Trying to imagine cars on these streets, bumper to bumper while pausing to allow pedestrians to cross, was a bit uncomfortable to him, but he was sure that's the way the city was heading. Hell, maybe even the entire

country.

The Lincoln family lived down a side street that seemed to have been plucked straight out of London. Their house was a large, expensive brownstone. Just seeing it gave Frank a feeling of anxiety. He wondered how many wealthy families were currently living in homes like these and still paying them off. Faced with the current financial crisis, that must be its own special form of hell.

When Frank knocked on the door, it was answered right away by a middle-aged man with a very long, very white beard. He was dressed as if he were about to step into a very important business meeting but his face was occupied by a stern and sorrowful expression of grief. He did something of a double take when he saw Ava standing next to a man who was very clearly a cop of some kind.

“Yes?” the man said, his voice haggard and tired.

“Detectives Wimbley and Gold,” Frank said, showing his badge. “We were hoping to ask some questions to the family of Mr. Monty Lincoln, if possible.”

“Oh, absolutely,” the man said. He stepped aside and ushered them in. Before even closing the door, the man started talking. “We’ve had one cop come by, but that was yesterday. We were assured the man who killed Monty had been arrested. Is this more or less just a follow-up?”

“Basically, yes, sir,” Frank said. “If you don’t mind, might I get your name?”

“Samuel Lincoln...Monty’s brother. As I’m sure you can imagine, Monty’s wife and son are completely destroyed over this. Anna, his wife, hasn’t spoken but a handful of words since we got the news. And his son has holed himself up in his room. He’s refusing to eat and though he will talk, it’s awful stuff. He talks about wanting to kill the man who took his father away, wanting to take to the streets and do whatever is

necessary.” Samuel sighed and came to a stop in a large, nicely furnished parlor. “So I’ve been acting as the spokesman for the family ever since it happened.”

“That’s completely understandable,” Ava said. “And while we’ll eventually need to speak with the wife, at least, hopefully you can give us some information.”

“I’m happy to do so. And I know quite a bit about my brother. We were very close and I...” He stopped talking for a moment, trying to keep a wave of grief away. He gave a sorrowful smile and said, “Whenever Anna is able to start taking these sorts of visits, I do think I’m going to break a bit as well, you know? But someone has to be strong for right now. So...ask me whatever you need to know and I’ll try my best to help.”

“Well, one of the things that is striking us as odd,” Frank said, “is that your brother seemed to be very respected. A fairly well-known property owner and developer. So we found it strange that he appears to have been working towards buying a jazz club in Harlem. It seems to not line up at all with his other interests.”

“And you would not be the first to suggest such a thing,” Samuel said. “Now, not many people knew about his interest in that club. Just myself and I think one of his financial planners. But Monty had been eyeing a few properties in Harlem over the last few months. And when this stock business got nasty, I think he decided it was the right time to strike. He figured he could get some places for pretty cheap. Monty...he was always forward thinking. All of his uptight friends would never think of doing business in Harlem. And I think it was because of that, that Monty was so interested. No competition, you know?”

“Did he have any working relationships with business owners in Harlem?” Ava asked.

“Now that, I don’t know for sure. I’d assume so, though. Monty was pretty good at

talking to just about anyone, and that included colored folks. And he'd already purchased two apartment buildings over that way, and as far as I know those transactions went smoothly."

"So let's say this deal for the jazz club had gone down the way Monty had hoped," Frank said. "What do you think he would have done with it?"

"He planned to turn it and a few others he had his eyes on into an all-whites establishment. When he started catching whiffs of that stock market disaster, it lit a fire under him. He figured the market crash would send all those sloppy Harlem business owners into a panic. And once the business owners were gone and the businesses were passed on to more capable hands, that would also lead to the beginning of the end of the black population in Harlem."

Ava didn't think she'd ever heard such a racist sentiment, and she'd heard a lot of them. She wasn't naïve enough to think that even the most refined or open-minded folks living in the city didn't have at least a bit of racism running through them, but this was a truly disgusting take on things. Looking over at Frank, she thought it had taken him aback too. Still, she managed to keep herself in check, remaining professional as she pressed on.

"Was he openly hostile to any of the Harlem business owners?"

"Not sure, but I'd be surprised if he was. Monty...well, he could get along with damn near anyone. Especially if there was a bit of money to be made from it."

"And in the little bit he did tell you about these plans," Frank said, "did he ever mention anyone who had crossed him? Was there anyone that he mentioned might be a threat? Maybe someone who had even threatened his life?"

Samuel shook his head and smiled a bit, as if he had been expecting the line of



questioning to end up here. “Not to me. It doesn’t surprise me, really, because the last time I spoke to him, he said he was on very good terms with the few business owners he’d been speaking with.”

“Would you happen to know any of the names of the owners he’d been in contact with?”

“No, sorry. He kept the names rather secret. He liked to brag about all that he was working on but never revealed names until a transaction was complete. He was always a little superstitious in that way.”

A sad look crossed his face as he thought fondly back on his brother. Ava wasn’t sure of what else to ask and, given the extreme views and opinions insinuated by Samuel, she didn’t think speaking to his wife would offer anything else. She had a feeling that Monty Lincoln was the sort of man who shared more information with his brother and other men in his life than with his wife, anyway.

Frank seemed to pick up on her mood. He gave Samuel Lincoln a grin and offered his hand for a shake—all posturing, really, Ava knew. “Mr. Lincoln, I do appreciate your help. And we may very well be back to speak with the wife and son in the next few days. So maybe just let them know that we stopped by, would you?”

Samuel took the offered hand and shook. “Of course, Detective. Feel free to come by at any time.”

Frank led the way out of the parlor and then to the front door, which Samuel opened and held for them. Not another word was spoken until they reached the car, parked in front of the house.

“Well, we didn’t learn a single thing from that, now did we?” Frank asked.

“Of course we did,” Ava said. “We learned that both Monty and his brother are racist and think they are superior to black people.”

“Do you think it was a racially motivated crime?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know. I hate to automatically assume such a thing just because the victim is white and the current suspect is black, but based on the way Samuel was talking, I think it might very well be the case. And if it had gotten out that Monty’s plan was to buy up businesses in the hopes of driving black people out of Harlem, I think that would open up our list of suspects to a wide range of angry people.”

Frank was thinking so, too, even though he’d done his very best not to assume the entire thing was based on race. He understood where Ava was coming from, but he’d seen more of the backstreet vibe this city had to offer, the grit and darkness of it. He’d seen the worst of it, something Ava was only getting her first real glimpse of.

He wanted to protect her from it but as they forged on in search of a killer and in the hope of freeing Carter Epps, he was very much afraid that she was going to end up seeing it up close and personal.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Back at the station, Ava started to look through files from the past few months that had occurred over real estate transactions—intensely focusing on cases that had occurred following the crash of the stock market. There were more than she'd been expecting but she could only find one that had two men of different races involved. So that, as far as she was concerned, was a dead end.

While she'd been digging into those cases, Frank updated the report with the scant information they'd received from Samuel Lincoln. When he was done, he turned to Ava, who was also sitting at his desk. It was an odd feeling to be sharing his desk while there was a romantic relationship between them. While no one in the department was on to them yet, she felt that their every move was being scrutinized. She wished she had her own desk up here in the primary bullpen but also knew that if she were to ask Minard for one, he'd direct her right back downstairs to the Women's Bureau where her original desk was waiting.

"Here's a thought for you," Frank said. "And hear me out...just give me a chance. Because in this theory, I'm going to assume Carter Epps did it just so we can keep a suspect at the forefront. So...we know that Monty Lincoln had his eyes on the Candle's Wick and planned to eventually buy it. So I think the first question we need to answer is why someone like Carter Epps got into a heated discussion with Lincoln rather the owner of the place. You'd think if anyone had choice words for Lincoln, it would have been Tony."

"Not necessarily," Ava argued. "If Samuel was being honest, there was no beef between Monty and the business owners he'd been talking to." She caught on to this

particular train of thought, though, thinking that it might be headed somewhere promising. “It makes me wonder, though...maybe someone else overheard a conversation between Monty and Tony. Maybe that person took offense to the idea of a white man trying to slowly take over a few businesses in Harlem and didn’t take it well. Without the financial gain of a business owner who would be selling, such a business transaction might look like a thinly veiled takeover.”

“Well, if you go by that narrative, then it could have very well been Carter Epps.”

“Or anyone else in the vicinity,” Ava pointed out.

“Well, we already know it couldn’t have been that many people. Again, I think we really have to key in on the band. I know you feel a certain sense of kinship with musicians, Ava, but I think you also have to accept that the answer to this might be staring you directly in the face.”

She knew that as a detective, she had to accept that possibility. But Frank was also right in that she absolutely did feel a sense of kinship with the band. She thought back to her few years as a singer in jazz bands, trying to recall a time when she’d ever met a musician that she thought might be capable of murder. She’d seen a few fights, sure, but those had either been over women or pay.

She thought back to the band Carter played with. They’d interviewed them all and even Frank had admitted that none of them seemed to be the killer. The only reason Crater Epps was currently in a cell was because a passerby claimed to have seen him. She went back through her memories of the band members one by one, trying to bring to mind anything any of them had done that made her the least bit skeptical. They’d all been so timid, so...

“Frank...can I see what you wrote up about our interview with the band members?”

“Yeah,” he said, digging through a small pile of papers. “It’s not much, but you’re welcome to have at it.”

She took the sheet he offered her and looked it over. He was right; there wasn’t much to see but it was more than enough for her to confirm what she’d been thinking.

“Someone’s missing,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, this is a jazz band and it looks like someone is missing. We interviewed them all. We got a singer, a sax player, a pianist, a trumpet player, and the drummer. But there’s no bass player. How the hell did I not notice that?”

“I’m sorry,” Frank said. “But you know I’m an idiot when it comes to music. But is that unheard of?”

“Not all the time, especially if it’s a band that is heavily driven by keys. But with two horns and the sort of drum set-up they were working with, I can guarantee you this band has a bass player. And he apparently wasn’t there when we spoke to them.”

“You think he was just missing for the day or that he made a quick escape after the murder?”

“No clue. But I don’t recall seeing a bass of any kind. I think we can talk to Carter and find out.” She got to her feet, not liking where it felt like this was heading. But then again, she recalled how distant the band had seemed—all tight knit and banding together as if there had been a secret fluttering between them.

“Hey, wait, hold on,” Frank said. “Let’s be real here. If there is a missing bass player and we need to question him, do you really think Carter is just going to come out and

tell us?”

“No idea,” she said, though she thought it was a good point. Carter’s little group seemed like a unit who had each other’s backs no matter what. She may have to get a bit confrontational with him, but she thought she may be able to work it out. “I think I’d like to give it a try, though.”

Frank gestured toward the hallway that led back to the holding cells. “Lead the way, then.”

She did just that, walking to the holding cells for the second time. She saw that two more men had been added to the cells, one of whom had clearly managed to get his hands on some booze. He was huddled in the corner, groaning with his head lolling against the wall. They found Carter in the same cell and when he saw that they were back, a brief look of worry crossed his face.

“Hello, Mr. Epps,” Ava said. “How are you?”

“Fine, I suppose. Been better, that’s for sure.”

“I want to ask you a few more questions, Mr. Epps,” Ava said. “But before I ask you anything, I need you to understand something. I used to be a performer myself. A singer. I played with a few different groups, and never really settled in with a single band, but even then, I know how close bandmates can be—how you value one another and respect one another. And I know how you stand up and protect one another, too. But I need you to be smart when I ask you these questions. Anything you lie about, Detective Wimbley and I can find the truth on our own. The only difference is that it’s going to make this case go on longer and make us quite angry. On the other hand, if you’re truthful and we can indeed prove your innocence, it’s going to go a very long way for you if we can say that you helped us when we asked. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He looked worried now, but he also looked rather resigned in an odd way. It was almost as if he'd accepted his hand and whatever happened from here on out was basically out of his hands. "Yes ma'am," he said. "I understand."

"Good. Now...when we talked to the band, we interviewed everyone, and I truly do think they told us all they knew. But I felt they were holding something back and I couldn't figure out what—until about ten minutes ago. See, like I said, I know how bands work. I know the set-ups and how to appeal to an audience. And I also know that given the sort of music you're apparently playing, a bass guitar is going to be a very important part of it all. Probably a stand-up bass so you can get that gritty but huge feel. Is that right?"

She saw a slight bit of awe in his eyes. He was apparently impressed with her knowledge of how to run a jazz band. But she also saw some disappointment there, too. It was even more apparent in the fact that he didn't seem to want to speak.

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“Mr. Epps, your band does have a bass player, yes?”

Again, he didn’t answer. Frank stepped forward and wrapped one of his large hands around a bar of the cell. “Answer her, Mr. Epps. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

Carter couldn’t look at them when he did respond. “Yeah, we have a bass player.”

“What’s his name?” Ava asked.

“Robert Love. Pretty sure that’s not his real name, but that’s what he always calls himself.”

“And was he there yesterday?” Frank asked. “Was he there at the club when Monty Lincoln was killed?”

Carter eyed them both but seemed to look at Ava a bit longer. It almost looked like he was pleading with her, using just his eyes. “I’m sorry. I do want to help but I know how things in this city work for a black man. So...I gave you his name. But that’s all I’m going to say.”

“Fair enough,” Ava said, already starting to turn away. She noticed Frank giving her a perplexed look. He clearly didn’t think their interview was over. “But can you maybe at least tell us where he lives?” Ava added. “You told us yourself that you don’t even know if he’s using a real name?”

The look on his face—brow furrowed and sad eyes looking down—showed that he



was wrestling with it, but in the end, he looked back up to her. “Yeah, I know where he lives. But please, don’t make me say anything else.”

“Deal,” Ava said.

Carter told them in a whisper and when Ava and Frank turned to leave, her heart broke a bit as she saw Carter crying. In his mind, he’d potentially just turned a friend over to the police. And it made Ava wonder just what they might find about Robert Love before the day was over.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

The man who called himself Robert Love lived in a house that was little more than a tenement building. It was a small apartment building wedged in between six similar-looking buildings deep in the maze of streets that ran along the northern rim of Harlem. When they approached the front door, a stream of six children—the earliest certainly no older than four—went running by them, in the middle of a game of some kind. Other than that, the streets were quiet; hardly anyone in this area owned an auto and most of the residents were either at work or desperately searching for a job.

There was an ominous feel to the neighborhood, which Ava assumed was why Frank made sure to step in front of her. He wanted to be the one to knock on the door and engage with whoever was waiting on the other side. When he knocked, the sound echoed inside, suggesting just how hollow the door was and how empty the apartment might be.

The door was answered almost right away by a tall, thin black woman. She was carrying a child of about a year or so on her hip. The woman was very pretty, though it was clear she was tired and maybe in need of a meal. She sized them up quickly and her face went rigid, like steel.

“You the cops?” she asked.

“We are,” Frank said, showing his badge. “Detectives Wimbley and Gold.”

“A woman dick?” the woman asked with a chuckle. “You pulling one on me?”

Ava wasn't sure why, but it actually did her a bit of good to hear the comment. It was nice to know that her little burst of fame had not yet reached every nook and cranny of the city.

"We aren't pulling anything," Frank said.

With her face still hardened, the woman shrugged as if she really didn't care at all. "Can I help you?" she asked. The baby on her hip looked out curiously.

"We're looking for a man named Robert Love," Frank said. "Does he live here?"

She nodded and didn't look all that surprised to have the cops asking about him. "Yeah, that's my husband. He's not here, though."

"Do you know where he is?"

"He's got a job over at the tire factory. Got it a few weeks back."

"Do you know which one?"

"No. All I know is that it's next to a butcher's shop. He brought home some fatback last week. Said the butcher gave him a good deal on it." She adjusted the baby a bit and sighed. "He done something I should know about?"

Ava waited as Frank took a few seconds to come up with a proper response. "Nothing bad," he finally said. "We just need to ask him a few questions about something we believe he was a witness to."

The woman rolled her eyes a bit. She wasn't buying it but apparently didn't care enough to ask questions. "Anything else?"

“No ma’am,” Frank said. “I believe I know the factory you’re talking about. Thank you.”

She gave a curt nod and closed the door. Heading back to the car, Frank said, “Doesn’t seem like the best marriage, you think?”

“That or the people that live her just get really tense when the police come knocking on their door.” For Ava, it was a bit odd to know that Frank was not inherently racist. She could see him doing his best to remain open-minded on a variety of issues that most other detectives and cops on the force had long ago taken a direct stance on—racism being among those issues. She’d seen it in Clarence from time to time, too, and he’d not shown any racist or hateful traits at all. But every now and then he’d make a comment that would make her think otherwise. Because of that, and because of how she saw Frank sometimes wrestle with it, she wondered if it was harder for a man to work for the police force in this rapidly growing city and not get ensnared in some of the negativity and stereotypes.

Ava had no idea where the tire factory in question was, but it turned out not to be all that far away. Still, in the nine blocks they covered just to get out of the maze of dirty streets and into the more well-maintained avenues, she pictured a man walking to work down this route every day and couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. In their automobile, it took fifteen minutes to get from the residence of Robert Love to the tire factory. Even with shortcuts and little alleyways to cut off some time, she imagined it would take a man anywhere between thirty and forty minutes to get there.

The tire factory was a small building that emitted a plume of blue-tinged smoke from its roof. When they got out of the car, Ava could smell the pungent odor of rubber before they even went inside. Frank held the door open for her and they found themselves standing in a thin alcove. An overweight man stood behind a cluttered counter. He was smoking a pipe and furiously looking through a stack of papers. Behind him, out of sight behind a large brick wall, it sounded like the world was

ending as machines did their business and several shouting voices communicated with one another over the din.

The large man behind the counter looked up and gazed at them from behind a little cloud of pipe smoke. “Yeah?” he asked, having to raise his voice to be heard over the commotion behind him. “Can I help you?”

Jack flashed his badge and stepped closer to the counter. “Detectives Wimbly and Gold, NYPD. We need to speak to a man we were told works here—fellow by the name of Robert Love.”

“What’s he done?” the pipe-smoking man asked.

“Probably nothing,” Frank said, and Ava appreciated him not vocalizing any assumptions he might have. “We just need to ask him some questions about a case we’re working on.”

The man considered this for a moment, almost as if he had been hoping for something more. “Come on, then. I’ll take you to his station.”

He waved them over to join him on the other side of the counter. They met him on the right side of the counter, where he pushed open a small saloon-style half-door that allowed them to come around to his side. From there, without a word or even much of a glance, he led them behind the large brick wall and out onto the floor.

Ava had been in factories where hard manual labor was conducted before, but there seemed to be a tense sort of urgency on the floor of the tire factory. It was a large concrete slab of a floor with large, noisy machines taking up much of the area. Everything smelled of sweat and rubber, and there were dozens of men hard at work, separated into separate stations. Strips of rubber lay on pallets and carts, and the finished tires were stacked in neat rows on the far end of the floor. To Ava, it all

seemed like organized chaos.

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The man with the pipe led them to the left side of the floor. There, a conveyor belt was helping to move freshly stripped rubber onto what looked like a strange, metallic spool. Four men were working around it, including two black men. The man who was leading Ava and Frank along looked closely around the station before taking his pipe out of his mouth and shouting to the workers.

“Where’s Love?” he barked.

None of the four men said a single word, though one of them, a white man smeared in grime and dust, looked to the left, toward the back of the building. He did so quickly, in a move that made Ava think he wanted the boss-man to see, but not his co-workers. Ava, Frank, and the boss all looked in that direction just in time to see a black man hurrying out through a small exit door. A sliver of sunshine came onto the floor as he stepped out. When he passed through the doorway, he glanced back to the very station Ava and Frank were standing by. When the man saw them looking, his eyes grew wide and he dashed out the door.

“Great,” Frank hissed. He took off at a run, Ava falling in right behind him. As they passed by, the workers all stopped to stare, murmuring theories about what might be going on. When they passed through the door, Ava was surprised to see that the man had not run off like they’d assumed. Instead, he was standing directly beside the small set of crooked wooden steps that came down from the exit door.

“Going somewhere, Mr. Love?” Frank asked.

“I thought about it,” he said, not trying to hide the facts of the matter. “But I figured it didn’t make no sense to cause a scene at work.”

“Good thinking,” Frank said. At the same time, the boss-man with the pipe had come to the doorway, peering out. “Thanks, sir,” Frank said, giving a polite nod. “But we can take it from here.”

The man gave Robert Love a distrusting glance before returning inside to the floor. He closed the exit door behind him, the groans and noise of the machines now little more than a murmur.

“So you are Robert Love?” Ava asked.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Any reason you decided to try skipping out of work when you saw us coming?” Frank asked.

“You’re cops, right?”

“We are,” Frank said, showing his badge. “But how would you know that?”

“Saw the gun on your hip, sir,” Love said. “And...well, you have the look. You look like a cop.”

“You always run when you see cops?” Frank asked. “If so, that makes you seem suspicious, you know? So, why’d you run?”

“I’m on thin ice, sir. Had some trouble not too long ago...trouble with the law. And a few days back, I was around some stuff that...well, some bad stuff. I just figured you were here looking for me.”

“Well, we are,” Frank said.



“Mr. Love,” Ava said, “you claim to not want to cause a scene at work. And if you can answer some questions for us, we won’t do that. How’s that sound?”

“What questions?”

“Do you know of a man named Monty Lincoln?”

Love thought about it for a second, really considering the name. “Sounds familiar, maybe. But not someone I know well.”

“How about Carter Epps?” Frank asked.

“Yeah, I know Carter,” Love said. His tone indicated mild annoyance and defeat. It seemed he’d been expecting this question ever since he’d seen them come in. “This is about what happened the other day, isn’t it? At the Candle’s Wick?”

“It is,” Frank said. “We know you play bass for the band Carter is in. What we want to know is why you weren’t at the club when the rest of the band was rehearsing...on a day Carter Epps allegedly attacked and killed someone.”

“He didn’t kill anyone, sir.”

“Well, how about you?” Frank challenged. “Did you kill anyone?”

“Lordy, no!” Love said. He looked shocked and disgusted that anyone might even suggest such a thing.

“Okay, then,” Ava said. “Tell us about this trouble you say you were in not too long ago, and then why you weren’t with your band when they were rehearsing to get a gig at the Candle’s Wick.”

“It’s all the same, you see,” Love said. “I was at the club that day. But when things started getting bad, when they started going south, Ma told me to get up out of there. Carter, too. Like I said...I got in some trouble with the law back a bit...about five to six months ago. Did some time in jail because a white man claimed I stole his watch. I didn’t do it, but they said I was guilty all the same. So when Ma and Carter realized what was happening and that the law would show up, they told me to leave. They knew what it would look like, me being at the scene of a murder just two months after getting out of jail.”

“So you were there when the murder happened?” Ava asked.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Did you see it happen?” Frank asked.

“No, I was inside. But I could hear Carter and that man arguing out in the alley.”

“That man was Monty Lincoln,” Ava said. “And the way it looks right now, Carter Epps killed him.”

“Oh, but ma’am, there’s no way Carter killed that man—or any man for that matter.”

“How can you be so sure?” Frank asked.

“I just know the man, sir. Just a few days ago, Carter just about broke down crying because he saw a dead cat in the street, a little gray kitten. He’s that kind of man, you know? Hates fighting and cross words. Carter would never throw a punch at nobody, so there’s no way he’d kill someone.”

Ava knew that this sort of testimony ultimately meant nothing. But she also knew that her instincts were telling her that Carter Epps was innocent.

“Your bandmates must really like you,” Frank said. “No one even mentioned you were there. Not even Tony, the club’s owner.”

“Yeah, they’re some good friends. Good people.”

“And what you’re saying,” Ava said, “is that if we confront them with omitting that

you were even there at all, they'd tell us you were never out in that alley with Carter and Mr. Lincoln, right?"

"That's right. But...they were only trying to keep me from getting in more trouble...trouble I never even caused in the first place. They won't get in trouble for leaving me out of their stories, will they?"

"Likely not," Ava said. "But if turns out they were lying about anything more pressing, then it may have to be looked at very hard. So you're not quite free just yet."

"Mr. Love, did you see anything odd that day?" Frank asked. "Do you have any idea who might have been out there in the alley other than Carter Epps and Monty Lincoln?"

"I know there was a man that says he saw Carter hurt the man, but I never saw him. I was out the door, right out the back, before he came inside. But he was out there alright, cussing and screaming."

"Anything else?" Ava asked.

"Not really. I mean, there was some heat between that big man—the bouncer for the club—and that same man that Carter was gumming with."

"You mean the victim?" Frank asked. "Monty Lincoln?"

"Yeah. I never saw them going at it or anything, never even heard them arguing, but he was mad. And I think one of the reasons that man, Mr. Lincoln, showed up at all was to give that bouncer a piece of his mind. I don't know all the details but they seemed to be mad at each other just based on what I heard the bouncer saying."

“The bouncer,” Frank said. “You mean that huge, massive black man named Leon, right?”

“Yeah, Leon. I forgot his name until you just now said it.” Robert Love then seemed to regret having said anything. There was a look of shame on his face that made her think he was worried he may have gotten someone in trouble.

Frank seemed to sense this, too. He was starting to look frustrated but she was pretty sure he was also certain Robert Love had not killed anyone. More than that, she also thought the frustration showed one more thing they were both becoming clear on: someone was lying to them.

Between the band members, Carter Epps, Leon the bouncer, and Tony the club owner, someone was not being honest with them. And Ava was determined to find out who it was and why they were telling lies.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They went back to the club, hoping to question Leon. But the only person there was Tony, working on his inventory and taking a day or two to keep the place closed while the case was actively open. It was, in Ava's opinion, a smart move. And while she thought Tony might very well be the one being dishonest (or at least just as likely as anyone else involved) she thought it best to stay on track and focus on Leon first.

After getting his Harlem address from Tony, Ava found herself being driven through yet another dingy Harlem street with the same scenery and sense of quiet desperation as the street Robert Love and his wife lived on. The streets weren't necessarily dirty, but there was a clear distinction between what was acceptable here and what was acceptable closer to the heart of the city, where buildings were being built high up toward the clouds and men were trying to make money hand over fist despite a stock market that had anyone with even a small amount of wealth shaking in their boots.

Leon's apartment was easy to find because he was sitting on the front step. The step was essentially a short concrete block jutting out from the underside of the door to the apartment building. As Ava and Frank approached him, Leon was watching a child at play. The kid was black, no older than seven or eight. He was currently using a stick to whack at a tin can, trying to get it to smack off of a sickly-looking tree on the side of the street.

Leon saw them before either detective said anything. He gave them a smile that seemed genuine enough and didn't seem all that disturbed by their presence.

"Hello again, Leon," Frank said.

“Hello! It was Gold and...Winston?”

“Wimbly,” Frank corrected. He then nodded over to the boy with the stick and asked, “Is he yours?”

“Not my son, no. My nephew. I watch him sometimes while my brother is out looking for work.” He eyed them for a moment and then shifted his posture slightly. “Something new come up with the murder?”

“Yes, actually,” Ava said. “But it’s not something you’re going to want to hear. First of all, we know that everyone in that club conveniently left out the fact that there was a missing bass player. A man named Robert Love. We just spoke to him. And when we spoke to him, he mentioned another thing that no one bothered to mention. Something about you, Leon.”

Leon sighed and nodded his head. “He told you that me and Monty Lincoln had words, right?”

“He did,” Frank said. “Why didn’t you bother telling us about it?”

“Because it wasn’t important. It was just a disagreement, some cross words. And I knew if we did mention it, you’d take his side.”

“And why is that?” Ava asked.

Leon looked at her like she was stupid. “I wish you wouldn’t make me come out and say it.”

“Say what?”

He chuckled nervously and said, “You’d take his side because he’s white. White and

dead. And where I come from, if you're a big black man and there's a dead white man anywhere nearby...well, it's only going to go one way. Now, I think Tony would have probably had my back, but even then...I know how it goes."

"Leon, we just want the truth," Ava said. "I don't have the time or patience to let prejudice get in the way of a case where a man has been killed."

"I think I believe you, Detective. But I also know there aren't many like you out there. Of course...you're a woman so you know what it's like to be thought of as less than everyone else."

The comment came off as sympathetic rather than biting, and she understood him perfectly. "So, Leon, tell us about the argument you and Monty Lincoln had. Start with when you had it."

"Ah hell, it wasn't anything serious."

"Serious enough to keep from us at the start," Frank pointed out. "Come on, Leon. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

Leon looked back out to his nephew, thinking things over. "I didn't kill him," was all he said.

"That's not what we asked," Frank said. "We need to know the details and—"

An approaching figure distracted all of them. The person was coming in from the right, from just down the street. It was a woman, walking quickly and with her eyes looking straight ahead. When she saw them looking her way, she stopped. And in seeing the woman's face, Ava recognized who it was at once.

It was Ma, the singer in Carter Epps's band. Even from about twenty feet away, Ava



could tell that Ma was slightly mortified to see them. Leon smiled at her and waved her on over. She came, but slowly, and never taking her eyes off of Ava and Frank.

“Something wrong?” she asked when she approached the concrete stoop.

“Nah,” Leon said, not bothering to stand up from the concrete slab. “But these here cops know about Robert.”

“You tell ’em?” Ma asked.

“No.”

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“Then who?” she asked, looking nervously to Ava and Frank.

“We can’t say,” Frank said. “But the more important thing is that we now know you and your band, and maybe even Tony, are lying to us. And I want to know why.”

“Robert told us that Leon and Monty Lincoln had an argument not too long before Monty was killed,” Ava said. “And Leon was about to tell us all about it.”

As the four of them looked at one another, sizing each other up, Leon’s nephew smacked the can with his stick, spinning it across the sidewalk. He noticed that Ma was there now and seemed pleased, but continued to keep his distance, probably because of the strange white people who had suddenly appeared.

“I think you should tell them,” Ma said.

“Why me? Why not you?”

Ma cackled, a genuine belly-busting laugh. “Me. A black woman. You know how far my word is going to go? You’re just as black as me, but at least you got them man parts between your legs. That stands for something, you know.”

Ava found it funny that Leon seemed to blush at Ma’s mention of man parts. He gathered his composure and shrugged. He kept his voice quiet, glancing over to his nephew.

“Me and Ma are an item these days. Have been for about a month or so. Keeping it quiet, though. Not even her band members know. I’m the one that convinced Tony to

check them out. So I was there, helping them set up when they needed help and sneaking glances at Ma when I could. Now, on that day, at some point right when they got there and started bringing in their instruments, in walks Monty Lincoln. He'd been talking to Tony about buying the place for a while but I don't think Tony was interested.

"Anyway, Ma walks back out into the back alley for some fresh air and sort of waves at me, wants me to follow her. So I do, but on the way, Tony stops me. Tells me he needs me to check on that bad toilet in the back. I tell him I will, but I need to step out for a second. So I go out behind Ma...maybe a minute or two after. And when I got out to the alley, I planned to steal a kiss or three. But I step outside, and there's Monty Lincoln and he's got Ma pressed against the wall. Not violent or nothing, but he's got his hands on her chest and her backside and she's asking him to stop."

Ma made a hmmph noise under her breath. "I would have slapped him but...well, the white and black thing again. Messed up how I'd be the guilty one there, now ain't it?"

"So when Mr. Lincoln sees me, he backs away like he isn't interested anymore and goes inside. I checked on Ma and she was all flustered and mad, you know. I went back inside while she waited to cool off, hoping Mr. Lincoln would leave. But when she came back in, he was still there and at some point later, I saw him grabbing at her again, slapping her on the backside and giggling about it. And I...well, I just had enough. I stormed over to him and told him to get out. Got up in his face but never laid a hand on him. He yelled back at me, told me that no darkie was going to tell him what to do and if he wanted, he could make sure I lost my job. I started yelling back but then Tony came on over and broke it all up. And I swear, I think the only reason Mr. Lincoln walked away was because Tony told him he was ready to talk about selling the place. And boy, that did the trick. So he went to the back with Tony and that's the last time I saw him alive."

During his telling of the story, Ma had placed a hand on his shoulder. He reached up

to pat it and then shrugged. “And that’s that.”

“But the story as we know it,” Frank said, “is that Carter Epps and Monty Lincoln were out in that alley when Monty died. You never saw him go back through the club?”

“No, sir.”

“And you never saw the altercation between Carter and Monty?” Ava asked.

“No, ma’am. I stayed busy fixing that toilet. Or trying to, anyway. But now, I heard them squabbling. All of us heard that. So I guess he got mad when he figured out Tony wasn’t going to sell and went back through. Probably just mad and wanting to yell at anyone he could that wouldn’t yell back if you ask me.”

Ava wanted to believe him and, based on solely this conversation, she was inclined to do so. But she also knew that someone in the mix was being dishonest, and it could just as easily be Leon as anyone else. The tricky bit was that even if they went to Tony and asked if Leon was being truthful, he could be lying, and they’d have no way of knowing for sure.

In other words, it really didn’t matter if Leon was telling the truth or a lie. Because either way, they had come to another dead end.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Either they’re all telling the truth or every single one of them is a very good liar.”

Ava cringed at the comment from Frank as they drove back to the precinct—not because it was such a blatant statement, but because she knew it was true. To a detective who rested easily on the stereotypes of the black community, this case was already closed. A group of colored people—colored people in a jazz band at that—were present when a wealthy white man had been murdered. None of them would fess up to it and a white passerby claimed to have seen Carter Epps attack the wealthy white man.

Case closed.

But for Ava, there were two nagging aspects to it all. If the band members, Leon, and Tony were indeed lying, why was it Carter who took the fall? And if they were indeed lying, which of the band members were they trying to protect?

“Do you have any hunches?” Ava asked.

“I have one, but it seems a bit out there.”

“Let’s hear it anyway.”

“What if it was Carter? What if Carter Epps murdered Monty Lincoln, but Tony put him up to it?”

“Under what pretense?” Ava asked.

“No pretense. I just wonder if maybe Tony needed a way to get Monty Lincoln off his back because he didn’t want to even be tempted to sell the club. Think about it...a small club owner trying to stay afloat in this economy—at some point, the money Monty Lincoln is offering has got to start seeming like a very nice way out. So maybe Tony slid Carter some money to take care of it. Maybe Tony just straight up didn’t like Monty. He certainly didn’t seem the least bit affected or upset about the man’s death.”

It didn’t feel right to her, but she shrugged all the same. “It’s an avenue to look down for sure. But first, I want to ask Carter if he was aware that Monty Lincoln was assaulting Ma. And to see if the secret relationship between Leon and Ma was as secret as Leon thought.”

“You think there might be a jealous lover sort of thing going on somewhere in the group?”

“I’m not sure,” she said with a grin. “But I think it has just as much of a chance as your theory.”

“So call it. Do we start visiting band members and hit it all over again or focus on Carter for now?”

“I’d say Carter. I’m thinking time behind those bars is making him a bit softer—which is why he told us about Robert Love, I’m assuming. I think after a while, if there is some secret keeping going on, he’s not going to care and he’ll tell us more and more with the hopes of getting out of there.”

“Yeah, let’s bank on that,” Frank said as he weaved his way through mid-afternoon traffic. They spent the rest of the trip to the precinct in silence, both thinking over the

theories that had just been doled out. Ava couldn't help but wonder if maybe they were starting to complicate things. Maybe the answer to it all was a bit easier than they were thinking. Maybe these convoluted theories would eventually lead them astray.

Frank parked behind the station and they made their way directly to the holding cells. Ava noted that a few officers they passed along the way gave them peculiar looks and then looked away quickly when their eyes connected. It very much seemed like they knew something that Ava and Frank did not. A little knot of worry formed in her stomach as they drew closer to the cells.

When they arrived, she suddenly became aware of what those knowing looks from the other officers were all about.

Carter Epps was no longer in his cell. The cell was empty, the door cracked slightly open.

"Where is he?" Ava asked, not realizing until after she voiced it just how dumb the question was.

"No clue," Frank said. "I very seriously doubt they would have released him. I mean, the only other reason I could think his cell would be empty would be...ah, damn."

"What, Frank?"

Frank looked at the empty cell and then redirected his gaze down the hallway, his hands on his hips. He was clearly trying to make a decision and Ava did not like that he was remaining quiet for so long.

"Frank?"

He looked at her and placed a hand on her shoulder. “I need you to stay calm and not fly off the handle, okay? You getting upset and loud is only going to make this worse. But I’m pretty sure the only reason they’d remove him from his cell so soon after the alleged crime is to march him in front of a judge.”

“What? But we never heard anything about that.”

“I know. And I imagine it was on purpose.” He looked back down the hallway and then back to her with a frown on his face. “Listen...I know it’s going to be hard for you, but I need you to go back to the car, okay? Wait for me out there and I’ll go speak to some of the boys, maybe even Minard. I’ll find out what happened and if they did send him to court—”

“Then we’ll make an appearance.”

Frank grimaced, clearly not liking the idea. But in the end, he nodded and started back down the hall. Ava followed and veered off to the left at the first intersection, heading for the exit and the parked cars in the lot.



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She hated that she had to hide away while Frank went and rubbed shoulders with the men just to get some information. The again, she knew it was absolutely the right thing to do. If she went with him and let her emotions get the better of her, she'd ruin any chance they had of getting the information they needed.

So she went out to the same car they'd used earlier, sitting in the passenger seat and waiting for Frank to come back. It gave her some time to sort her thoughts, to try to see things from the police department's perspective. She was well aware that for an officer who did not know the ins and outs of the case, it was indeed a very obvious case—a case where Carter Epps had attacked wealthy businessman Monty Lincoln behind a club. It was the picture that had been painted and it was rather clear. From a professional standpoint, she supposed she couldn't fault them for such a decision. If it was that cut and dry, why not push the process along and have the minor trial carried out as soon as possible? Get the criminal in jail and free up the holding cell.

But on a human level, Ava knew better. She felt very deeply that Carter was not the killer. One step further, she didn't think that anyone they'd yet met was the killer. She had no evidence to support this; it was just a gut reaction based on the little bit of time they'd spent questioning everyone.

Roughly ten minutes after she'd arrived back at the car, Frank came hurrying out of the rear exit. He looked rushed flustered, and ultimately very unhappy. When he came to her door rather than hurrying back behind the wheel, Ava started to get a very bad feeling.

"I was right," he said. "They took him out about half an hour before we arrived and his trial is set to start in about an hour or so."

“Do you know where?” Ava asked.

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go.”

“I can’t. I think Minard anticipated that we’d react this way. So he’s tasked me with something else—heading over to a bank where a man shot two people and then killed himself. Someone else got involved and there’s a small hostage situation. It’s a mess, and they need more men over there.”

“Then I’ll go,” Ava said, defiantly.

“Yeah, I figured you’d say that. Flag down a cabbie and head over to the courthouse on Eighty-first Street. You should have plenty of time to get there. And...I don’t have to tell you how important it is, do I?”

She shook her head. No, she knew exactly what was going on. Today’s hearing would be the decision-maker as to whether or not Carter would officially go in front of a jury. And if that happened, Ava knew his fate was basically sealed.

Ava got out of the car, feeling an acute anger rising up inside of her. It truly did seem as if this had all been designed to keep them out of the loop. Had they spent more time out with Leon, they may very well have missed the opportunity to even know there had been a trial.

“Just be smart about it, okay?” Frank said. “There are certain people in this city who have taken a liking to you, one of the very first official female detectives. I’d imagine a few of those types would be in the courtroom. So don’t go in there showing yourself.”

“You don’t think I know how to behave?” she asked, taking his hand in hers.

“Based on past experience, it’s hit-or-miss at best. You’re sort of an unpredictable dame, you know that?”

She leaned up and kissed him on the mouth briefly—the first time she’d ever done such a thing so close to the precinct. “Yes. I know.”

That said, she left Frank behind at his car, her eyes already scouring the streets for a cab to take her to 81st Street.

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The courthouse was a well-maintained but clearly older building. There was a sheen to it, the sort of place Ava often associated with stuffy men and leather-bound books. She walked in through the front doors and found a single policeman standing as a guard just inside the door. He nodded to her, gave her a polite “ma’am,” and allowed her to enter without any hassle. Apparently, Minard hadn’t sent word out to keep her away. Not that she thought he would. He was a tough enforcer but Ava had also always felt he had a semi-hidden soft spot for her. Every move he’d made toward her had seemed overly strict but, in an almost veiled way, had also empowered her a bit.

The courthouse only offered a single courtroom, with several smaller offices. She located the courtroom easily enough, as it was the largest room in the building, situated in the center. As she stepped through the partially opened doors, she saw another policeman escorting Carter to a seat near the front. A judge of about fifty or sixty years of age sat at the front of the room, looking down at Carter as if he were nothing more than a bug to be squashed.

“This is Epps?” the judge asked.

“It is, Your Honor,” the cop said. Ava noticed that the men didn’t even respect Carter enough to allow him to confirm that this was indeed his own name.

“And this is to be the preliminary trial to lead up to a larger trial based on the alleged murder of one Monty Lincoln, correct?”

“It is, Your Honor.” The policeman by Carter’s side was starting to sound a lot like a parrot.

Ava had heard enough. She made her way to the front of the room, passing by two people sitting on benches, a bored-looking bailiff, and the man she assumed was passing as the state-appointed lawyer who would be assigned to Carter.

“Excuse me, Your Honor,” she asked, “but is there any reason you aren’t directly asking these questions to the defendant?”

Everyone in the courtroom turned in Ava’s direction, including Carter. The look of confusion on his face was almost comical. It may have even garnered a laugh out of her if she’d not been under the heavy scrutiny of the judge. The policeman standing next to Carter made a move in her direction, but the judge’s voice stopped him.

“And who might you be, young lady?” the judge asked.

“Detective Ava Gold, NYPD,” she said. “My partner and I are currently working this case, and seeing as how we’ve not come to a fitting conclusion to it, I’m confused as to how Mr. Epps is already on trial.”

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Detective Gold,” the judge said, the faintest hint of a smile coming to his face. “I’ve read lots about you. But despite your fame, you have no right to intrude on a trial.”

“I agree, sir. But again, I must stress that Mr. Epps is not yet ready for a trial as the case is still ongoing.”

The judge looked to his desk and rifled through a sheet of papers. “Seems that there’s more than enough evidence here to hold him for a jury trial.”

“Other than the fact that there is no evidence to support the claims against him,” Ava said. “That and the idea that the only man who claims to have seen it happen saw it from a great distance.”

The judge was clearly frustrated, the slight smile now gone. He looked to the bailiff, as if wondering if he should just boot her out of here. Ava was quite sure he had the right to do it, despite her position of authority. She decided it might be best to speak up again before he had a chance to make that decision.

“Your Honor, I do apologize for the intrusion. I was only in such a hurry because it seemed that certain others on my force seemed to want to keep me in the dark concerning this trial. And to me, that seems suspicious. It almost seems like they wanted this hushed, wrapped, and done away with as soon as possible. I have theories as to why, but I won’t waste your time with them. But what it comes down to is this: a man cannot be tried when a case concerning the weight of his guilt or innocence is still being determined. I know I don’t have much experience in the field, sir, but that is one of the more clear and simple parts of my job.”

She could tell right away that regarding him as a superior had helped. It truly is simple to sway a man, she thought. Just make him think you're well aware he's above you.

"Detective Gold," the judge said, "what stage of the case are you currently on?"

She knew stretching the truth in front of a judge was not the best idea, but she really had no choice. "We are currently looking into two potential leads, both of which would easily remove Carter Epps from the equation."

"You feel certain of this, do you?" He was still looking down on her but there was at least a bit of interest in his eyes now.

"Yes, Your Honor. I do."

The judge looked to Carter Epps and then back to Ava. When he sighed, it seemed to come from deep within him, a sound that reverberated through the courtroom. "Very well, then. Detective Gold, I will temporarily cancel this hearing, but unless you solve this case in the next twenty-four hours, I will expect to see Mr. Epps back here tomorrow at this same time. In other words, Mrs. Gold, you have one day to find a way to prove his innocence, or he will go on trial. And based on what I see here in these reports in front of me, he's going to likely spend a very good amount of time in jail."

Ava felt the weight of this responsibility right away but she also knew that to argue it would be foolish. She did her best to smile and seem grateful as she said, "Yes, Your Honor, I understand. Thank you."

Feeling that it would be an invitation to danger and disaster if she stayed any longer, she instantly turned to leave the courthouse. She could see Carter out of the corner of her eye. It seemed like he wanted to speak with her but she also figured that would

not look very good in the eyes of the court. Instead, she hurried her way out, hoping it would give the judge a good impression, the look of a woman hellbent on a mission.

As she left the courtroom, her thoughts turned to Clarence. She liked to think that he'd be proud of what she'd just done—of how she was fighting so hard to keep a man she thought to be wholly innocent out of prison. And with her mind on him, she started to think about Clarence's case. Even though he was a murdered policeman, it almost seemed as if his case had been rushed. Because there had been no immediate answers, the force had simply moved on to cases they could get a better grip on—cases that would make them look better for closing quickly and efficiently.

It was something of a wake-up call for her. Yes, she'd been perfectly fine to feel that she had a bit of a responsibility to close Clarence's case, but now she was also starting to feel that she had to. No one was going to do it and it was all on her shoulders.

First, though, the weight of Carter Epps's life was also on her shoulders. And she'd need to free herself of that weight before fully committing to anything else.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Without permission or a license to use the precinct automobiles, Ava's options became limited to cab rides. As she hailed one down and took her seat in the back, she wondered where she should go next. She could speak to the band members again, one by one this time so as to maybe catch them mixing up the narratives, but that would take an insane amount of time, and that was something she didn't have.

Also, the day was coming to a close and she had made a promise not to work too late into the nights so that she would always be there to tuck Jeffrey into bed. So when she got into the back of the cab, she asked the driver to take her to the station, hoping that Frank might already be back, though she figured the chances were slim. If he was involved in a hostage situation, there was no telling how long he might be tied up. She also found herself a little envious that he was involved in something so off the cuff and adventurous.

When she arrived at the station she found that Frank and at least ten others were still at the bank in question. After asking around and getting no concrete updates, she walked over to Frank's desk and looked through the scant reports he'd put together. She spent about half an hour or so reading through them, looking for any red flags they'd missed or areas where there were flaws in the story. But there was nothing—so much nothing that she started to wonder if maybe Frank's hunch about Tony paying Carter to off Monty Lincoln might have some steam behind it.

As the evening wore on, she was torn. She had a limited amount of time to put the pieces together, but at the same time, she wanted to go home. In the end, she made handwritten copies of the notes Frank had put together. It didn't take long because the



notes weren't all that detailed. She then took these notes with her as she left the precinct had started walking home.

On the streets, she could feel the unrest in the city. The whole stock market disaster was taking a silent toll. Sometimes, of course, it wasn't so silent. Sometimes it came in the form of situations like Frank was currently working through, down at the bank where a man had shot two people, taken his own life, and then another employee had taken hostages. For the most part, though, people seemed to attempt to carry on as if the bottom wasn't shaking and threatening to fall out from under them. They were fine to look upon the everyday issues like the city becoming overcrowded and race issues that everyone tried to ignore. But the financial unrest lurked under it all like a shadow trailing behind the entire population and as the day dimmed, that shadow seemed to grow darker somehow.

It was just past six when she arrived home. Her father had fried up a few burgers for him and Jeffrey. There were three remaining on the kitchen table while her father and Jeffrey cleaned the dishes.

"Dinner smells great, Dad," she said, walking over to him and giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Wish I could say the same about the taste," he chuckled. "I overcooked them a little. But Jeffrey here at two and begged for a third. Those three on the table are for you and Frank. I just assumed he'd be coming?"

"I don't know. He had a pretty rough case he got called into a few hours ago. But it's a nice thought."

Roosevelt nudged Jeffrey while the boy dried the dishes with a white cloth. "Take a break, kiddo," he said. "Go spend some time with your mom."

Jeffrey sat at the table with Ava while she ate a burger that while, yes, was overcooked, still tasted very good. She had fresh sliced tomatoes with it and it was all eaten before she knew it. She'd left the other two for Frank, hoping he would show up sooner rather than later.

"Did you have a good day at school?" Ava asked Jeffrey.

As usual, he was eager to fill her in. He told her all about what they were learning. He seemed particularly overjoyed about a man who came in to speak—a man from a construction company that had plans to put up at least two more skyscrapers in the next ten years. Jeffrey went on and on about the grand vision his company, as well as others, had for New York City. Ava believed it easily enough. She saw it on a daily basis, all of the construction and progressive turmoil as the city continued to grow all around her.

After dinner, she sat with him in the living room for a while, listening as he tried his best to read through the first chapter of *Oliver Twist*. He was a strong reader but when he slipped into a story, he often got lost. While she listened to him read, she could see him zoning out, literally sinking into the story. Even when there was a knock at the door, Jeffrey did not stop reading.

Ava got up to get it, Roosevelt having already headed off to bed so he could meet with a young boxer at five the following morning. When she opened the door, Frank was on the other side. He looked tired and a bit weary but she was glad to see him.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"Well, it wasn't even a hostage situation, really. It was someone who was traumatized by the murder suicides and was threatening to copy it." He stepped inside and sat down at the table, shaking his head. "I'm telling you...people start to get worried about money and they'll do all sorts of terrible things. They're losing their minds out

there and...it's just crazy."

"Well, at least you're safe."

"Yeah, I guess there's that."

"There's a plate wrapped up on the counter for you. Dad cooked it. Eat up while I head back in here to have Jeffrey finish reading to me. Maybe we can talk a bit after I put him to bed."

"I appreciate it, but I think I'm going to head home," he said, taking her hand. "It was a heavy day and I just...I sort of just want to be alone to process it."

"Of course," she said. "That makes sense."

"How about you? Were you able to do anything at the courthouse?"

"Yes. The judge has postponed the trial until tomorrow. So I have less than one day to close this case."

He kissed her hand and said, "We have less than one day to close this case. We can start bright and early tomorrow."

"But I could hit up the jazz clubs tonight, see if anyone knows anything."

He smiled and shook his head. "And even if anyone has heard anything, do you think you're going to get anything helpful? Think of the potential audience and who they're going to side with."

She hated it, but he was right. She could spend all night scouring the clubs and could come up with nothing more than biased rumors.

“Go home. Spend some time with Jeffrey,” he said.

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“Yeah, that might be for the best,” she said. Still, she couldn’t get over how much it felt like defeat.

Frank got up and took the burger. “Tell your dad I said thanks.” He then stepped forward and kissed her. It was soft and brief, as he was always respectful about such things when in her home, especially when Jeffrey was nearby. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

She walked him to the door and watched him leave, wondering what he might be like tomorrow, knowing they were on a clock to get this case solved. She also wondered if he’d be able to give it his full attention after the case he’d worked on today. Ava stood and watched him until he stepped down the stairs and out of sight.

Closing the door behind her, she walked back into the living room, where the other important man in her life had just started chapter two.

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After putting Jeffrey into bed, Ava took a bath and then sat on the edge of her bed, looking over the notes she’d written at the station. She studied and analyzed for about an hour before sleep seemed to come out of nowhere and claim her.

She fell into a dream that came like a cloud across her sleeping mind, the sort that she knew was a dream as she had it. In it, she was standing in the courtroom again. Only now, there was just a single person there with her. Clarence sat where the judge had been sitting and when he looked down at her, she felt encompassed in a wave of pure love.

“You know you have nowhere to go with this case, right?” Clarence asked.

“It’s starting to feel that way, yeah.”

“But you also know you can’t give up. You’ve seen most of the men at the department. They aren’t all closed-minded, but most of them are. People like you—people that fight for the disadvantaged—are few and far between.”

“I wish you were here,” Ava said. “I bet you would have already closed this case.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” When he stood up and walked to her, she saw that he was dressed in his policeman’s uniform. It was clean and it shimmered like gold. “You don’t need to take my place, Ava. You need to be your own person—your own detective. You might just end up doing it better than I ever did.”

He took her in his arms and looked at her lovingly. She lost herself in his eyes, and though she knew he was dead, she could feel something very much alive about him.

“If that’s true,” she said, “then why can’t I find your killer?”

“Maybe you’re not supposed to.” He smiled and she rested her head on his shoulder. “Or,” he said in her ear, “maybe the time just isn’t right.”

“Well, when will the time be right?”

He had no verbal answer, but in the dream, he started to dance with her in the abandoned courtroom. Music came from somewhere, and it was nothing she’d ever heard before. It sounded like angels whispering, like thunder during a summer afternoon, like rain on a tin roof.

She looked up to kiss him, but as is the cruel nature of dreams, her eyes opened and

the dream ended.

Ava looked to the ceiling and heard rain splattering against the window and roof. And though she knew Clarence was not there in the bed with her, she thought she could feel him for just a split second. She thought she might be on the brink of crying but she was fortunate enough to fall back asleep before it could happen.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When she arrived at the precinct the next morning, Ava was so distracted by the need to close Carter Epps's case within the span of a day that she missed the fleeting glances the other cops and detectives were directing her way. She initially headed in the direction of the stairs that would lead her down to the Women's Bureau, hoping some insight from detectives who weren't close to the case might help to redirect her thinking.

But on the way, she saw Frank. He was sitting at his desk with the day's paper in his hand. He caught her eye and waved her over. As she changed direction and headed to his desk, she finally noticed that at least half the people in the large room were looking at her. Some were talking quietly, a few even going so far as to speak behind their hands.

This, of course, was nothing new to her. She'd been the subject of much scrutiny ever since she'd become a detective. But it had been a while since she'd felt the pressure of it. She'd almost come to the conclusion that things would be okay—that the men in the precinct would get used to her presence and it would eventually become a new normal to them. But now she felt that maybe this had been nothing but a hopeful dream.

As she neared Frank's desk, she saw worry in his face and she suddenly found the murmuring people behind her all the more frightening.

"What is it?" Ava asked as she approached the desk.



“I’m not sure how it happened,” Frank said, “but this was in the paper this morning.”

He placed the newspaper he’d been reading on his desk. It was opened to the second page, where the first headline in the left-hand column caught her attention. Ava grew cold as she read it, feeling fear and a sense of betrayal. It read: Infamous Detective Gold Delays Murderer Sentencing.

“Frank, this is not...well, not entirely accurate.”

“I figured,” he said.

Ava picked up the paper and read the article. It was brief, but there was more than enough there to make it seem as if she were both entitled and stubborn. The way the article was worded, it told the events of yesterday, when she’d approached the judge unannounced. It said that she had demanded the trial be postponed because of a lack of evidence. It then went on to state that there was plenty of evidence and there was even a reliable witness to back the whole thing up.

“How bad can this get?” she asked.

“Depends on how the day goes,” he said. “If I were you, I’d get out of here before Minard has a chance to call you in. He, of course, knows that you’d never be as spoiled or as forceful as the article makes you out to be, so I don’t think he’d press you too hard. But I do think he’d sideline you.”

“Ah, but don’t forget...the judge only gave me today.”

Frank reached out and took the paper from her. “Then what are you doing in here? Get going before one of these brown-nosers tells Minard you got in.”

She nodded and started walking quickly away from the desk. She stopped when she

heard Frank whispering at her. “Katz’s Diner,” he said. “Fifteen minutes.”

She gave a quick nod without turning around. As she made her way to the front of the building, it seemed that no one was going to make much of an effort to pretend she wasn’t the prime topic of conversation for the morning. She was always aware of at least two officers walking in the direction of Minard’s office; one of them kept sending her angry looks, as if he wanted her to know that he was headed to Minard so he could rat on her.

Ava hurried out and when she got on the street, she allowed herself a deep breath. Away from the prying eyes and already starting to walk toward Katz’s Diner, she recapped the article in her mind. A small part of her was willing to admit the sharpest hurt that had come from it. Up until this point of her career, she’d been the bee’s knees. The papers and reporters had loved her, seeing her as a ray of hope for the city. But now it seemed that the media had turned on her. Not only that, but it had turned quickly. Literally overnight.

She also assumed this meant that someone in the department had managed to find out what she was up to and reported it to the papers. The only other solution she could think of was that the judge had done it, but that seemed rather unlikely.

All of these scenarios ran through her mind as she entered Katz’s. As she found a table by the window, she noted that several people were reading the paper with their breakfasts. She knew she was not so well known that everyone would know her face, but she still felt on edge knowing that a false and demeaning story about her was currently in the hands of a few of the diner’s patrons.

She ordered a coffee and waited for Frank to arrive. She wondered if he was catching any grief from the macks back at the station. Even though they had no idea there was a romantic relationship between them, it was no secret at all that they were partners. She was sure he was getting plenty of jokes about not being able to keep his partner

in line, about how that ditzy dame he worked with was starting to get a little too big for her britches.

Her coffee arrived and she also ordered eggs for breakfast, though she'd grabbed something to eat before leaving the apartment. She figured she may want to fuel up while she had the chance because today was going to have to be wide open and very rushed if she planned to try freeing Carter Epps by the end of the day.

Her fried eggs arrived shortly before Frank came walking in the door. He was moving quickly and with purpose. When he sat down in the chair across from Ava, it almost looked like he was partially collapsing.

"Is it that bad?" she asked.

"Just some crude jokes and comments," he said. "You may also want to know that about two minutes after you made your way out, Minard came over to me, looking for you. I just told him straight because, like I said, I think he'd be on your side with this. He does, of course, also have the entire precinct to think about, too."

"Straight? What exactly did you tell him?"

"I told him that for you to make this story go away, you needed to do exactly what you said you were going to do—prove that Carter Epps was innocent. And it wasn't anything you were going to get done sitting in the station. He nodded in that sort of sneaky little way he does sometimes. He understands what we're up to but I think if you can't really pull this off, there might be repercussions. I think he was pretty steamed that you went right in front of a judge like that, but that's the worst of it."

"Well, for now," Ava said, idly slicing into one of her eggs. "If I can't close this thing by five o'clock this afternoon, that will be the worst of it. The paper will have a field day with it and Carter Epps is going to go to prison for something I really don't think

he did.”

Frank sighed and waved the waiter over for a cup of coffee. He then leaned slightly into the table and said, “Yeah, I don’t think he did it, either.”

“That settles it, then,” Ava said. “Let’s get out there and figure this thing out.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:45 am*

“You’re ready for it?” Frank asked.

“Of course I’m ready for it. What’s that even supposed to mean?”

He took a moment to choose his words, which made Ava know that what he was about to say was going to be hard for him. “You attack every case you get with passion—especially when there’s someone vulnerable or falsely accused attached to it. But at the same time, you also get a bit narrow-minded. You focus on one thing and get obsessed with it. This case...Clarence’s killer. I don’t want to see you wear down. I know you feel fine right now, but this job catches up to you, Ava. And I wonder if maybe after this one is over—after today, no matter how it all comes down—you should maybe take a step back.”

She knew he was right. She had what Clarence had often called an addictive personality. Clarence had seen it with the two passions in her life that had come before detective work. When he’d been training with her dad at the boxing gym, she became obsessive over strategies and footwork. She’d wake up at night with her ankles and feet still twitching, still moving as if she were in the gym. And when she’d been a singer, the talent had come naturally to her, but she’d been a voracious student of music. She’d listen to everything she could get her hands on, swapping records around with other musicians and listening to songs as many times as necessary to learn the words, the vocal inflections, the styles.

On the other hand, there was still some bite whenever Frank mentioned Clarence’s killer in any way that didn’t completely side with her. And while she wanted to mention that she felt she had every right to be obsessive about finding the man who killed her husband, she knew it would be a waste of her time and breath. Besides, she

couldn't focus on that right now. Every ounce of her concentration needed to go toward Carter Epps today.

"I promise you, Frank," she said, "I'm fine. I'm irritated and a little hurt by what was in the paper this morning, but in terms of the case...yes, I'm good."

His coffee had come, and he sipped from it thoughtfully. "I think we have to start with the club again. It was the scene of the murder and it's where every possible suspect we have happened to be when it happened. I say we head back there and try approaching it with fresh eyes."

"I was thinking the same thing." She wolfed down the rest of her eggs and took one last gulp of her coffee. "Are you paying?"

"Sure," he said with a smile, already reaching for his wallet. "Is this how it's going to be for the remainder of the day?"

"What's that?"

"You constantly hurrying me along."

"I don't know," she said. And then, with a smile, she couldn't resist adding: "Now hurry up. I've got limited time to work with."

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Frank was glad to see Ava cracking jokes as they left Katz's Diner. For just a moment, he thought he'd seen a flicker of anger in her eyes when he'd mentioned Clarence's killer. He figured one of these days, he'd learn that lesson. No matter how long they were together, she would never be okay with him mentioning Clarence's murder. He understood it, so he wasn't sure why he couldn't just keep it out of his mouth.

Also, her humor made him think that her obsessive nature might take a back seat today. He knew that such a trait could often help a detective but he'd also seen it cause detectives to lose track of the case—to focus so intensely on one certain aspect that other important facets went overlooked.

As he and Ava rode back out to the Candle's Wick, Frank started trying to unpack the case as he saw it. He was fine trying to start all over from the very beginning. After all, there was no new evidence to convict or free Carter Epps so it was easy to view it as if they were starting over. The scary thing was, though, that the scant evidence that had placed Carter into a holding cell in the first place would absolutely be seen as enough to convict him of murder. And the longer he worked with Ava, the easier it was for him to understand how wrong that was. If the races were reverse and Carter Epps was a white man who had been found on the scene with no real evidence to convict him of having killed a black man, he likely wouldn't even have been arrested at all. No, in a case like Carter's the notion of innocent until proven guilty just didn't exist.

This lack of justice made Frank just as determined as Ava to find some way to free

Carter, and to find Monty Lincoln's real killer. He knew how the law worked (or, rather, how it didn't work) and that an innocent man's future and livelihood rested in their hands.

Frank was fully prepared to arrive at the club only to find that no one was there. After all, most clubs weren't open at 9:10 in the morning. But when they parked in front of the Candle's Wick, he saw that the front door was cracked open. Tony stood just inside the door, sweeping his floor. When he saw the car with two detectives inside—detectives he was likely tired of seeing—he did his best not to look annoyed. But Frank saw it, all the same. It was in the furrow of his brow and the slight downtick along the left side of his lips.

Before stepping out of the car, Ava reached over and took Frank's hand. "You lead the questioning this time around, okay? I'm going to try something, and I need you to cover for me."

"What am I covering?"

"I don't know just yet. It's an idea that just came to me and I don't even know if it's going to work or not."

"Okay," he said. "Just don't do anything to get us into hot water. We get in the least bit of trouble and this day is going to be over a lot sooner than we'd hoped."

They stepped out of the car and Tony continued to do his best to seem as if he wasn't bothered by their presence. He smiled at them and held the door open, nodding to the pile of dust and debris he'd collected with his broom. "Come on in, but watch your step."

They both made sure to step around the pile and waited as Tony scooped it all up with a small piece of cardboard. He then dumped it into a trashcan by the door and



wiped his hands on a work apron he wore around his waist.

“Looks like we’re interrupting the morning routine,” Ava said.

“Not much of a routine,” Tony said flatly. “You need something?”

“Just to ask you a few more questions about what happened here.”

Tony’s annoyance was clear to see. He sighed and shook his head. “That’s fine, but can we make it fast? I’m trying to clean the place a bit. I had a guy do it for me up until a few weeks ago but that damn stock market did its thing and now...well, there’s not really enough money to throw around on things like that.”

“I promise we’ll do our very best to make it as quick as possible,” Frank said. He glanced over to Ava to see if she was going to make any move to let him know what sort of plan she had in mind.

“Yeah, sure,” Tony said, though it was obvious he was annoyed. He’d apparently tapped out on patience at some point yesterday.

“Great,” Frank said. “We were curious to know if you had any idea that Leon was romantically involved with the singer of Carter’s band.”

Tony took a seat at the nearest table. His eyes wandered around the room and Ava thought his mind might already be on how he could make up the time he was losing by talking to them.

“I didn’t know for sure,” Tony answered. “But I had a feeling. Just the way they looked at each other, and how Leon would try to be closer to her when he didn’t think anyone was looking. But I never said anything. Not my business, you know?”

“Does Leon seem like the sort of man who would respect a woman?” Ava asked.

“Yes, I think so. He’s a stand-up guy, you know? A good egg.”

“How did he end up working for you?” Frank asked.

But before Tony could answer, Ava spoke up with a slight tone of embarrassment to her voice. “So sorry, but could I use your restroom?”

“Yeah,” Tony said, the annoyance now clear in his voice. He really didn’t want them here. Ava assumed he was already worried about what a prolonged police presence might mean for business at his club if word got out. “All the way in the back. And just be sure the water doesn’t keep running when you flush. Tony said he was going to fix that but I don’t know if he ever got it to work.”

“Thank you.”

Frank watched as she made her way quickly to the hallway in front of them and slightly off to the left. He supposed this was probably part of her plan and that she’d need him to buy some time. He was good with that, as he had no problem coming up with heavy-handed questions. All he needed to do was keep Tony busy with an interview for the next few minutes while Ava disappeared around the corner of the hallway to do whatever she had in mind.

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Ava walked to the thin hallway at the back of the building, the same hallway that also contained Tony’s office. When she was halfway down the hall, she turned around to make sure she was out of sight of both men. She could still hear their voices, but she was indeed out of their line of vision. With this bit of security, Ava moved quickly. She stepped into Tony’s office, not sure what she was looking for. But what she did

know was that Monty Lincoln had had his eyes set on this place before he died, and she knew that money and power typically drive men to do vile things. She couldn't help but wonder if there was some paperwork or some other form of evidence buried in Tony's office that might reveal some unspoken secrets between the two men—maybe financial secrets that would be worth killing for.

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Having seen the office before, she knew what to expect: a slightly untidy desk in the center, and a few old cabinets pushed against the walls. She went to the desk and searched around through the loose papers and the leather-bound ledger that sat to the right-hand side. The scattered papers on the desk offered up nothing, just invoices and orders for goods and services. But the ledger was a different story entirely. As she opened it up, she listened for the murmur of conversation between Frank and Tony from up front. Frank was keeping him busy, even causing the club owner to laugh a bit.

The first thing Ava found when she opened the ledger were three pages that had been adhered together by crimping the top left corners. And just when she saw it, something Tony said made her freeze.

“...for sure. If you need, I can show you the receipts They’re back in my office.”

Her heart leaped into her throat. She nearly left the desk and started back down the hall, not wanting to get caught. But Frank’s response was quick and effective, showing just how fast he thought on the fly. “No, don’t even worry about it. I’m sure it’s just a formality and I don’t want you having to get that deep into this. This case will probably be pretty much forgotten in a few days anyway.”

Tony hmphed and the two men started speaking again.

Ava looked back down to the ledger, studying the pages she’d come across. The pages made up an offer to purchase the club. At first, Ava assumed it was from Monty Lincoln, but the name that kept appearing throughout the document was Alfred Moss. As she glanced over the pages, she kept reminding herself that it was

just an offer, not a contract. What it did mean, though, was that Monty Lincoln had not been the only person interested in potentially purchasing the Candle's Wick.

She flipped through a few more pages, mostly papers from the bank and his real estate broker. But near the back of another thin stack of papers that had been stuffed into the ledger, she found another multipage document. This one looked much more official than the offer she'd seen. No, this one was a contract. And by the time she'd made it three lines into the document, she saw the name she'd been expecting see: Monty Lincoln.

She looked through the contract, coming to the end, and saw something interesting on the last page. She saw that Monty had signed the contract and dated it six days ago. The line where Tony needed to sign, though, was empty.

She also saw that Monty had offered \$9,200 for the club, whereas the unofficial offer Tony had gotten from Alfred Moss had been for \$7,300. Ava knew very little about real estate but thought these were both fairly generous offers. And with the financial forecast in the city looking to get much worse before it got better, selling a semi-struggling club in Harlem for \$9,200 would be a surefire win for Tony.

She couldn't help but wonder if Moss and Lincoln had known about one another. And, if so, had Moss been prepared to try to find a way to match Monty Lincoln? More than that, what part had Tony played? She didn't see him as being the sort to start a bidding war between two people but given the hard times that were falling on the city, she knew some people would do whatever it took to stay ahead.

Whatever the situation, Ava had enough new information to take to Tony. She was beyond keeping up appearances now, so she didn't bother going by the restroom to flush the toilet just to sell her story (which she'd planned on doing if she'd found nothing in Tony's office). Instead, she walked back to the main room where Frank and Tony were still talking at the table. The topic of conversation had now turned to

how Tony decided who to hire for his club.

Ava sat down calmly at the table and gave Frank a quick look and a nod. He seemed to relax his posture a bit, nonverbally giving Ava control of the conversation.

“Tony, did you happen to know that your club wasn’t the only Harlem property that Mr. Lincoln had his eye on?”

“He’d told me he had a few others in mind,” Tony said. “But he didn’t tell me which ones. I figured it was just a smart money play. Whether folks want to admit it or not, Harlem is getting bigger and it’s slowly getting more and more attention. And with real estate values the way they are now, I figured it was smart on his part, you know?”

“Was there ever any time when you seriously thought about selling?”

Tony shrugged and looked, for just a moment, almost remorseful. “I went back and forth on it. His offer seemed a little low, but in the face of all the mess we’re in now, it started to seem like a small fortune. But this club...running something like this has always been a dream of mine. And to be honest with you...yeah, I think I would have sold. I didn’t realize just how close I was to making the decision until he died. Knowing the offer is gone now...it hurts.”

Ava leaned forward a bit, knowing she was about to step into the thick of it. “What about the offer Mr. Alfred Moss presented to you?”

Tony didn’t look surprised, nor did he attempt to put on an act, feigning that he had no idea what she was talking about. He simply looked down to the tabletop and shook his head. “What about it?”

“Well, who came to you first? Moss or Lincoln?”

“Moss. It was about a week before Monty came along. When Monty learned that Alfred had been talking to me, he came with an offer right away.”

“Did you in any way maybe pit them against one another?” Ava asked.

“No, but I’ll tell you right here to your face that I thought long and hard about it. I figured if I could start a war between them, I stood to get a pretty penny.”

“Was Monty ever aware of how much Mr. Moss offered you?”

“No. I kept it private. Like I said, I decided it wouldn’t be the righteous thing to do, to make them butt heads like that.”

“But they were each aware that the other was interested.”

“Yes. Funny enough, though, I didn’t tell them. Monty just came in the second time we spoke and asked how long Alfred Moss had been talking to me.”

“If you’d had to choose between the two, who would you have picked?” Frank asked. Even though he had no idea what Ava had seen, it was clear that he was trusting her. She took note of this, as it meant a great deal to her.

“Monty. And not just because he was offering more. Monty had the amount ready for me in cash. Alfred told me point-blank that he’d have to acquire a loan for part of it. And now that Monty is dead, I suppose he’s the only option I have. If he’s even still interested at all. It’s only been a few weeks, but the financial landscape is so different now.”

“Do us a favor,” Ava said. “Wait a day or so before reaching out to him. I think it would be worth me and Detective Wimbly speaking to him in terms of the case.”

“I don’t think Moss is the type to...to, well, murder,” Tony said. “On the other hand, he was very aggressive in his pitch to try to get me to sell.”



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“When’s the last time you saw him?” Frank asked.

“It’s been about five or six days, I guess.”

“And no issues with him? Was he always professional and cordial?”

“Seemed to be. Of course, I only ever saw the businessman side to him. He seemed like a nice enough gent, I suppose.”

Ava got to her feet, very much aware of the passing of minutes as her one day to solve this case inched closer and closer to its end. “Tony, thanks again for the time. And like Detective Wimbley said, wait a day or so before reaching out to him.”

Tony nodded, with a sour look on his face. Ava supposed this whole ordeal might put an entirely different spin on trying to sell his establishment. Because he was right in how he’d phrased it: the financial landscape was only getting worse. And if it suffered anymore, Tony probably wouldn’t be able to find an interested buyer at all, leaving him with a small club in one of the poorest areas of the city.

It was yet another reminder of just how much money could skew things. Ava understood how it made some men desperate and power hungry—both of which, for all she knew, Alfred Moss also understood.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

All it took was a quick stop by the precinct for Ava and Frank to get all the information they needed on Alfred Moss. Ava had remained in the car while Frank ran in to get an address. When he came back, he had more than an address. He also had a thin folder he'd taken from records. As it turned out, Alfred Moss had a small police record.

“Had you ever heard of him before today?” Ava asked as Frank pulled back out into morning traffic.

“It’s one of those names I’m pretty sure I’ve heard before, but couldn’t tell you why. The sort of name you hear in passing from time to time.”

Ava opened up the folder and found only three pages. When she saw Alfred Moss’s mugshot, it became a bit clearer why he had a police record. From the photographs, she could see that Moss was a well-to-do black man. The three pages recounted two different incident reports. The first had been an arrest when he’d been apprehended due to suspicion of transporting and selling alcohol. According to the report, there had not been enough evidence. Still, he’d spent two weeks in prison just for the suspicion. The second report was for a public disturbance where Moss and several other black men had gotten into a fight in front of a train station. He’d spent no time in prison but had been fined.

“So the reports here really don’t amount to much,” she said. “And in his mugshot, he’s wearing what looks to be a nice suit. Is it too much of a leap to assume he’s a businessman of some kind? I don’t know what other sort of individual is going to be

brave enough to toss around upwards of eight thousand dollars in Harlem right now.”

“There are a few black people whose names pop up in the papers in regards to real estate deals here and there,” Frank said. “Maybe that’s where I’d heard the name before. There’s also the fact that the address we’re heading to is Garver Financial Planning. That was the work address on file for him.”

Ava put it all together and it suddenly made sense—and also made her speculate on whether or not Alfred Moss might have had a hand in the murder of Monty Lincoln and was using a convenient bystander to take the fall. She tried to imagine how an up-and-coming black businessman would feel if he was preparing to buy a property in Harlem only to have a white businessman sweep in as well. And if Moss was heavily involved in real estate or the world of business within the area, she figured there was a chance he also knew about Monty’s plans to buy up several Harlem locations and make them white-only properties. And if a situation like that got out of hand, there was no telling what sort of hard feelings and hatred might come out of it. And in a city where the mere mention of money was enough to put people on edge, Ava found that it wasn’t too hard to imagine people sinking to deplorable depths just to make sure they remained safe and financially stable.

They arrived at Garver Financial Planning twenty minutes later. It was in one of the better parts of Manhattan, an area where the number of cars was much greater and nearly everyone on the street was wearing a suit or their Sunday best. When they stepped inside, the place was abuzz with activity. There were men on telephones, standing by the walls. Some were screaming into the phones while others took a more calm and measured approach. This, Ava knew, was a portrait of the city trying to make sense of the financial ruin it was starting to see; not everyone viewed the possible solution the same, as was evidenced in the mannerisms of these men.

A frenzied-looking man was standing behind a desk that was littered with piles upon piles of papers as they came in through a large lobby. He had removed his suit jacket

and slung it over a chair behind the desk. His white button-down was marked in sweat, the collar popped and askew.

“Yeah, can I help you?” he barked, barely looking up from the paper he was currently reading.

“We’re looking for Alfred Moss,” Ava said.

“And you are?”

Frank, apparently already angry over the way they were being addressed, stepped forward and showed his badge. “Detectives Wimbly and Gold, NYPD. Now, again...we’re here to speak with Alfred Moss.”

“Downstairs offices,” the man said, hitching his thumb to the left. “In the colored offices.”

Ava gritted her teeth at the way he’d said it. It almost seemed as if he were speaking about the rodents inside the building’s walls. And it was a sentiment Ava knew all too well, thinking about the Women’s Bureau offices back at the station. It helped her to appreciate the black workers more as she and Frank found the stairs and headed down.

The downstairs area was nice, too, but not nearly as nice as the upstairs. It was a finished cellar, complete with wooden walls and finished floors. There was a large work area in the center of the single room. Two men sat around the table, one reading from a book while the other was working figures out with a pencil and a sheet of paper. They were dressed similarly to the white men upstairs but showed none of the worry or stress. The man looking over the book looked up at them and gave a nod and a smile, and then got to his feet.

“Can I help you folks?” he asked.

“We’re Detectives Wimbly and Gold,” Frank said, flashing his badge. “We were hoping to have a word with Alfred Moss. Is he around?”

The man turned behind him, to one of two offices built into the rear wall. As he gestured to the office on the right, a tall and handsome black man came stepping out of the office. He wore a hat, which he removed politely when he saw their visitors. Ava guessed him to be around fifty years of age or so, his face slightly wrinkled and the first signs of gray starting to weave in around his temples.

“That’s me,” he said. “I’m Alfred Moss.”

“Can we bend your ear for a moment?” Frank asked.

“Yes, sir. Come on in.”

Alfred Moss stepped aside, still holding his hat in his hand, and allowed the detectives into his office. It was small and cramped, but tidy. It was evident that Moss took great pride in the fact that he had an office in an institution such as Garver Financial.

“Sorry...but I don’t have chairs for you,” Moss said. “We don’t really get many visitors down here.”

“That’s quite alright,” Ava said. Moss himself had a small desk and a chair but he elected not to sit—likely out of respect and politeness.

“What can I help you with?” Moss asked. He seemed legitimately curious rather than scared or off his game.

“Well, we recently learned that you put an offer in on a place called the Candle’s Wick,” Frank said. “Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir, I sure did. Mind you, it was just a preliminary offer. I hadn’t settled on a figure with the owner.”

“And did you know that another potential buyer was also speaking to the owner?”

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Moss frowned and started to pick at the brim of his hat. “Yes, sir, I knew that. Monty Lincoln. I also heard he was murdered two days ago.”

“He was,” Ava said. “And did you hear where?”

“The alleyway behind the club. I read about it in the paper.”

“Mr. Moss,” Frank said, “at any point in your dealings with the owner of the Candle’s Wick, did you ever cross paths with Mr. Lincoln?”

“No, sir, I didn’t.”

“Had you ever met Monty Lincoln before?” Ava asked.

“A few times. He’d come here to meet with some of his friends. I only ever met him in passing, and that was fine with me. Mr. Lincoln never made any attempts to hide how he felt about black people having jobs somewhere like Garver Financial Planning.”

“I’m curious,” Ava said. “How did you find out that Mr. Lincoln was interested in buying the club? We spoke with Tony, the owner, and he said he never told you.”

“Oh, he never did. I found out through someone else.”

“We need to know who, Mr. Moss.”

“Well, there was this band that was trying out, hoping to get some gigs at the club. I

only even knew about the place because I know the singer. A woman named Merle, but everyone just calls her Ma. After I approached Tony, Ma told me that she'd heard some rumblings that there was another buyer. She didn't even know the man's whole name, just his last name. Lincoln. And I sort of put the rest together for myself."

"How do you know Ma?" Ava asked.

He grinned widely and a little color rose up into his cheeks. "I met her at a jazz club a few months back. I tried to court her, but she wasn't having it. She said I was too high and mighty. Said she couldn't take a man like me seriously."

"A man like you?" Ava asked.

"A man that thinks making money is the most important thing in the world."

"Any idea how Ma learned about Mr. Lincoln's interest?" Frank asked.

"I don't know for sure. She just said she heard it from someone else down there at the club."

Ava nodded, assuming that someone had been Leon. And if that was true, she doubted there was any malicious intent there. It was probably just idle chatter in bed or around the dinner table.

"Mr. Moss," Frank said, "you mentioned how Monty Lincoln would come in and make no attempt to hide how he didn't like people like you working here. Was anyone ever combative with him?"

"No, sir. But you know, there were times when it almost seemed that's exactly what he was doing—trying to rile someone up to talk back to him. But when I got my job here—me and all these other black men—we were told never to interact with white



clients or partners unless they interacted with us first. And we were never under any circumstances to speak negatively to them. Detectives...I consider myself a smart man. I know how blessed I am to have this job, especially now with all that's going on. It's very demeaning, but there's not much I wouldn't do to keep this job."

"We're trying to determine who killed Mr. Lincoln," Ava said. "Currently, we have a suspect in custody but there are doubts about his guilt. You understand that given that you and Mr. Lincoln were more or less in a competition for the Candle's Wick, we have to ask for your whereabouts on the day he was murdered."

Moss nodded, but there was no objection to it. It was almost as if he'd expected this part to come. "Yes, ma'am, I understand that. The papers say he was killed sometime in the afternoon, is that right?"

"That's right," Frank said.

"Well, that's easy. Every day of the week, I get here at eight in the morning and don't leave until almost six. Lately, it's been more like eight to eight. It's been that way for the entire time I've worked here, almost a year and a half now. We get a lunch break, but we have to take it in here. People know there are black men working here at Garver, but the higher-ups don't like to broadcast it. So we have to eat inside."

"You have people that will back this up for you pertaining to your schedule two days ago?" Frank asked.

"Those men sitting out there," Moss said. "And my supervisor, Mr. Stuart Cole. He's upstairs in the big office on the third floor. There's the lady that does the timecards, too. She'll be able to back it all up."

"Well, thank you so much for your time, Mr. Moss," Frank said. Almost as an afterthought, he said: "If you do think of anything else that you might know about

Mr. Lincoln—you or anyone else that works here—please call the local station and ask for me. Frank Wimbley. Can you do that?”

“Yes, sir. And good luck on your case.” He walked them out of his office, his hat still in his hands. The other workers gave them a casual glance as they headed back for the stairway. Moss even gave them a courteous little wave.

As they made their way back through the central lobby and back out to their car, Ava felt torn. She was happy that they’d managed to clear another black man from the murder, but she also knew that a dead end now meant that they’d just wasted an hour of her day—a day that was already feeling like it was slipping through her fingers.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

With no clear direction as to where to go next, Ava and Frank simply sat in the car, still in front of Garver Financial Planning. Ava could tell that Frank was in his own head, trying to figure out some way to help her prove Carter's innocence. She wasn't fully convinced Frank thought Carter was innocent; rather, she felt that her insistence was somehow driving him. But at this point, there was no sense in keeping their theories separate. They had limited time and if they were going to find the real killer, they were going to have to work together better than ever before.

"We're not going to have enough time to get this done, are we?" she asked.

"It is a pretty tight deadline the judge gave you."

"I don't understand this at all. I mean, there's a very small cast of characters we have to work on. What the hell are we missing?" She cringed a bit as she said this. Though she did not see hell as a particularly vulgar word, she was pretty sure it was the first time she'd ever said anything unladylike in front of Frank. He'd seen her throw punches and get angry at suspects, but never use a vulgar word.

But Frank apparently didn't even notice. "Well, maybe the cast of characters isn't quite as small as we're thinking. After all, before we met with him, Alfred Moss seemed like a fitting candidate. And he wasn't at the club when Monty was killed."

"Plus, there's the fact that if Carter is telling the truth, then most of the band wouldn't have seen the killer, either. The only people to actually see the killer would have been Carter, Albert Long, and Monty Lincoln. One is dead, and we've spoken to the other

two already.”

“There’s another thing to consider,” Frank said, “and I don’t think it’s something you’re going to want to hear.”

“I know. You’re suggesting that maybe Carter did it. But you know he didn’t.”

“I’m fairly certain he’s innocent of murder. You’re right. But that doesn’t mean we have to automatically assume he’s being truthful about everything.”

“What would he have to lie about if he’s innocent?”

“Beats me, but we’re quickly finding out that hardly anyone has been one hundred percent honest and forthcoming.” He sighed and said, “And I do find it hard to fathom the idea that Carter found the body after he was arguing with the man but never saw the killer. Something there isn’t adding up.”

She knew this was right. And based on that, it made her wonder if maybe she was being a bit too set in her own assumptions. Was she so sure that Carter wasn’t the killer that he was overlooking some of the most basic facts?

“Here’s an idea,” Frank said. “Because all we’re doing right now is wasting time. I think we need to go our own ways for a few hours. I’ll go talk to Carter again. Maybe when it’s just me and I put a bit of pressure on him, he’ll fess up to anything he’d hiding.”

Ava didn’t like the idea of Frank potentially bullying Carter, but she did have to admit that he’d be more effective. He was also right in that it made more sense to attack their limited amount of time by taking two different routes.

“And maybe I’ll head back to the precinct. Some of the lesser crimes are handled

downstairs in the WB. “I’m sure there have to be arguments between wealthy white men that don’t get the proper attention and are just shoved down to the ladies just to make sure nothing huge comes of it.” But even as she spoke this out loud, it sounded empty and desperate. She honestly had no idea where to go from here.

Frank nodded and started the engine. As they headed back for the precinct, Ava marveled over just how quickly certain things could change. Because of just one single newspaper article, she had somehow been transformed from borderline heroic to some laughable, stubborn dame. And it had literally happened overnight. She knew it was probably selfish of her, but she couldn’t help but feel that solving this case would save not only Carter Epps, but her name as well.

And Clarence’s, she thought. Don’t forget that you’re only even in this position because everyone respected Clarence. Whether you like it or not, your performance is going to reflect on him.

It was just one more bit of pressure on her shoulders and she could feel it all weighing down on her as Frank worked his way back to the precinct. When he pulled into the rear lot, he got out and opened her door for her. Even under pressure and with a ticking clock driving them, he was still chivalrous and kind.

“I know how you work,” Frank said softly. “I know you have these sudden spurs of genius. So please don’t isolate yourself to the precinct. Go where the case leads you.”

“Are you kidding?” she said. “After that article this morning and all the sidelong glances I got, I really don’t plan on staying here long.”

“Just leave a note on my desk if you decide to go anywhere or have any big breaks.”

“I will. And take it easy on Carter. I can’t imagine what it’s like to know that you could very well go to prison for something you didn’t do. And if the charge is

murder, we both know he's likely looking at the electric chair."

"I'll do my best," he said. He kissed her quickly and she noticed that he didn't even bother to take a look around to see if anyone might notice. With that, he got back into the car and she watched him pull off.

It didn't occur to her until she walked in through the rear of the building that Frank had fully intended to park in the back not because of convenience in parking, but to make sure she would be able to get to the WB offices without passing by the bullpen area and, as a result, the glares and whispers of everyone currently on shift.

From the back door, she simply had to walk down a single hallway of old rooms filled with records older than ten years and a bit of old storage. She took a right, passed by a few offices, and then came to the stairs that took her down to the Women's Bureau. All told, she passed only four people and none of them seemed to even notice her.

The moment she stepped in through the door, she saw and heard Lottie all at once. The pretty blonde, flawless and a living portrait of just about every man's fantasy, applauded playfully as Ava came into the WB office. Lottie was the only woman currently in the office, the other desks unoccupied.

"As I live and breathe, it's every woman's hero, Ava Gold!"

"Oh God, please don't," Ava said as she walked to her desk.

"You're right," Lottie said. "I read that article in the paper this morning. Seems I'm not supposed to like you anymore. Did you know that you're stubborn and entitled? Those are quotes, you know."

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“I am those things,” Ava said. She looked around the otherwise empty room and said, “Where’s Frances?”

“Oh, she’s been here and there and everywhere these last few days,” Lottie said. “Working with the mothers and wives of men that are losing everything because of this stock market crash, trying to prevent a whole lot of domestic disturbances,” and in a playful yet conspiratorial sort of way, she added: “It’s all hush-hush, you know. Which is why they sent a dame. Undercover and all. Most people don’t even know we’re down here, remember?”

“I remember,” she said, wondering if there was a bit of resentment buried in Lottie’s playful demeanor.

“You down here for any particular reason?” Lottie asked.

“I was going to ask Frances about any records pertaining to wealthy men getting into fights or arguments.”

“You mean like with each other?”

“Yes. Especially if there’s real estate involved.”

“Ah, yeah. All of those types of things got sent back upstairs two weeks ago. There weren’t many of them between rich men like you’re looking for, but there have been a lot of reports of fraud and theft around real estate, especially in poor communities.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Ava said. “Seems like something I should have known, being a

part of the Women's Bureau."

"Don't be daft," Lottie said. "Darling, we love that you still think of yourself as one of us, but you got a promotion out of here the moment Minard paired you up with Wimbly and gave you the title of Detective."

"Sure, but none of that means I'm better than any of you."

"I know. And Frances does, too, and she'll be more than happy to tell you about it. But you...well, you sort of are our hero, you know. You're leading the charge for us pretty ladies whether you know it or not."

It was a comment that meant more to Ava than she'd expected. She actually found herself close to tears as the words sank in. And beyond that, it stirred up a whole new level of determination inside of her. She blinked a tear away and turned away from Lottie, not wanting her to see the emotional reaction.

"You okay, doll?" Lottie asked.

"I am," Ava said. "I just...I need to get out of here. I only have a few hours to close this case and it's not going to get closed by anything I do here."

She didn't realize she was going in to hug Lottie until she had the woman wrapped up in her arms. "Thanks, Lottie."

"Um, sure thing. But...for what?"

Ava smiled and said, "For the kick in the pants. For the reminder of what I need to be doing."

And as Ava left the office in a hurry, she started to laugh out loud as Lottie once



again playfully applauded behind her.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

The motivation and inadvertent encouragement from Lottie was much needed, but it still did nothing to point Ava in any given direction. The records Lottie had indicated were upstairs had all come to dead ends, netting absolutely nothing that would help with the case. All she found were the details of petty arguments between spoiled, rich men. In fact, when Ava left the precinct through the back door, she had absolutely no idea where she needed to go. It was 10:20, giving her less than seven hours to figure out who the killer was. Seven more hours before the innocent Carter Epps went to prison for something he didn't do.

But where to start? Frank was speaking with Carter and hopefully something would come out of that. As for her, she wasn't sure what new angle to take. She supposed she could go back to the scene of the crime, once again poking her head into the Candle's Wick. But the mere idea of it made her feel like she was simply treading water and delaying the inevitable. No, she had to do something proactive, not just hope to stumble into something.

She'd been walking for ten minutes as she tried to sort it all out. When she realized that she was headed in the direction of her father's gym, she wasn't all that surprised. Ever since she was a teenager, the boxing gym had been a place of rescue and safety for her, a place where she could find herself and feel grounded—a place where the world made sense and the pounding and bags and gloves were like the beating of a large, gentle heart.

When she got older, that place of safety and shelter had become Clarence. And now that he was gone, none of it truly fit. She'd put the gym behind her, much like her

singing, and now the only place that felt right and comfortable was her job as a detective—and even that seemed to have some slippery footing. She supposed it was good to have so many places she'd once considered familiar, but there was also something simple and safe about the sense of coming home.

And that's exactly how she felt when, as if directed by some unseen and divine hand, she found herself standing in front of her father's gym. Naturally, there would be no answers about the case to be found inside, but she was just hopeful enough to believe she might be able to find something almost as good—insight, a new direction.

When she stepped inside, the smells hit her like something baking in an oven. It was peculiar, because the smells of a boxing gym were not appetizing at all. Sweat, dust, rubber, and something that had always reminded her faintly of copper. There were only two people working the floors; one was on the smaller bags in the back while another was working on his footwork by a dirty mirror in the back.

She spotted her father sitting on the edge of one of the rings, keeping an eye on both of them. Ava slowly made her way over and took a seat next to him.

“What a surprise,” Roosevelt said. “You on a break or something?”

“Not exactly. I'm working this really rushed case and I'm finding myself at a dead end and I'm not sure where to turn. My feet—and I guess maybe my heart, too—seemed to think I needed to come here.”

“Need to put on some gloves and beat up a bag for a while?”

“No, I don't think so.”

“Maybe spar with one of these chumps?” he asked, nodding to the two young men on the floor.

The idea of sparring made something leap inside of her and any other day, she may have taken him up on the offer. But right now, she simply didn't have time. Her hands, though, suddenly ached for the feel of a pair of gloves around them.

"Some other time for sure," she said. "I just...I don't have the time right now."

"Well, you know you're welcome here anytime, Ava. But if you didn't come to hit something, why are you here?"

"I needed to clear my head. And the gym has always helped with that."

"See, now you're preaching to the choir." They both watched the two men work for a moment before Roosevelt then asked: "You need to talk something out with your old man?"

She wasn't even sure where to start, but that had never stopped her when it came to her father. As she started talking, it was almost as if she were processing it all for the first time. "An innocent man is going to go to prison unless I can find a murderer by the end of the day."

Roosevelt seemed at odds with how to respond for a moment. After a few seconds, he settled on: "Well, that seems like an awful lot of pressure. Do you not have any leads?"

"Not really. There have been a few, but none of them panned out. I almost feel like I need to start over. But I really don't have time for that."

"I wish I had a detective's mind," he said with a grin. "It must be amazing to see the world the way you do. So perceptive and always looking for an answer."

"Yeah, that sums it up."

“I hate to be the father that can’t offer anything useful, but...well, I wouldn’t even know how to start looking for someone in this city. There are just so many people, and so many places. I don’t know how anyone can makes heads or tails of where they’re going. You mind me asking what part of the city you’re looking at?”

“Harlem.”

“Ah, I see. Nice to know the police are actually trying to keep things peaceful out there.”

“That’s the thing...there aren’t many. There aren’t many other cops that would tackle this case I’m on right now.”

“Is that because they don’t see it as part of their neighborhood?”

“Partly, yes. I think so, anyway.”

Roosevelt frowned. Working with boxers, he’d had a few black students. As far as she knew, her father had never been racist or prejudiced. He’d always looked down on those who thought they were better than others because of their heritage or the color of their skin.

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“I think most men aren’t inherently bad, you know,” Roosevelt said. “But the majority of folks in this town are immigrants one way or another. And when a new part of a city comes along and starts growing, I think it makes them feel a little less powerful. It’s this whole new place that they can’t make heads or tails of—a place that seems foreign to them. They don’t know how to see the streets or the people on them. And a lot of the time, they find that it’s just too much work to figure out how to adapt. So instead, they just turn their noses up.”

Ava nodded her agreement, but something he said remained in place in her head, jumping out among all of the other things he’d said.

They don’t know how to see the streets or the people on them.

Slowly, she got up from the edge of the ring, thinking.

“You okay?” her father asked.

“Yes. I think you may have accidentally just provided some of that insight you were hoping for.”

“Really?” he asked with a smile. “What did I say?”

She hugged him, wanting to get out of there before the sudden surge of speculation drifted off. “I’m not even sure yet,” she said. “But thanks, all the same.”

Still smiling and with a bemused look on his face, he said: “Don’t mention it.”

Ava left the gym and when she was back out on the street, she started putting it together. They don't know how to see the streets or the people on them. This made her think of Albert Long's story—of how he'd been coming from a client's office and had supposedly seen Carter attacking Monty Lincoln. But based on the information they had, the client he'd been visiting was across the street and further down the block. The only way Albert would have seen the attack was if he'd intentionally been walking by the alleyway.

She pictured the street layout in her head, specifically where the alleyway came out. There was nothing down that street but a few dumpy apartment buildings and a series of buildings and businesses that got more and more decrepit and poor the further down the street they went. But as far as she knew, no one had bothered to ask Albert Long where he'd been headed after leaving his client's office. The police saw him as a well-to-do white man who was probably in a hurry to get out of Harlem and had left it at that.

Ava was a bit ashamed to realize that she had done the same. While she did not consider herself above anyone regardless of race, she had subconsciously assumed Long to be telling the truth. She'd not even thought of questioning why he'd had such a clear view of the alley that ran behind the Candle's Wick.

But it was a question that was very prominent in her mind now and she intended to get it answered as soon as possible. Now more determined than ever, Ava kept her eyes open for a cab as she hurried along the street.

### CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

It took Ava only two minutes to get into the back of a cab and another thirteen minutes to get to Banking Solutions and Trust. It was only a total of fifteen minutes but each one of those minutes was valuable as the clock ticked closer and closer to noon. When she walked in, she instantly recalled where Albert Long's desk had been, just inside off the main foyer. But his desk was currently unoccupied, littered with all manner of papers and books.

The building felt both stuffy and enormous as she looked around, taking note of the handful of workers who looked very tired as they looked over ledgers, numbers, and papers.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" a voice asked from behind her. She turned away from Long's desk and saw a young man approaching. He was maybe thirty years of age, dressed appropriately for the business, and with a hopeful smile on his face.

"I was hoping to speak with Albert Long."

"Ah, he's not here at the moment, He probably won't be back for another few hours. He's out visiting clients today."

Ava knew she wasn't the best actress, but she had to work with what she had. This young man looked like the sort who was eager to help. His hands were clasped behind his back and he was eyeing her with the sort of anticipation that made her quite sure that when she left, he'd be taking one last lingering glance as she passed through the doors.



“Oh, well that’s unfortunate,” she said. She showed him her badge and used her best soft-spoken voice when she added: “He’s been helping me with some questions regarding the murder of Monty Lincoln and I really need to speak with him.”

“If you want to leave a message, I’ll make sure he gets it as soon as he returns.”

“Yes, let’s do that,” she said. And then, doing her best to stay in character, she smiled and said, “But you know...these are simple questions, really. Maybe even things you might be able to answer for me. Would you mind?”

His smile widened even as he tried to keep it contained. “Well, I don’t know about that, but I can certainly try.”

“As I’m sure you know, Mr. Long witnessed the terrible events that took Monty Lincoln’s life. I was curious what clients he has out in Harlem that would have had him out that way. Maybe I could talk to them.”

“Well, now, I don’t know specific names, but I do know that he’s been working with property managers out there, trying to sniff out owners that are looking to sell, given the current financial crisis.”

“I see, of course. Would you happen to know if the Candle’s Wick was one of those projects?”

The young man thought about it for a moment, eventually shaking his head. “I don’t believe so. Mr. Long knew that Mr. Lincoln had his eye on that property. And in most cases here, that would mean that our workers would back off as a sign of respect.”

“I don’t understand,” Ava said. “Why would Mr. Long care about what properties Mr. Lincoln was looking at?”

“Well, from the little I’ve heard and gathered, Mr. Long learned most everything he knew from Mr. Lincoln. They once worked together, you know. I believe Mr. Long was sort of a student or apprentice. I don’t believe it was for very long, though.”

This revelation struck Ava like an electric spark. Albert Long, the witness who had claimed Carter Epps had killed Monty, once worked with Monty, the victim. It seemed like the sort of thing that should have come up during the very brief questioning of Albert Long.

“Do you know how long they worked together?” Ava asked.

“I’m not quite sure...maybe four years? I don’t know the specifics, but Mr. Lincoln’s business let several people go all at once. Mr. Long was one of them, and I think it came as a surprise to a lot of people.”

“What was his line of business with Mr. Lincoln?”

“Same as here. Property manager and inspector.”

Word by word, this was starting to seem like the most important conversation she’d had in regards to this case. And though it had not yet come up, she couldn’t help but wonder if Long being fired had created a bit of resentment. With racial tensions high, the city panicking over the state of financial affairs, Long would have had the perfect opportunity to do away with Monty Lincoln and pin it on someone else—preferably a black man. Being a wealthy white man, surely Long knew how the law worked—and that he’d barely be given a passing glance if there were black suspects to point his finger at.

Whatever the case, there was certainly a story to be told there—a story Albert Long had conveniently left out when the police had talked to him and then when he and Frank had followed up.

“Would you by any chance know which clients he’s seeing today?” Ava asked. “I know it’s troublesome, but he’s been a massive help so far and we really need to speak with him again.”

A look of importance washed over the young man’s face, a look that seemed to say: Well, that’s right; Mr. Long is, after all, a very important man. He then checked his pocket watch and seemed to do some figuring in his head. “I know that he had an appointment with Strand and Dowery at eleven thirty, and that he was hoping wrap it up in time for lunch. If you were to leave now and catch a cab, you could probably beat him there and meet him before the meeting.”

Ava was a bit dramatic when she reached out and took the young man’s hand. “Thank you so much for this,” she said. “Truly, you’ve been a big help.”

“Of course.” He smiled confidently, in a way that told her he was used to getting his way when it came to that smile. And she could see why. He was good looking and the very confidence itself added more to it. She was sure the gals were all ditzy for him pretty much wherever he went.

Ava left quickly, happy to leave him in a state of thinking he’d not only helped the police, but perhaps fed Long’s ego as well. She wondered how the conversation may eventually go between the two of them when the young man learned why she really needed to speak with Long. However, if Ava’s hunch was right and things went as well as she hoped, Albert Long may never speak to his young and enthusiastic co-worker again.

### CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Ava had no trouble catching a cab and, luckily for her, the cabbie did indeed know where Strand and Dowery was located. And though traffic was getting a little thick as the midday rush began to trickle out into the streets, she made it to the building a full seven minutes early. Inside, she found a place that looked just like every other financial institution she'd ever visited. There were tall, ornate walls and shining, wooden floors. Important-looking men stood behind large desks and counters, hard at work over papers and ledgers.

“Can I help you, ma'am?” an older gentleman asked from behind the desk closest to the front door. He looked very grumpy and it seemed as if he truly didn't want to be of any help at all. And that was fine with Ava, as she wanted as little attention on her as possible as she waited for Albert Long to arrive.

While she waited, she wondered if Frank was getting anything new out of Carter. And, even if he was, if it would be information that would help them. True, she didn't know Carter at all (outside of the small conversations they'd had since his arrest), but she did not get the impression that he would be difficult on purpose—especially if he knew that both she and Frank were doing everything they could to make sure he didn't go to prison.

She sat in a small lounge chair, watching the front door. When Albert Long entered four minutes after she arrived, he stopped in the doorway, taking a moment to look at her. For a second, it appeared as if he was wondering if he'd somehow come to the wrong place. The look of confusion on his face was almost comical. He did a decent job of recovering, though; he marched into the building and approached with a

completely fake smile.

“Detective Gold,” he said. “You have business here today?”

“Just to see you, Mr. Long.”

“How did you even know I’d be here?”

Ava offered a wry smile and showed him her badge. “Well, I am a detective. And a pretty good one, if I do say so myself.”

“Well, I don’t have time to speak with you right now, Detective Gold. I have an appointment with a client at the moment.”

“Yes, I understand. But I have some questions I need you to answer on this pressing case—you know, the case involving the murder of Monty Lincoln.” She got up from her chair and stepped close to him. She saw right away that he found the move intrusive but didn’t dare take a step back. She could only imagine the sort of demoralization he’d feel if he took a retreating step back away from her in the presence of all of these other men. “Now, if you want, I can make this very embarrassing for you,” she went on. “I can pull out my badge and get very loud and insist that you speak with me, a New York City detective, right here in front of all of these people. Or, you could just sit down with me for about five minutes and be done with it.”

“That sounds like a threat,” he said, hissing the words through his clenched teeth.

“Good, because it very much is. Now...you decide.”

She didn’t move as he stood in front of her, thinking it over. Shaking his head in frustration, he finally made his way over to the row of small lounge chairs against the

front wall.

“We’ll sit,” he said. “But I can’t imagine what other questions you have on the case. You have that Epps fellow in custody.” He shot her a sour look and a rather crass smile. “I read the article in the paper, you know. I’m well aware of how you’re holding things up.”

“And with good reason,” Ava said. “I don’t work towards putting innocent men in jail. And, to that, I honestly just need to hear your account of what happened. As I’m sure you know by now, I’ve been assigned to the case with my partner, Detective Wimbly.”

“I do, and I already gave you my testimony.”

“Well, the case looks a bit different now, Mr. Long. So if you can just run through it once more and maybe answer some follow-up questions, you can get to your appointment.”

Some of the anger and resentment in his face dissolved at this bit of news. She saw relief there as well. “Oh, yes, I see.” Still, he shifted a bit uncomfortably in his chair while she eyed him.

“You okay, Mr. Long?”

“Yes, of course. I just wasn’t expecting to run into you or to have to go through all of this again.”

“So then let’s get to it and free you up as soon as possible.”

Still shifting a bit in his seat, Long finally began. “I was coming from a client’s business two blocks away from Candle’s Wick. I was in a bit of a hurry to get to my

next appointment and, though I'm not comfortable in Harlem, I knew I could save myself a few minutes of walking by cutting through a few side streets. And it was there that I saw the black man attacking a white man I now know to have been Monty Lincoln."

"And it was in the alleyway, right?" Ava asked. "The one behind the club?"

"That's right."

"Mr. Long, what appointment were you headed to when you decided to take the shortcut that took you by Candle's Wick?"

"A gentleman who had just purchased a small apartment building just before the stock market crashed. He was seeking some counsel and I helped him figure out how to make sure he didn't go broke."

"And given the interruption you had there in Harlem, did you ever make that appointment?"

He started shifting again and his eyes flitted all around the room Ava had seen this before and it was one of the surefire tells that Clarence had always told her about. Whenever a man is about to lie, they tend to start fidgeting or looking closely to their surroundings—anything to keep from staring directly at the person they are about to lie to.

"I did not. I had to reschedule for the following day."

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“I see. And can I get the name of the person you were meeting with?”

“No,” he snapped. “I’m very sorry, Detective, but I can’t give the names of my clients so freely.”

“Fine,” she said. “Just a few more things and I’ll leave you alone. You said you saw Epps strike Mr. Lincoln. Was it a punch with his fist, or was there something in his hand?”

“I believe there was something in his hand.”

“How big?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you recall the color?”

“No, I don’t. As I said, I simply saw the end of the attack. I saw the follow-through of the swing or punch and then Mr. Lincoln was on the ground, and the black fellow crouched over him.”

“And you saw all of this from the mouth of the alleyway?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Long, was your appointment in Harlem?”



“No. As I told you...I’m uncomfortable with that stretch of the city. What sense would it make for me to do business there?”

“That’s a very good point. But you see, the thing that confuses me is that the only way you would be able to see into the alleyway behind the club is if you were heading deeper into Harlem. And maybe that was the case, but I don’t see how walking that far would be a shortcut. To be on that side street where you have access to the club, you’d have to take a walk of about half a block or so off of the central street. Did you get lost, perhaps?”

“No,” he said, clearly uncomfortable. “I just...I heard something strange, like a sound of distress. I wanted to see if anyone needed some help.”

“So you heard the struggle before you saw the attack?”

He thought about it for a moment and then nodded quickly. “Yes, that’s right.”

“But that’s not what you told the police when they took your statement.”

“Oh, I’m sure I did, though.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Oh, is that so? Maybe I was just confused.”

“Maybe so,” Ava said. And then, not giving him even the smallest moment to relax or regroup, she added: “Did you know Mr. Lincoln?”

He went to shifting again. He was doing it so much now that Ava expected him to get up out of the chair at any moment. “Yes, I did. I once worked for him, in fact.”

“Seems that was another thing you conveniently left out when the police took your statement. Now, why was that, Mr. Long?”

He was clearly frustrated now, making no effort to hide it. And while he had not yet gotten out of his chair, he was now sitting on the edge. “Listen. I had just witnessed a murder and I had cops asking me a lot of questions. I was flustered and confused.”

“So confused that you momentarily forgot about the fact that you knew the man you’d just seen killed? Mr. Long...is it true that you not only worked for Mr. Lincoln at one point, but that he also released you along with several other employees?”

“Detective, I’m no fool. I can see where this is going...the monstrous accusation you’re trying to pin on me. And I will not tolerate it.” He got to his feet and Ava did the same, making sure he knew she was not at all intimidated by him.

“I have more questions,” she said, angling herself in front of him. She stood in his way, making sure that he would either have to answer the rest of her questions or cause a bit of a scene.

“Well, I’m not answering them.” He leaned in closer to her and scowled, his voice a bit lower. “Just because you have a badge and your dead husband was a great cop doesn’t mean you can do his job. A woman detective...you really think anyone takes you seriously?” And then, with a slight shove to her shoulder, he said: “Get out of my way and get back to your kitchen, woman.”

The mention of her dead husband lit a fire in her that she had not felt burn in a very long time. The shove was just an added bonus.

“Mr. Long,” she said, “believe it or not, I’m actually very glad you did that.”

“Yeah? Why’s tha—”

She used some fancy boxing footwork to pivot around behind him. She had his right arm in her grip and was twisting it upwards before Albert Long had any idea what was happening. When he started attempting to fight, she grabbed his left arm and gently guided him to the wall where she pinned him against it and handcuffed him.

She was aware of the murmur of conversation behind her, shocked and surprised. But she was certain Albert Long was much more aware of it than she was. She could feel him tensing up, and she fully expected an explosive surge of yelling. But in the end, he decided to do his best to save what little reputation he might have left after all of this.

Keeping his voice low, he said, "Detective Gold, you just ruined your career."

"We'll just have to wait and see about that. For now, though, it looks like we're going to have to have the rest of our conversation in an interrogation room."

### CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Ava had been expecting some gawkers when she walked into the precinct with Albert Long in a set of handcuffs, and she wasn't disappointed. She was taking notice that for Long, every step of this had been one embarrassment after another. He'd not even had the convenience of being placed into a cop's automobile, but had to endure sitting in the back of the first cab Ava had been able to flag down. And now, being escorted to the interrogation rooms at the precinct, he seemed to redden in the face whenever someone saw him. He walked with his head hung low, doing his best to move so that as few people as possible would see him.

She came to the first interrogation room and escorted him inside. It felt strange to be in this position without Frank by her side, but she also realized it was a prime opportunity to show all of the men in this precinct that she was perfectly capable of handling a case on her own.

When she had him seated, his arms still cuffed behind him, any pretense of anger or outrage slowly faded. Instead, he looked up at her in an almost pleading way. "It's not too late to say you made a mistake," he said. "Do it now and I won't come after your career."

"Mr. Long, I'm sure this is your first time being in a jam like this, but that's not exactly how interrogations work."

"You and I both know that I don't belong here."

"But a man like Carter Epps does?"

He said nothing to this. She could see by the expression on his face that he felt as if she was setting a trap for him.

“So tell me how you were so easily confused when having to tell your story just a day after you gave it to the police,” Ava said.

“I told you. I simply got my facts mixed up. It happened very fast and I had, after all, just witnessed a murder. So my mind was a little jumbled.”

“And that includes simply not telling the authorities that you once worked f—”

A knock at the door interrupted her. Before she had a chance to call out for the person on the other side to come in, it opened anyway. Captain Minard stepped in and took a quick look around. His face was like stone, as usual, so Ava couldn’t read his thoughts. He gave Long a quick nod of acknowledgment before he looked directly at Ava.

“Detective Gold, a word, please?”

Without waiting for a response, he stepped back out into the hallway. Ava followed, closing the interrogation room door behind her.

“Explain this,” Minard said right away. He did not look angry, but she could see that he was doing his best to remain calm. In other words, it seemed that he was giving her the benefit of the doubt—something that would have been unheard of several months ago when she started this job. Apparently, she thought, at least the people that matter are evolving.

“The judge hasn’t given me much time,” she explained. “So I thought the best thing to do would be to start at the beginning. And at the beginning, Detective Wimbley and I didn’t ask Albert Long, the witness, enough questions. So I went so speak with him.

And within less than a minute or so, it became quite clear that he was lying—either to me or to the original officers that too his statement.”

“How so?”

“Just inaccuracies, sir. That and being intentionally vague about certain details. And the most pressing and important matter is that he just happened to leave out the fact that he had once worked for Monty Lincoln, but he was released with a few other workers not too long ago.”

Minard showed a bit of emotion at this, but it was not the one she was expecting. He looked worried—probably, she thought, because he was starting to understand that they may have to swap out a black man for a white man in a murder case that, just a few minutes ago, had seemed like a sure thing.

“He’s admitted to this?” he finally asked.

“Yes. He claims he was so confused and upset when the police first questioned him that it slipped his mind.”

As Minard considered this, Ava caught motion over his shoulder. At the end of the hallway, Frank was approaching. He was moving quickly, likely having sensed the whispers and unrest in the bullpen. And seeing her chatting with Minard outside of the interrogation rooms was probably causing him to panic, too.

“Captain,” Frank said, “what’s going on?”

Frank kept his eyes on Ava and said, “Let your partner tell you. As far as I’m concerned, Detective Gold, you’re on a dangerous path, but one that you should stay on.” He looked as if he resented saying it the moment the words were out of his mouth but walked away before he could take anything back.

When Minard was out of earshot, Frank said, “I hear someone in the bullpen whispering about how you’ve apparently got Albert Long in there?”

“I do.”

“The witness?”

“Yes, the witness.” She then spent thirty seconds catching him up, telling him everything she’d just shared with Minard. The same expression of worry and concern crossed his face, too, only not quite as strongly as it had with Minard.

“Okay, then,” he said. “Let’s see what else he has to say. This is your show right now, Ava,” he added, gesturing toward the door.

They entered the interrogation room and Long instantly looked a bit more concerned that there was a second detective with her.

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“Mr. Long, you remember my partner, Detective Frank Wimbley. Would you like to try telling him your story? Do you think you could get it exactly right if you were given another chance to get your facts in order?”

“I don’t appreciate this,” Long said. “You’re intentionally trying to get me to misspeak.”

“Perhaps. But if you were telling the truth, then what’s the worry?”

Frank stepped closer to the table, setting his hands on the edge and leaning forward. “Look, Mr. Long. Here’s the thing...if you intentionally lied about what you saw, that’s bad. And yeah, it’ll take us some digging for sure, but we’ll find out about it sooner or later. And that’s called interfering with a case. But if you come clean right now and can actually help us solve this case, you’re not going to really see much punishment. Hardly any, really.”

This alarmed Ava at first, because it sounded as if he was just assuming that Long wasn’t their killer. And quite frankly, it was a suspicion that was growing dimmer and dimmer for Ava too. But in laying these terms out, it offered Long a way out, but it also provided him with an ample field of traps he could potentially fall into. Plus, if he decided to keep up his lies, he’d only be digging his hole deeper. In other words, there was no true scenario in which Long would come out rosy. On the other hand, anything he chose to say would benefit them greatly.

“You mean it?” Long asked. He sounded like a groveling child at this point, like he was really hoping his parents would just overlook the bit of trouble he’d caused.



“Yes. This arrest will, of course, go on your record. But things like this pass for well-to-do men,” Frank said. “I’ve seen it over and over. But you’ve got to help us. Tell us what happened as simply as you can.”

“Okay,” he said, and Ava was shocked by just how easily he was able to switch gears now that a man had given him such assurances. “I was taking a shortcut. And it didn’t even go by the Candle’s Wick. But I knew where it was because there have been rumors that a few businessmen had been looking at properties in Harlem. And that club came up a few times, so I was just curious as to why. Walking over there only added a minute to my walk, so I figured I’d go by to see what all the fuss was about. And when I went that way—that is, when I was coming up on the building—I heard some commotion coming from behind the place. And one of the voices sounded very familiar. You know...sometimes you hear a voice and don’t quite know who it belongs to? So I got curious and walked to the back. I came to that alley and saw that black man crouched over a white man. I took a few steps forward to see if I could help but then I saw it was Monty and I froze.”

“So...you saw Carter Epps crouched over Monty Lincoln,” Ava said.

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t see him actually attacking?”

Long shook his head. “No.”

“So why lie about it?” Frank asked. “And why leave out the fact that you knew Monty Lincoln?”

“I don’t even know...not really. I’m not proud of it, but I’ve held a grudge ever since he fired me. I damn near lost everything, and then this stock market nonsense happened and I just started to really loathe him. I saw that colored fella crouching

over him and I saw an opportunity. I wasn't even sure what that opportunity was right away, but I did when the police got there. I thought if I could identify what happened and make sure someone was arrested for the murder, I'd be in good graces with Monty's partners—that they'd accept me back if I went looking for a job when this financial mess clears up.”

Based on what Ava knew about the behaviors of wealthy men when their streams of revenue were threatened, she didn't doubt this story at all. Still, some if it didn't quite add up.

“So you just happened to come across a dead Monty Lincoln in a part of town you aren't all that familiar with?”

“Yes,” Long said.

“Because to someone who doesn't know the ins and outs of the story, it sounds a bit like you were following him. And the fact that you've just admitted that you held a grudge against him doesn't help, either.”

“Look, that's the God's honest truth,” Long said. “I swear it.”

Because it was such a huge revelation buried in a stack of other lies, Ava repeated the most important aspect, just to confirm it. “So you never actually saw Crater Epps attack Monty Lincoln.”

“No. No, I didn't.”

Ava nodded and walked back outside. She was furious and relieved all at once, which made her feel slightly overwhelmed. She leaned against the wall, thinking about what this might all mean. A few moments later, Frank also stepped out of the room.

“Your instincts never fail to impress me,” he said. “I won’t lie to you...if I’d been with you when you arrested him, I would have tried to talk you out of it.”

“Because you thought it didn’t fit, or because you were afraid of how it would look back here at the station?”

He frowned but managed to look her in the eyes when he answered: “A bit of both.”

“I know some still see me as a rookie, but this admission is enough to free Carter, right?”

“In most cases, probably so. He’ll have to sign something and it’ll be sent to the judge but—”

“But there’s a black man already in custody and it might not matter.”

Frank could only nod. “But it never hurts to try. And in the meantime, the murderer is still out there. And I’d like to find him with you if we can.”

“I’d like that, too. But I do want to stay here until Long signs his admission. I want to make sure all the right steps are taken.”

“That means sitting and waiting a bit,” Frank said. “And if things don’t go the right way, that’s wasting time the judge gave you.”

“Then let’s get started right now.” Without any room for further discussion, Ava turned away from Frank and headed for Minard’s office.

### CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

It took less than a minute for Ava to lay out everything Albert Long had confessed, and even less than that for Minard to sigh and start shaking his head. It was the exact opposite of the sort of reaction she'd been hoping to get.

"Here's my concern," Minard said. "While it's certainly eye-opening that Long lied about this testimony, it does nothing to change the fact that we still have a man crouched over the dead body less than thirty seconds or so after Long heard Monty Lincoln's voice." He then turned directly to Ava and added: "And before you get started, yes...I'd have the same concern if it was a white man crouched over the body. The fact that all signs point to Carter Epps and that he's already in custody is going to make Long's new testimony flimsy at best."

"So we're stuck, then?" Ava asked.

"No. You're in the same place you were in before you hauled Albert Long in here. You still have about five hours to find the killer. I hate to say it, but coming up with the killer is going to be the only way you can free Carter Epps. You may have caught Albert Long in a series of lies, but that's a long way away from clearing Epps's name."

Ava was especially frustrated over this because she understood the argument. She supposed she'd been so blinded by the anger from Long's admission of lying that she hadn't realized it.

"Thank you sir," she said rather curtly, turning to exit the office. "I suppose we'd

better step to it, then.”

When she left his office, she felt angry and rejected. It was another one of those moments where she felt like she was running uphill and just when she started to get used to the incline, it got even steeper. Only this time, she did her best to remind herself it had nothing to do with the fact that she was a woman being hazed and disrespected by men. This time, it was a broken system of law that had yet to see white men and black men as equals.

Ava didn't bother heading to Frank's desk or to the Women's Bureau. She made a direct line to the front doors and stepped out onto the street. It was nearing one o'clock and the streets were rather busy with people going about their midday business. She walked to the end of the block where a bench sat along the edge of the precinct's outer wall. She sat down, aware that Frank was following her, but barely noticing him.

She'd been faced with the prospect of failure before, but this was different. She knew that she'd closed every case she'd been given but that didn't matter right now. This was the first time she could physically feel the weight of an innocent man's future resting in her hands. If she didn't figure out who the killer actually was in the next four hours or so, Carter Epps was going to go to jail for a crime he didn't commit.

Frank joined her on the bench and she could immediately sense that Minard's response had deflated him, too. “You know it's not about you this time, right?”

“I do,” she said. “This time, it's because Carter Epps is black.”

“I think that might be partly true,” Frank said, “but you can't make assumptions like that. One thing I've learned in this job is that someone will always have someone else to blame. In this case, what if Carter Epps was white? Well, then it would come down to what sort of money he makes. Is he poor or wealthy? That's going to be the driving

force behind assumptions and stereotypes. But in this particular example, it just happens to be that he's a black man. I tell you all of this because you can never let your own grudges or feelings about classes or races cloud your vision. If you do that, it will come back to bite you."

She knew this was true and she also knew that the ignorance about race that seemed prevalent in the precinct was indeed getting on her nerves. There was no point in denying it. And maybe it was getting in her way. But it was hard to look past the racist undertones that were scattered throughout this case. It seemed to be everywhere, which made it very hard not to think of it as a driving force behind the murder.

"I know," she said. "And I'm trying to keep a clear head. But when our murder victim was intentionally trying to buy out Harlem properties so he could turn them into whites-only establishments, it's a little hard to separate it."

"I have to wonder, though, if it was him being racist, or just knowing that whites tend to be wealthier than blacks. It makes sense to open up a business that is exclusively for people who are willing to drop a little money here and there."

"And I suppose he would have to possess some sort of tolerance for black people if he was trying to do business deals with them."

"Maybe," Frank said. "Or maybe he doesn't care what race someone is so long as there was some money to be made. Either way, what can we do about it?"

Ava heard the question, but she was also reconsidering the last thing she'd mentioned. Based on the flippant attitude of Samuel Lincoln, Monty's brother, she found it hard to accept that Monty would have been friendly with many people of color. Yet, on the other hand...

“Hold on a second,” she said, processing her thoughts out loud. “When we went to speak with Leon, we found out more than just the fact that he and Ma are dating. Leon and Ma told us that Monty Lincoln had been getting handsy with Ma. Groping her, trying to flirt, basically assaulting her.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” Frank said, his tone indicating that he might already know where she was headed with this.

“If he was blatantly racist, do you really think he’d be drawn to a colored woman in such a way? Based on what they said, it wasn’t like he was being demeaning to her, no more so than any other man would be to any other woman. He was just...”

“Trying to get his jollies, as they say,” Frank said. “But to your question, I’ve seen this sort of thing a few times. There are still far too many white men who think they have free rein over the black community. And who do they see as the weakest members of the community? Women. It becomes this very strange fetish-type situation where they become attracted to the very thing they want to demean because they know no one will really care.”

“That’s sick.”

“I agree.”

Ava suppressed a little shiver of anger and asked: “So, do you think there’s any chance he may only be opposed to black men?”

“I suppose it could be possible,” Frank said, considering. “Especially when you think about how rare it is to find black business owners. And if he’s going after businesses...I don’t know. Maybe he feels black businesses or organizations don’t belong? Or some other nonsense.”

“Back at the start of all of this, Samuel Lincoln said Monty already had two small properties in Harlem. Apartment buildings, right?”

“Two of them,” Frank said. “He also said those deals had gone down smoothly.”

“We need to find out which apartment buildings they are. Maybe see what sort of people are living there—and if they’re black, we can ask about how they’ve been treated. Maybe some of them will even be able to offer insights into why Monty was killed.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Frank said. “And I think Samuel would be able to give us those addresses.” He got to his feet, and Ava did the same. Without another word shared between them, they started around the building, for the back lot and the patrol cars.

“Does this feel like a long shot to you?” Ava asked.

Frank chuckled nervously and shrugged. “I’ll give you another little tip. When you’re on a time crunch, every single idea you get is going to feel like a long shot.”

It wasn’t particularly uplifting, but it helped her to center her thoughts, knowing that Frank was just as hurried and anxious to find answers as she was. And by the time they were in the car and headed back to the Lincoln residence, it was starting to feel less and less like a long shot after all.



### CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Ava sat in the car as she watched Frank come hurrying down the stairs of the porch of the Lincoln residence. She also saw the door partially open behind him as Samuel Lincoln started out. He didn't exactly look unhappy, but perhaps a little worn out. She supposed this made some degree of sense if he was still working as the representative of the family while the wife and son continued to grieve.

Frank got back into the car, taking his place behind the wheel. He seemed pleased with how things had gone and even gave Samuel a little wave through the window as they pulled away from the curb.

"How are the Lincolns?" Ava asked.

"Well, Samuel is still very much on our side. He told me did read the article in the paper, but he wants to make sure the man that truly killed his brother goes to jail—and if we don't think it was Carter Epps, then he believes us. So he was happy to help, and gave me the addresses without any hesitation."

"That's good. How about the wife and son?"

"I heard the wife, Anna, speaking to someone in the parlor; Samuel said it was the pastor of the church they attend. He also said the son has finally started to speak but looks like he might fall asleep at any moment. He says the son might be in a very strong state of denial because he keeps talking about waiting for his father to come back home any minute now."

“Poor kid.”

“I agree—only he’s not a kid. Marcus Lincoln is actually nineteen years old, apparently. Samuel just told me that, too. They apparently had Marcus when Anna was very young. Samuel seems to think that one of the reasons Marcus is so wrecked over this is because he now understands that he’s going to be expected to take up his father’s good name and business ethics.”

“Any chance we can come back to visit with the wife if things at the apartments don’t pan out?”

“Yes, and Samuel even recommended that. But he also noted that Anna was pretty clueless when it came to anything regarding Monty’s businesses. But I’d still say it might be worth a shot.”

Monty drove back into Harlem and there was a jarring moment where Ava realized that she was starting to miss the clubs and her brief stint as a jazz singer less and less. Coming into Harlem did bring to mind some of the shows she’d performed but with every week that went by as a detective, she realized that her singing days might be behind her. It stung her deep down inside her heart, but she was also slowly coming to terms with the idea that being a detective was her first passion outside of raising Jeffrey. In an attempt to make sure Carter Epps didn’t go to jail, it was a passion that she realized had always been there; the badge simply gave her more rights and freedoms to let it out.

Ironically, they had to pass the Candle’s Wick on their way to the apartment buildings. There was a sign up that hadn’t been there earlier, promoting “Live jazz music tonite!” Apparently, Tony was ready to carry on with business as usual—whatever usual might be in this uncertain economic time.

The apartments were located a bit further back in the neighborhood, where there were

no businesses but just stretches of ramshackle houses, apartment buildings, and other dwellings that looked to either be on the brink of collapse or in the process of just being built. Frank pulled up in front of a three-story brick building. It looked to be in much better shape than the vast majority of other dwellings. Ava was pretty sure there were new windows along the front. Also, the front stoop was clean and almost inviting, the complete opposite of every other front stoop on the street.

“I wonder if the quality is a glimpse into what Monty had in mind for his Harlem properties,” Ava said.

“Yeah, and if it’s reflected in what the tenants are paying in rent,” Frank commented.

Past the front door, there was no lobby. There were two hallways, one leading to the left and the other straight ahead. A stairwell sat at the end of the forward-facing hall. There were only two doors along each wall, both to the right and straight ahead. That meant twelve rooms in all, if the remainder of the building contained the same layout.

“Split up?” Ava asked.

“Makes sense,” Frank said. “We are running out of time.”

They split up at the doorway, Ava heading to the left while Frank walked down the hallway directly ahead of them. Ava knocked on the first door she came to and got no answer. After waiting a few seconds and knocking again, she leaned close to the door, but the silence that greeted her made it apparent that no one was home.

She then tried the next door and the moment she knocked, she heard soft, shuffling footsteps. After a few seconds, Ava heard those footsteps approach the door. “Hello?” a young female voice asked from inside. “Wh-Who’s there?”

Ava realized that it was a young girl, certainly no older than thirteen. “My name is

Ava Gold,” she said. “I’m with the police. A detective.”

“Oh? Really?” the girl asked, curious.

“Really.”

“Oh. Well...my mother and father aren’t here right now. And they make me promise to never answer the door when they’re away.”

“You have some very smart parents. Maybe you could answer something for me. I know that someone new now owns this building. Do you know if your parents are happy here?”

“I...I don’t know. I think so. But Daddy says we might have to move because the people that need money for us to live here are asking for more money.”

“I see,” Ava said. And then, feeling certain there was nothing more to come from a conversation with a child, Ava said, “Thank you. You’ve been a very big help.”

“You’re welcome!”

Ava left the door and walked back to the main hallway. There, she found Frank waiting for her at the stairs. “No one home in either of those,” he said.

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They made their way up the stairs and found the exact setup as the floor below. This time, before they had a chance to split up, they could hear a fairly loud conversation coming from the hallway to the left. It seemed to be one of good nature, but it was the term “greedy white ass” that really caught their attention.

They walked to the first door along the hallway and Frank stepped in the lead, knocking on the door. The conversation inside stopped right away and was replaced by a loud, booming male voice. “Yeah, hold on!”

When the door opened, they were greeted by a frail but intimidating black man. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, and the pants he wore showed the telltale rips and tears of hard manual labor.

“Can I help you?” the man asked.

“I hope so,” Frank said, pulling out his badge. “We’re Detectives Wimbley and Gold. We’re looking into the new building management, trying to get some details on how things have been going since the building was purchased.”

The tall man laughed and looked back into the apartment. Ava looked in over Frank’s shoulder and saw two other black men. They were sitting at a table with bottles of pop. “You boys hear that? They want to know what we think of the new building manager.”

One of the men cackled a bit while the other only shook his head.

“Would you mind if we came inside?” Ava asked.

“Yes ma’am, come on in.”

Frank seemed momentarily irritated at this but she also got the feeling it was simply out of his protective nature.

“So, why the laughter?” Frank asked the cackling man at the table.

“Well, I live next door. And the same man that bought this building got that one, too. And I hope you folks don’t take offense to this, but as soon as we knew a white man was buying up property in Harlem, we’d be forced out. Sure enough, rent was jacked up within two weeks.”

“What was the difference?” Frank asked.

“We were paying fourteen a month under the old owner. But this new white fella came in and it was bumped up to twenty-two. Prices like that, and I may have to go back to tenement housing. But...well, I guess that’s what he wants.”

“Gentlemen,” Ava said, “you may be interested to know that your new landlord was killed two days ago. We’re currently looking for the murderer and aren’t having much luck. We were hoping to find out what sort of relationship he had with the people living in these two apartment buildings.”

All three men looked baffled. The quiet one at the table even looked ashamed that they’d just been speaking ill of him.

“He’s dead...for real?” the tall man who had answered the door asked.

“Yes,” Frank said. “In an alleyway not far from here. Do you know of anyone in these two buildings that had any sort of grudge with him?”

“Well, yeah,” the other man at the table said. “Just about everyone does. Look, it’s nice that he’s trying to clean up the place and make it nicer, but everyone is pretty upset about how he increased the rent. But I don’t...well, I just don’t know that it would be enough for anyone to kill him. Then again, we don’t really know everyone in both the buildings.”

“Hell,” the man that answered the door said. “I don’t even know everyone that lives in this building.”

“There’s Harriet, though,” the man at the table said.

“Oh, there’s nothing wrong with Harriet,” the other man at the table argued.

“And who is Harriet?” Ava asked.

The man who had answered the door reclaimed his seat at the table and sipped from his pop. After swallowing, he said, “Sweet little young girl that lives in the next building. She’s already looking at getting out of here. Pretty sure her husband died and she was left with a baby. Now, I didn’t see this, just heard about it, you know? But rumor has it that someone complained about the baby crying and that new landlord of ours went to her and raised all kinds of hell. And ever since then, Harriet has been...”

“Different,” the quiet man said. “Every time I see her, she’s damn near scared. For what, I don’t know.”

“The landlord got on her about a crying baby?” Ava asked. “That seems harsh.”

“A crying baby, walking too loud, snoring, whatever it takes. A new white landlord with mostly black renters. Doesn’t take a genius to figure out why he might take a complaint like that seriously.”

“And she’s in the next building over?” Ava said.

“Yes, ma’am, the one right beside here,” the quiet man said. “Harriet knows me a bit. I can walk you over there if you want. I’m sure you know...well, there’s not many people around here that are going to trust cops. No offense.”

“None taken,” Frank said. “And what’s your name, sir?”



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“Curtis.” He downed the rest of the pop and place the empty bottle on the table. “Thanks for the drink,” he told his host.

Curtis led Ava and Frank out of the apartment and then back down the stairs. “Someone really killed him, huh?”

“Sure did,” Frank said. “And you never spoke with him?”

“No, sir. Saw him once when I came in from work. He was talking to this other white man, some sort of builder, I think.”

Curtis led them outside and to the neighboring building. They were basically built right on top of one another; there was technically a small alleyway space between them, but it was barely wide enough for a person to walk through. The interior of the building was slightly different than its neighbor, offering a larger space on the first floor, with two rooms on the right and one on the left, beside a stairway.

As Curtis walked with them up the stairs, he said, “She’s sort of shy. Like I said, looks scared all the time. But it didn’t really happen until she had a beef with the new landlord.”

“Your friend said it was just a rumor.”

“Maybe so. But in the neighborhood, you don’t start fake rumors about wealthy white people. I have friends that have ended up in jail for less than that. So if the story got out around here, I promise you there’s some truth to it.”

He took them to the second door on the third floor. Even as they came to it, Ava could hear the soft murmurs of an infant. It was currently not complaining, but making the sort of exploratory vocalizations that came with discovering its voice. Both Ava and Frank stayed a few steps back as Curtis knocked on the door.

“Yeah, hold on a second!” came an answer from inside, a woman’s voice both sing-song and somehow stern at the same time.

The door was answered by a very pretty black woman in her early twenties. Her hair was in disarray but the curls made it look almost pristine and cute. Ava noticed at once that she had very expressive eyes, and even when she looked to the two white people behind Curtis and frowned slightly, Ava guessed she likely had a gorgeous smile.

“Who you got with you, Curtis?”

“They’re detectives,” he said. “They seem like the good kind, though. They had some questions and—” He stopped and looked back to Ava and Frank, as if for permission. Frank gave him a little nod and Curtis finished with: “They said someone killed the new building owner. They were looking for folks in these buildings that have spoken with him.”

The woman then looked to Ava and Frank, though after just a moment or two, her eyes settled back on Ava. “Dead? He’s dead?”

“He is,” Ava said. “And Curtis and some of his friends here tell us that you had some tense exchanges with him.”

She smiled then and even though it was one of sarcasm, Ava saw that she was right: the woman had a gorgeous smile. “Yes. Tense exchanges. That would explain it well. Y’all need to come in?”

“Yes, please,” Ava said.

“You still need me?” Curtis asked Frank.

“Not really. But if Harriett feels more comfortable with you...”

“No, sir, it’s okay,” Harriet said. “Come on in.”

Curtis nodded and took his leave as Ava and Frank walked into the apartment. It was another of those situations where Ava could sense Frank now taking the back seat, knowing that this single mother was going to relate to Ava much more than she would to a white male cop in Harlem.

As they came into the room, Ava saw a blanket folded over in half on the dingy wood floor. A baby lay on it, looking up to the ceiling and kicking its little legs. Ava guessed it to be a boy, probably about two months old. And from the way it was working its legs, he was going to almost certainly be an early crawler.

“Your child is adorable,” Ava said.

“Thank you,” Harriet said. “His name’s Abel.”

“I have a son of my own,” Ava said, “and I know how much attention they need at this age, so we won’t waste too much of your time. Would you mind just telling us about the interactions you had with the landlord?”

“You mean Mr. Lincoln, right?”

“Yes,” Frank said. “Monty Lincoln.”

“Well, before he bought the building, there was this fussy old woman next door that

was always complaining about Abel crying in the night. As if I could do something about that, you know? She even got in my face about it for a while but then she moved off somewhere. Pretty sure her husband lost his job and they moved. But then about three or four days after Mr. Lincoln bought the property, I get a knock on my door, and it's him. Now, I'd seen him once before because I passed him coming out of the building one day. He asked if I lived here, and we chatted a bit. He seemed nice enough then."

"Only then?"

Harriet waited a while before she went on. She looked down to Abel and picked him up. She carried him on her hip for a minute before again turning her attention directly to Ava. "Someone downstairs, on the second floor, apparently asked him if there was anything he could do about keeping Abel quiet. So he came up and talked to me about it."

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“And how did that go?” Frank asked.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” Harriet said. “It’s not something I want to relive.”

Ava understood this completely so she was hesitant to push. But at the same time, she was starting to figure something out. It was only a faint hunch at the moment, but it made more and more sense the longer she considered it. She looked around the apartment and found it tidy. There was also the smell of fresh-cooked food in the air—some sort of pork, she thought.

“Your husband passed away recently, right?”

“Yes ma’am, he did. Just a month after Abel was born.”

“And how old is Abel?”

“He’ll be three months in a couple of days.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Ava said, her hunch now finding more footing. “Forgive me for asking, but do you work?”

“I don’t,” she said. And just for a moment, her eyes went wide. Ava could see that Harriet knew where she was heading with this and she didn’t like it.

“How much are you paying for rent here?” Ava asked. She looked briefly to Frank, glad that he was remaining quiet while she tried to unspool all of this.

“Oh, it’s about seventeen.”

“About?”

“Yes. Seventeen. That’s it.” It was a different price than what the men in the neighboring building had given them, though the apartments looked basically the same. Now sensing that Harriet knew exactly what was going on, she pressed a bit harder.

“We need to know how the conversation with Mr. Lincoln went,” Ava said. “If you can help us, you’ll also be helping an innocent man stay out of prison. A colored man, a jazz musician that everyone thinks killed Monty Lincoln.”

“No. That’s my business.”

“Was he cruel?” Frank asked. Ava didn’t think he was aware of the theory she was trying to prove, but the question could help get them there. “Did he hit you?”

“No. Now, please...just let me and Abel—”

“Did your husband leave anything behind for you when he died?” Ava asked. She hated to go there because she knew all too well what it was like to lose a husband.

“What does that have to do with anything?” she asked, now rocking Abel on her hip.

“Living in this apartment,” Ava said, “while raising a baby, and without a job. Harriet, would it surprise you at all to know that we have testimony stating that Mr. Lincoln was being very flirtatious with a black jazz singer? Grabbing at her and trying to be intimate?”

Harriet stopped rocking Abel on her hip. For a moment, it looked like she stopped

breathing. Beside Ava, Frank whispered, “Jesus...”

“How long has it been going on?” Ava asked. “How long had you been having an affair with Monty Lincoln?”

Harriet sneered at first but then let it go in a sigh. She sat down in the beaten-up chair against the wall, holding Abel close to her breast.

“You can’t think less of me for it,” she said. “You don’t have the right.”

“It’s not you I’m thinking less of.”

This actually seemed to cause Harriet a bit of relief. Her eyes softened and she started softly rubbing her hand on her baby’s back. She shook her head and refused to look at them again.

“He told me it could be a good thing for me that he had bought the building. Said he was sorry my husband was dead, but if I wanted, he could take care of me now. No rent. And he’d make sure no one complained about Abel anymore. Said he’d even help me out with groceries and clothes because I was on my own now. All I had to do...”

Again, she shook her head, unable to bring herself to say it.

“Was it...abusive?” Frank asked.

Ava hated the question. Any unwanted physicality from a man was abuse in her book. But she knew what he meant. And apparently, Harriet did, too.

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“No,” she said. “Just fast and wanted it to be over as fast as possible. But so far as I can tell, he was going to keep his word. He came by with a few bags of groceries just a week ago. Enough to get me through for about a month. I’m not proud of what I was doing but...well, I hadn’t seen so many groceries at one time before. And I’m wondering now...what kind of a woman does it make me that I’m mad about him being dead?”

As Ava watched the woman wrestle with this on the verge of tears, it made sense why the men they’d met claimed they thought Harriet looked scared. She was scared they’d find out. And she was ashamed of what he was doing—simply because of the act of it and because her husband had just recently died.

And all the while, with this new information about Monty Lincoln, she thought she had a good idea who the killer was. They knew now that Monty had been sleeping with Harriet and that he’d been doing his best to get Ma’s attention. Based on that, as well as Monty’s wealth and ego, Ava thought it was safe to assume he had other black mistresses somewhere out in Harlem. Maybe part of his business venture was to also keep an eye out for women that interested him.

Seeing a clearly struggling woman and her baby in front of her, Ava felt a bit like a monster as her thoughts were already moving on. But she had a job to do and a man to keep out of prison—and they were quickly running out of time.

“Was there nothing left behind from your husband?” Ava asked.

“Oh, there was a bit saved up, but it won’t last me two months. If that. I just don’t know what I’m going to do.”



“Would you mind if I came by to check in on you?” Ava asked. “As I said, I have a son. And I also lost a husband recently—not so recent as you, but it still hurts.”

Harriet seemed shocked by this but nodded. “Well, yes, ma’am, that would be fine. Thank you.”

“Of course. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have to go. We have a killer to catch...a killer that, believe it or not, you may have helped us identify.”

“Mr. Lincoln’s killer?”

“That’s right.”

Nodding, she said, “Well, best of luck to you.”

“And to you, too,” Ava said. And with that, she gave a polite nod and headed for the door. Her heart broke for Harriet but it was also beating wildly with the knowledge that Monty Lincoln’s killer might very well be waiting for them in the very home in which he’d once resided.

### CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

“You think it’s the wife, don’t you?” Frank asked. “You think Anna Lincoln killed her husband.”

“I think it’s a very good chance. If Monty Lincoln was so open with making his interest known to these black women, I think Anna must have found out. I think she found out, got angry, and did something about it. If Anna’s half as racist as Samuel and his brother are, I’m sure the fact that they were women of color was a huge, extra sting.”

“That’s true,” Frank said, speeding the car out of Harlem and back toward the Lincoln residence. “But you know, it could have also been Samuel. Though I suppose if that were the case, he wouldn’t have been so forthcoming with information like addresses and other information.”

The closer they got to the house, the more Ava started to wonder about Samuel himself. He had a wealthier brother and had willingly stepped in to take on some of the weight of his death so that Anna and her son wouldn’t have to bear it all. It seemed like a noble gesture on the surface, but she supposed it could also be a lot of posturing. Maybe staying close to the family during this trying time was his way of making sure he was always there whenever bankers or Monty’s other business partners showed up. Maybe he was already trying to see what he could do to make sure he had the best chance at picking up where his brother had left off. And what better way to rope in his brother’s financial successes than killing him?

It felt a bit like a stretch but again, Ava was not prepared to rule anyone out just yet,

especially when they now had just about four hours remaining to clear Carter's name. And while it was hard enough going into the home of a grieving family, she had no doubt that what they were about to walk into would be so much worse than a typical and emotionally draining visit.

She could feel the weight and anticipation of it as Frank parked on the side of the street, in front of the house. It was heavier still when she got out and they made their way up the steps. When Ava knocked on the door, she was not at all surprised when Samuel opened it. He looked confused to see them again, so soon after Frank's visit.

"Detectives," he said. "I trust things went well at the apartments?"

"As well as could be hoped, anyway," Frank said. "You know, I had mentioned coming back and perhaps having a word with Mrs. Lincoln. I'd like to try to get that done now, please."

Ava wasn't sure if it was just her imagination or not, but she thought she saw Samuel hesitate for the slightest moment. But if he did hesitate, he recovered rather quickly. "Yes, I think that will be fine. The pastor left about twenty minutes ago. She'd currently in the kitchen when their cook, trying to work out meals for the next day. When she did come out of her stupor, Anna stepped right back into the flow of things." He lowered his voice and added: "I think she's really just trying to keep busy until the funeral."

He waved them on to follow him into the den. It was a large, well-furnished room and Ava was both amazed and saddened to find that she could actually feel the grief and sorrow of the loss of Monty filling the room.

"Just a moment," Samuel said. "I'll get Anna."

As Ava and Frank settled in, Ava was surprised to see a middle-aged black woman

enter the room. She walked stiffly and was dressed in what appeared to be a cheap maid service uniform. Ava had, to this point, assumed the family had staff of some kind. But this was the first time she'd actually seen any.

"Can I offer you folks anything to drink? Mrs. Lincoln just put on some coffee."

"No thank you," Frank said.

"None for me," Ava said, eyeing the woman as she smiled politely and left the room. She then turned to Frank and asked, "Did you spot household staff any other time you were here?"

"No. When I was here to get the addresses, Samuel mentioned that a woman was out fetching groceries, but I didn't quite make the connection."

"I wonder if this is the same woman," Ava said. "The same one that fetched the groceries and was just now back in the kitchen with Anna."

Before Frank could make any sort of speculations about this, someone else entered the room. It was a young man dressed in a black suit. His dark hair looked slightly greasy and he was clearly tired. The resemblance to the Lincoln brothers was uncanny, making Ava assume this must be Monty's son.

"Hello," the son said awkwardly.

"Hi," Frank said. He got to his feet and walked over to the young man, offering his hand for a shake. "I take it you're Mr. Lincoln's son?"

"Yes, sir," the boy said. "Marcus Lincoln. I...well, I heard you were here. That you've even been here a few times before. Trying to find the person that killed my father."

“That’s right. We’ve asked to speak with your mother, but if you feel up to it, we’d love to have a word with you, as well.”

“Of course,” the boy said—though to call him a boy might be degrading. Ava recalled that Frank had discovered the son was nineteen years of age. In his sadness, he looked a bit younger, despite the suit. “I’m sorry I’ve been so out of it. I would have spoken with you sooner, but I just...” He shrugged and seemed slightly embarrassed.

“It’s quite alright,” Frank said. “You lost your father. You have the right to take some time for yourself.”

“Are you having any luck?” he asked.

Ava wasn’t sure how to respond to this, as they were currently there to look into his mother as a potential suspect. Thankfully, Frank had more experience and tact in these matters, though.

“We have a few leads, but nothing very strong at the moment,” he said, the lie not showing in his face or reflected in his voice at all. “But we’re hoping that perhaps you and your mother might be able to provide some information that can help.”

As if drawn out by hearing mention of herself, Anna Lincoln came into the room. She walked fast, giving Frank and Ava apologetic nods. “So sorry,” she said. “As I’m sure you understand, there’s quite a lot to get done around here today. So much planning and unforeseen situations.”

“Don’t apologize,” Ava said, trying to keep her tone just as level as Frank’s.

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“And because we do know you’re going through a lot, we won’t take up much of your time,” Frank said.

“Oh, that’s quite alright,” Anna said. “I’m glad to help. I would like to see who was responsible for this in prison. I have to say, though—I’m told that you already have a man in custody, right?”

“There was an initial arrest, yes,” Ava said. “But there isn’t sufficient evidence against him.”

“I see. Well, we’d like to see the right man captured and punished for taking Monty from us.” She fought with tears for a moment but, blinking rapidly and looking up to the ceiling, she managed to keep control of herself.

“I suppose the first question,” Ava asked, “is how much you knew about Mr. Lincoln’s business. The people he worked with, the recent purchases he’d made, and so forth.”

“I’m ashamed to say I know very little,” Anna said. She nodded to the entryway of the den, where Samuel was still standing. “Samuel knows more than I would.”

“Did he ever mention people that he came into contact with throughout his day?” Frank asked. “Especially as of late, as he started venturing into Harlem?”

“Oh, no,” Anna said. A slight look of disgust crossed her face as she shook her head. “When Monty told me he was planning on purchasing buildings out there in that decrepit and sinful neighborhood, I told him I didn’t want to hear about it. And he

seemed happy enough to stay quiet on it.”

Oh, I bet he was, Ava said, thinking of Harriet.

“But you do know his plan, correct?” Frank asked. “You knew why he was purchasing property out there, right?”

“Oh, certainly I do. He was very passionate about it. Trying to straighten things out in this city, trying to make sure white businesses remained thriving and relevant.”

She said it with such pride and conviction that it was hard for Ava not to say something. But as she digested this, something struck her as odd. She was speaking about her husband as if he were some great, moral hero. Ava wasn’t picking up any angst at all. Maybe she hadn’t known about his affair with Harriet or any others that he might have had. Or maybe she did and she was just very good at keeping up appearances.

“How about you, Marcus?” Frank asked. “Did you and your father ever discuss his businesses?”

“Sometimes,” he said. “He wanted me to take things over when he got too old to handle it, but he never forced me too, you know? He did let me know he was going to start buying up buildings in Harlem and then pricing out the...well, the current residents.” He smiled slyly as he said this. It was the first real emotion he’d showed since he’d come into the room. “I was against it at first because I can’t imagine dealing with their kind. But with what my father was trying to do, Harlem would be a white-dominant neighborhood within a few years and I wouldn’t have to deal with all of that.”

Ava saw that even Frank was starting to get uncomfortable with the way the Lincolns were speaking. And as an awkward silence came over the room, the same black

woman came back in. She was carrying a small tray with a kettle and a cup on it. She set it on the coffee table in front of Anna, saying nothing. Ava watched the reactions of Anna and Marcus Lincoln as their colored household staff intruded upon their space. She noted that even though the woman was serving Anna, both Anna and Marcus seemed almost indignant toward her. She even saw the corner of Marcus's mouth decline slightly in a sneer.

Ava waited until the servant was gone before she continued on with her questions. And now, with Marcus still looking in the direction the servant had headed with that same wretched look on his face, Ava redirected the course of her questions.

"I wasn't aware you had hired household staff," Ava said. "Has their presence helped take away some of the burden these last few days?"

"A bit, yes," Anna said.

"Did Mr. Lincoln ever have much contact with them?"

The question seemed to take both mother and son by surprise. Anna looked as if she simply didn't even understand the question, whereas Marcus looked like he might throw up at any given moment. He also looked at Ava as if he wanted to come across the room and slap her.

"I don't believe so," Anna said. "Of course, they spoke to him cordially when he was home, but that's about all."

"And how many staff do you have?" Ava asked.

"Two," Marcus said, quickly and with a bit of force. "But with all due respect, what do our hired hands have to do with my father's murder?"



“Marcus! These people are only trying to help! They know what they’re doing.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Lincoln. Would you allow me to speak with them?”

“Well, there is only one here today. You’ve seen her, of course. You’re welcome to speak with her, but I don’t know how much good it will do.”

“Mother,” Marcus said, “this is a waste of t—”

“Hush now, Marcus.”

He did as his mother asked while she got up to get the woman, but he looked furious about it. He glared at Ava and Frank, making Ava reconsider which member of the house they might truly need to consider. When Anna came back into the room with the servant, Ava noted that Marcus got incredibly uncomfortable. For a moment, it seemed he might get to his feet and exit the room. But in the end, he stayed where he was. The maid stood just inside the room, not too far away from Samuel. She looked around the room, her eyes taking it all in. It was quite clear that she wasn’t sure if she should be scared or not.

“Eve, these detectives want to ask you some questions,” Anna said. “You answer them honestly now, you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Eve, was it?” Frank asked. He seemed a little baffled by Ava’s direction on this, too.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good to meet you, Eve,” Ava said. “How long have you been working for the Lincolns?”

The woman thought hard about it for a moment and even looked back to Anna before speaking. Anna gave her a nod and Eve finally said, “Maybe two years, ma’am.”

“Would you say you’ve been treated well?”

“Oh, for sure. They always pay me on time. Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln even gave me a nice coat for Christmas last year.”

“Are you married, Eve?”

Eve smiled and shook her head. “No, ma’am. Not me. Almost did one time when I was much younger but it didn’t work.”

“How old are you, Eve?”

With each question, Ava watched Marcus grow angrier and angrier. She prepared herself, knowing full well that the next question she was going to ask would likely set him off. She wished there was some way she could communicate with Frank before it

got there—to tell him to be ready for anything.

“I’ll be thirty-eight in a few weeks,” Eve said.

So she wasn’t quite as old as Ava had thought. And though she was much older than Harriet, she did have a certain glow to her. In many ways, they looked a bit similar, she supposed, other than the slight age difference.

“In your time with the Lincolns,” Ava said, “did you ever experience a time when Mr. Lincoln was inappropriate with you?”

She got two reactions to this right away. One came from Eve, as she said: “Inappropriate?”

The other came from Marcus. He got to his feet and practically screamed: “What the hell are you getting at, woman?”

Ava ignored Marcus, especially as Frank also got to his feet in response. She kept her eyes on Eve and said, “Yes. Inappropriate. What I mean was if he ever touched you in a way that made you uncomfortable.”

“Oh,” Eve said. She looked at the floor right away and started shaking her head quickly.

At the same time, Anne Lincoln also stood up. She was looking to Ava as if the detective had broken her heart. “Why would you...why would you come in here and accuse my husband of such a thing?”

Ava ignored her as the room became a chess game of sorts. Samuel remained where he was by the entrance of the den while Marcus paced back and forth in front of the couch.

“Eve, did you ever participate in a sexual relationship with Monty Lincoln?”

“Ava...” Frank said, shocked at the blunt nature of the question.

With a tremor in her voice, Anne spoke as loudly as she could. “You need to get out of my house, Detective. Both of you.”

“And you’ll be hearing from us,” Marcus said through clenched teeth. “We’ll contact your captain and you’ll both lose your jobs. You can—”

Eve’s gentle yet firm voice interrupted him.

“Only twice. I didn’t want to, but he insisted. And I knew if I said anything to anyone, no one would believe me. He’s tried it with Esther, the other staff, too. They never had relations, but he’s grabbed her and fondled her. She...was only sixteen at the time.”

The very air seemed to be sucked out of the room. Anna looked to Eve as if the maid had just spoken a different language. Samuel hung his head and started rubbing at his temples. It made Ava wonder if he’d known—or, at the very least, had suspicions.

But Marcus took it to a whole different level. In the midst of his pacing, he lunged straight ahead while reaching in his pocket. Both Ava and Frank went for their guns, but it was too late. In the span of about two seconds, Marcus moved behind Eve and pulled a small pocketknife from his trouser pocket. He put the blade to Eve’s throat and glared at the detectives from behind her shoulder.

“Put your guns down right now, or I’ll cut this black bitch’s throat!” Marcus screamed.

Anna stumbled backwards and for a moment, Ava thought she might faint. Samuel

remained where he was, aghast at the entire situation.

“Put them down, now!” Marcus said. “I’ll do it!”

Beside her, Frank did as Marcus asked. He slowly bent down and placed his gun on the floor. Then, with her eyes on the blade at Eve’s throat, Ava was helpless but to do the same.

### CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

It was easily one of the tensest moments Ava had ever experienced as a detective. To know that at any given moment, Marcus Lincoln could decide to draw his arm back and slice Eve's throat was unnerving. And without her gun, she felt utterly helpless. She could do nothing but stand there and hope she or Frank could come up with some way to save Eve's life.

The silence was broken by the fragile, frail voice of Anna Lincoln. "Is...is this true?"

But Eve was too afraid to speak. But, angry and perhaps realizing just what a mess he was making for himself, Marcus had no problem speaking.

"Of course it's true, Mother! Do you honestly think business interests was the only reason my father kept going into Harlem?"

"You knew," Ava said to Marcus. "You knew, and I think you've known for a while."

"Yes. Yes, I knew! And I was ashamed and disgusted."

"God almighty," Samuel said from his place by the parlor's entrance. "I always thought he might have a tendency towards women of color...always joked with him about it. But I never would have thought..."

"How many have there been, Marcus?" Frank asked.

“I lost count! There was a whore at some jazz club not too long ago and I know there’s a woman in one of those buildings he just bought.”

“How do you know?” Ava asked.

And just like that, she set the trap. The moment Marcus admitted to knowing about his father’s guilty pleasures, she knew he was the killer. Now she just needed to get him to slip up and admit it. And, of course, to remove the knife from Eve’s throat.

“I’ve known for months now,” he said. “But I didn’t want to believe it. So I started following him. And I saw him with that whore...he took her to a hotel. He was with her a few times and...”

Anna started to wail, dropping to her knees. Samuel went to her side, looking like he might shatter at any moment.

“So why threaten Eve right now?” Ava asked. “She did nothing. It was your father...” She stopped here, understanding what she was about to say. Monty Lincoln was dead and here she was, pretty much accusing him of rape in front of his aggrieved family.

“You saw your father at the Candle’s Wick, didn’t you?” Ava asked. “You were following him and you saw him trying his very best to force himself on the singer of the band.”

His eyes widened with horror, but the knife never moved away from Eve’s neck.

“What you did,” Ava said, “wasn’t done because you wanted his wealth or because you were envious. You were disgusted. You said it yourself just moments ago.”

“Shut up,” he screamed at her. His grip on Eve loosened a bit and Ava could tell that

all of his rage and anger was now directed at her.

“You confronted him about it in that alley, didn’t you?”

And then Frank spoke up, waiting for the right moment and going directly to the point. “What did you hit him with, son? You didn’t mean to kill him, right?”

This time, it was Samuel who spoke up, raising his voice to be heard over Anna’s screams. “How dare you make such an accusation?”

“You knew one of the band members would probably be assumed to be the killer, so you just fled the scene,” Ava said. She also wondered if maybe Albert Long had known this but had willingly covered for Monty Lincoln’s son, hoping his back would be scratched in a similar way later down the road. But that had nothing to do with the immediate situation and if she was wrong about it, it would only confuse matters.

“Come down to the station with us and tell us the truth,” Frank said. “You just let that woman go right now and we can—”

Rage pushed Marcus quickly. When he shoved Eve hard to the right and away from him, Ava was certain he’d sliced into her throat. Eve spilled over the edge of the couch and in a pinwheel motion, struck the floor hard. Ava barely saw this, though, as a room that had been perfectly still one second ago came alive with activity.

Marcus came charging at them, predictably coming for Ava first, assuming she’d be the weakest of the two. At about the same time, Frank leaned down for his gun. Ava, meanwhile, simply stood her ground, making fists of her hands and waiting for the right moment. There was a hair of a second where Marcus seemed to be confused. Why was she not moving? Why was she not trying to go for her gun or dodge his attack?



It was at about that same time that Ava jabbed out her right hand. She struck Marcus directly in the throat. He stopped coming forward at once as he started to make gagging noises. As he fell backwards, he slashed out with the knife just as Ava drew her hand back. The blade sliced across the upper part of her wrist. It cut deep and drew blood right away. She cradled it to her arm as Frank continued with the rest of their defense.

As Marcus tried his best not to fall, his free hand going to his throat while the other still brandished the knife, Frank slammed his large hand down on the knife-holding arm. The impact forced Marcus to drop the knife and the moment it hit the floor, Frank drew Marcus's arms up behind him and started to cuff him.

Ava then retrieved her gun just in case Samuel thought he might be able to help his nephew. She thought Samuel may have been advancing forward at first but when he saw her grab the gun, he went still again. He remained with Anna, doing his best to comfort her. And the hell of it was that Ava actually did feel sorry for her. Not only was her husband dead, but she was learning many deep, dark secrets about him that she would likely have never even imagined.

She held the gun by her side while Frank hoisted Marcus back up to his feet. Meanwhile Anna kept screaming and Marcus looked around the parlor as if he could already see the family name crumbling around him. And all the while, she felt a steady flow of blood down her arm. It trickled down her wrists and over her fingers where it dripped on the floor. She barely even noticed though, figuring her bloodstains were the least of the Lincoln family's concerns this afternoon.

### CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

The only person who served as a medic at the precinct was out on duty, so Ava had to settle for Lottie's charming bedside manner in the ladies' restroom. As Lottie helped her to wash the blood away from her arm, some of it having dried and caked up around the wound already, Ava started to worry she may require some actual medical attention.

But once the skin was cleaned off and the wound was revealed, it turned out to be not as bad as she feared. It was long, and had nearly nicked a vein, but that was the worst of it. The bleeding was already starting to dam up. It would leave a scar for sure, but there would be no visits to the doctor.

"Another daring arrest?" Lottie asked as she dried the area off.

"Well, technically, Frank did the arresting. I just punched the guy."

"Was it the right guy this time?"

"It was," Ava said, surprised to find that she didn't feel quite as victorious as she'd hoped. "In the end, it was the son."

"Well, let me get this bandaged up for you and you can go tell Carter Epps he's officially free." When she saw Ava's look of surprise, Lottie grinned. "What? We all know what you've been up to. Yes, even us lowly broads down in the WB office. And we were all rooting for you."

“Thanks,” Ava said. She watched Lottie apply a bandage to the area, wrapping some gauze around her arm.

“You’re representing us well, girly,” Lottie said, stepping back to admire her work. “Keep it up, would you? Just maybe stay away from knives from here on out.”

They parted ways as they exited the ladies’ room, Lottie heading back to the WB offices while Ava went off in search of Frank. She supposed he was already in an interrogation room with Marcus Lincoln. Yet, as she made her way to the hallway that contained the interrogation rooms, she saw Carter Epps. He was being escorted out of the building quickly by two officers. They were marching along the far side of the bullpen, making a direct line for the lobby and the front doors.

She forgot about the interrogation rooms at once. She redirected herself toward the lobby, hoping to cut off the officers who were taking Epps away. She made it just in time, angling in front of them when they were just feet away from the doors. One of the officers was a somewhat familiar face from around the bullpen, always giving her looks of condescension.

“Where is everyone headed?” Ava asked.

“Making sure he leaves the precinct,” the officer on the right said.

“He’s been let go, correct?” Ava asked.

“He has.”

“Then let him go. You think he’s going to hang around here any more than he has to?”

The officer that she’d seen from time to time gave Carter a little push in her direction.

“Fine,” he said. “Then you escort him out.” His attitude was far too similar to that of the Lincolns and it made her wonder how deep it truly did run in the precinct.

“Detective Gold,” Carter said, “I can’t thank you enough.”

“You don’t need to thank me at all,” she said, walking with him to the doors. “Sorry about the way they were handling that.”

“Hey, I get it. They had the wrong man and didn’t want to admit it. So of course they’re going to want to get me out of here as quickly as possible, with no one seeing.”

“Are you good to go now?” Ava asked.

“Yeah. And I owe it to you. It’s a shame I can’t ever pay you back.”

“Tell you what,” Ava said as they walked through the doors and out to the street. “Next time you guys play somewhere and I happen to show up, you can pay for my door charge.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

She watched him leave the precinct, walking with his head down and a bit of speed in his step. She couldn’t deny that it felt good to free an innocent man and to make sure the right man went to prison for the crime. With that in mind, she couldn’t help but think of Clarence. She thought of the information she now had on Clarence’s potential killer—about a visit she needed to take out to Welfare Island to speak with a man by the name of Kenny Sanderson.

And because they’d managed to free Carter Epps with about two and a half hours to spare, she thought she might head out that way before the day was over. But first,

there was Marcus Lincoln to deal with. She dashed back inside and after checking the room logs, she found Frank sitting in a smaller interrogation room with Marcus.

When Marcus saw her enter, he rolled his eyes and crossed his arms defiantly over his chest. Ignoring him completely, Frank looked at Ava's bandage and frowned. "How's the arm?"

"Not too bad. This is Lottie's handiwork."

"That's a good word for it." He sighed and then looked back to Marcus. "He says he's not saying anything else until his lawyer gets here. But because his father handled all of those affairs, he doesn't even know who the lawyer is."

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“We already got his confession,” Ava said. “And in front of his mother, uncle, and house staff, no less.”

“And at least two officers here when he was first brought in here.”

“Oh, I bet you two are really proud of yourself,” Marcus said. “Making sure to arrest a man who was just trying to keep his family’s legacy untainted.”

“Murder isn’t exactly the clean way to keep your family’s name out of the dirt,” Ava said.

“He’d agree with me if he could,” Marcus said.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“He’d tell me to do it. There’s no way he wasn’t ashamed of it...of what he did. And what I did, I did for my mother, hoping to hide her from the shame of what he was doing. But you went ahead and brought those secrets right to our doorstep, didn’t you?”

“All secrets come to the light eventually,” Ava said. She gave herself chills in saying it, as her mind once again brought up Welfare Island. She looked to Frank and said, “So what happens now?”

“We try to figure out who the lawyer is. We’ve already got some folks working on it.”

“I’m going to head out for a bit.”

“That should be fine. Where are you headed?”

She winced and then gave a smile. “You might not want to know.”

“Clarence?”

She nodded, not sure how she felt about his ability to read her so well. Then again, Clarence was just about the only topic she didn’t openly discuss with him.

“Just be careful. Promise me that?” She could tell there was a lot more he wanted to say. But they’d been down that road before and he knew how it would end. She appreciated the fact that he cared so much but probably even more than that, the fact that he was no longer trying to talk her out of bringing Clarence’s killer to justice.

“Always,” she answered. She found herself wanting to kiss him, but it would be highly unprofessional—not just while at work, but especially while in front of a man they’d both just arrested.

So she could only settle for giving him a smile and grazing the back of his hand as she made her exit. When she got back out into the hallway, her mind seemed to be locked on the idea of Welfare Island. Honestly, she’d originally intended to go in a few days but now, with the success of apprehending a killer and freeing an innocent man, she felt like she should try to strike while the iron was hot.

As she made her way back across to the lobby for the second time in less than fifteen minutes, she saw Captain Minard speaking to a cop in the bullpen. When he spotted her, he held up his index finger, indicating he needed her to stop for a second. He wrapped up his conversation with the officer and headed her way. She couldn’t read his expression but she assumed that whatever was on his mind had to do with the

Monty Lincoln case.

When he approached her, he stepped closely and offered a small smile. “Really great work on this case, Detective Gold. Detective Wimbly gives you all of the credit for figuring it out, despite a lack of leads and evidence.”

“I just wish I could have done it sooner.”

“Where are you headed right now?” he asked.

She knew she was taking a risk by telling a lie, but the truth certainly wouldn’t sit well with him. “I’m going to go back and get a follow-up with the maid,” she said. And then, showing him Lottie’s bandage job, she said: “And maybe get this checked out. Lottie and I weren’t sure if it was deep enough to need a doctor’s attention.”

“Yes, please do make sure you get that taken care of. But listen, Detective Gold. I’d like to have a meeting with you and Detective Wimbly tomorrow afternoon. My office, at one o’clock. Make sure you make room for it, okay?”

“Yes, sir.” She wanted to ask what the meeting was about but she knew better than to open that opportunity. Besides, he seemed to have bought her lie without any problem, so she knew it would be best to get out now before he decided to ask questions. “Anything else?”

“No, not for now. Again, great work today.”

“Thank you, sir.”

She headed for the doors again, still worried that Minard would call her one more time, at the last moment, asking her again what she was up to—what she was really up to. But Captain Minard didn’t call for her again and she was able to flag a cab



down before Minard, Frank, or her own second thoughts could stop her.

### CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Welfare Island was located on the East River and had been given something of a bad reputation because of the prison and mental facilities that were situated on the island. It was the sort of New York City location that Ava had often heard Clarence talk about but she had never visited. Until now, she'd simply had no reason to step foot on the island.

The prison looked like it belonged on the backside of some old, ruined castle in the wilds of England. Called quite simply City Prison, it looked both foreboding and quite boring. Looking at it from the back of the cab, Ava was relieved to find she had no more second thoughts. If anything, she was anxious to get inside.

She showed the driver her badge. "How long can you wait here for me? I didn't exactly see a lot of cabs swarming the island."

"Pretty lady like you, I can give you half an hour. I'm going to need you to pay now, though."

She'd expected as much and gave him the fare for the ride in without argument since he was willing to kill half an hour of potential fare time. She then got out of the car and headed to the front doors. When she walked inside, she was instantly overcome by the smell of dust, dirt, and sweat. As she moved in closer to a small foyer that was closed off by prison bars, she also caught a slight, pungent odor that she thought might be years of poorly cleaned urine.

An overweight officer sat behind the bars in the foyer. He looked very confused to

see a woman stepping inside such a place and even more confused still when that woman showed him her police badge.

“I’m Detective Ava Gold, and I’m here to meet with one of your prisoners. I also don’t have much time, so I’d appreciate it if I could see him quickly.”

“I’ll be,” the man said with a smile. “Ava Gold. I’ve heard a lot about you. Knew your husband a bit, too, if you don’t mind me saying. Hell of a good man.”

“Thank you,” she said, hoping this little bit of fame might work in her favor.

“Which inmate do you need to speak to?”

“A man named Kenny Sanderson.”

“Yeah, well, he’s here alright,” the overweight cop said. “One second.”

She waited on the other side of the bars as he flipped through an old, well-worn ledger of sorts. He scanned a page near the back with a pudgy finger and eventually pointed. “Yeah, Cell 46.”

“Is there a room where I could speak to him?”

“Best I could do is the cafeteria. But they’ll be prepping for dinner soon, so you won’t have much time.”

“That’s perfectly fine.”

“Alright then, let’s get you down there. Come on back.” With that, he pulled a ring of keys from his belt loop, unlocked the bars that separated the foyer, and pushed them open, revealing a door that had been well-hidden within the grid of bars. He led her

down a thin hallway that smelled even worse than the foyer. After several feet down, he stopped by a door that was partially open.

He poked his head in and spoke to a man inside. “Hey, Hattie! We need to get Kenny Sanderson down to the mess hall lickety-split. Can you do that for me?”

“A-yuh! Give me ten minutes,” another voice called out.

Ava figured she could continue trying her luck. She moved in behind the overweight officer and peered inside the room. She saw the older gentleman sitting at an old desk and smiled at him. “Can you make it five?” She also showed her badge for extra motivation.

“Sure thing, ma’am!” the older man, Hattie, exclaimed.

They left the room as a trio, the two officers splitting up at the end of the hallway. Ava’s escort led her down a set of stairs that looked like they could very well lead to a dungeon. The stairs ended in a large room made entirely of concrete. Concrete walls, concrete floors, and only a single, large light hanging from the ceiling. A single window looked outside along the back, low to the ground and showing only the backside of the prison, a flat expanse of gravel that gave way to the murky-looking river. Roughly twenty tables were set out along the floor, each with a handful of chairs positioned at them. To the right was a small alcove she assumed served as the kitchen, where the line of prisoners would rotate through for their dinner.

“Have a seat wherever you like,” the overweight officer said. “Now, I hope you’ll understand, I have to stay in here with you. Security, you know.”

“I understand.”

She took the seat closest to her and waited. She could sense the officer wanting to

Speak to her, to maybe ask questions about why she needed to speak with Sanderson, but he remained mercifully quiet.

Less than five minutes later, two more men joined them. One was another officer, a younger man this time, with a build roughly resembling the side of the prison—a form of security much more fitting than Ava’s escort. She assumed the other man, dressed in a dingy prisoner’s uniform, was Kenny Sanderson.

Sanderson smiled and even started to laugh a bit when he saw her. But he was also looking at her in a devious, hungry way that made her skin crawl.

“Y’all brought me a treat!” Sanderson said.

“Shut your face and sit down,” the new, large guard said.

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This stopped the laughter a bit, and Sanderson sat down in a chair at the table directly across from where Ava sat.

Ava showed her badge for the third time in less than ten minutes. “Mr. Sanderson, my name is Ava Gold, and I’m a detective with the NYPD. I need to—”

“Well, that’s just too sweet,” he said, chuckling. “Gold, you said? And a woman detective? My good Jesus, how long have I been in this hellhole? Did the world end?”

“Mr. Sanderson, I have very limited time to speak with you so I’d appreciate it if you would stop interrupting.”

“Yeah, but you—”

“Listen to her, Sanderson,” the large guard barked.

“You repeated my last name like it’s familiar to you. Why is that?”

Sanderson thought about this for a moment and started laughing again. “Gold. Wife of Clarence, right?”

Anger and curiosity buzzed inside of her like a bee in her guts. She sat up rigidly and stared him down. “How do you know that?”

“Ah hell, I’m not as stupid as I look. I had a feeling I knew who you were the moment you said your name. Who you were and why you were here. I just want to know what lousy bastard pointed you to me.”

“So you know why I’m here?”

“Sure. Delicious-looking thing like you walks into a place like this with a badge and turns out your husband’s dead—a dead cop, at that. You’re looking for the man that killed him.”

“I am,” she said, seething with rage.

“Sorry, baby, but it ain’t me.”

“I know it’s not you. But you know the man who did it and I need you tell me where I can find him.”

“Oh, I do? That’s rich. Why don’t you tell me his name?”

“Jim Spurlock.”

The mention of the name visibly shook his confidence. He stared at her now with something more than lust and arrogance. He knew he was between a rock and a hard place. Then he smiled, a slow tilt to his mouth that came gradually.

“Yeah, I know him. And I bet he’d love to see you.”

“Where can I find him?”

“What day is it?”

“Thursday.”

Sanderson nodded and she could see him thinking, the wheels of his mind churning. The question, though, was if he was really trying to find an answer or if he was

simply conjuring up a clever lie.

“Thursday,” he said. “Well, unless he’s switched things up, you’ll find him in the basement of this small tobacco warehouse out on Seventy-ninth Street. Little gambling den. Poker, dice, that sort of thing. Hell, they’ll even have chickens fighting every now and then. You might want to get there early, though. Mr. Spurlock likes to get his gambling done before all the poor, trouble-making riffraff get out on the streets.”

The large guard and the overweight one both seemed to stiffen at this. The overweight one pushed Sanderson hard from behind, rocking his seat a bit. “You better not be lying to this lady,” he said.

“Nope, no lies.”

“So then why are you giving me this information so easily?” Ava asked.

“Oh, a bunch of reasons. First, because there’s about three crooked bastards in that place that have cheated me out of money. And second...you can go chasing after Mr. Spurlock all you want, but you won’t get him. Like I said...I think he’d like to meet you. And if you aren’t careful, you’ll end up like your husband.”

Ava felt her hands clenching tightly and her breaths coming in thin, shallow hitches. She got to her feet and turned away from Sanderson before she lost control.

“Detective Gold?” the large guard said.



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“Yes?”

“If you lost your cool and maybe decided he needed a few punches, I think the three of us could conveniently look away for a minute or two.” The other officer nodded, even smiled a bit. And oh God, it was a tempting offer.

“I appreciate it, but I better not,” Ava said. “Gentlemen, thank you.”

“Good luck to you, Mrs. Gold,” the overweight officer said.

She looked back at Sanderson and she wasn’t sure how to feel about the smile that was still plastered to his face. She thought it meant he knew the sort of man Spurlock was. And if he’d known who she was based on just her last name, it all but confirmed the name of Clarence Gold had been in the minds and mouths of Jim Spurlock and the men he associated with. And why would that be the case if he wasn’t the man who killed him?

It all swirled in her head as she made her way back up the stairs and to the front doors. All she knew for certain was that she knew where the man who had killed Clarence would be later this evening.

And it was a good thing she had freed a man earlier in the day because she sure as hell planned to arrest one more before the day was out—and maybe, if she got the chance, just beat the hell out of him, too.

### CHAPTER THIRTY

She found the tobacco warehouse easily enough and when she got there, she paid the cab driver for the full fare, as she had no idea how long she'd be here waiting. She spent a few minutes staking the building out before even thinking about entering. It sat one building away from the corner of the block, bookended by a shoe repair shop and a vacant property that had once been a grocer.

It was 4:55, not yet late enough for most people who worked daily jobs to start filling the streets on their way home. She started to wonder how long she'd be willing to stay before seeing any sort of movement. She'd like to at least call home to say goodnight to Jeffrey if she was going to be out that long. All she knew was that she wasn't going anywhere until she saw Spurlock. She had him now; her hunting was over and the killer could very well be heading her way as she waited across the street in front of a woman's dress shop.

She sat there for roughly half an hour, watching and waiting, growing impatient. And just when she started to wonder if Kenny Sanderson had lied to her just to send her after a false lead, she watched a car pull up in front of the warehouse. It was a newer model, black and so sleek she thought it must have come directly from the dealership. The car remained there for a moment until another one arrived. This one passed by the parked car slowly and then headed to the far end of the block. There, it turned right and Ava could barely see the car as it, too, parked along the edge of the street.

Almost right away, two men got out of the car closest to her and walked over to the one that had just finished parking. Neither man looked familiar, but they were dressed in nice suits. One of them wore a stylish overcoat and a bowler hat—the same sort of

hat Jim Spurlock seemed to always wear. This man was clearly not Spurlock, though. He had graying hair and was much taller than Spurlock, whose arrest records indicated that he was five feet, five inches.

The two men paused at the other car, where another man got out. They then walked back up the sidewalk, now a trio, and stopped at the tobacco warehouse. One of the men knocked on the door and it was answered within seconds. When the door opened, the men hurried inside quickly, one of them looking over their shoulder.

Ava put her paper down, not sure if she should go in just yet. And even as she wondered that, another car pulled in where the second had parked. It slowed down to a stop by the other car and then continued on. All of this activity told her that there was at least some degree of truth to what Sanderson had told her. Something was going on at this warehouse and the men involved were being very secretive about it.

As 5:30 came around, two more cars had come by, slowing to look at the other two that had parked. But as the streets were filling with traffic as people made their way home from work, there were no spaces. So the cars would go down the side streets and never appear again. So far, there was no clear sign of Jim Spurlock. But she'd seen enough people going to the other side of the block to assume they were going in through a back entrance. When Ava had come early to get the lay of the land, she'd taken note of an alleyway that cut around behind the first row of buildings, giving way to a small parking lot that sat between both rows of buildings on opposite sides of the block.

Ava felt like she'd wasted enough time. She crossed the street and went around the same corner the other cars had gone behind. She came to the alley and saw two of the other cars she'd seen pulled to the side positioned alongside trash cans and empty crates. One of them was parked directly beside the loading dock of what she assumed was the tobacco warehouse.

Fearing that she might get spotted, she hurried along the alleyway and when she reached the car by the loading dock, she hunkered down behind it. She could hear footsteps treading along a wooden floor to her right and slightly overhead. A man was laughing about something while two others spoke.

Slowly she inched her way along the side of the car, hidden in the thin space between the car and back wall of the warehouse. She didn't stop until she came to the edge of the loading dock. It was made of wood, with steel underpinnings. While she crouched down, her head was about a foot or so below the floor of the dock and doorway leading inside. If she were to stand up, she'd be able to reach the steel railing and pull herself up onto the dock easily enough. She reached up to do just that when another set of footsteps approached along the dock.

She heard a voice from further in the building saying, "That's everyone, yeah?"

"Think so," a much closer voice said. "Want to ask Mr. Spurlock if he's waiting on anyone else?"

"Yeah, hold on."

Every muscle in Ava's body went tense at the confirmation that Jim Spurlock was inside. For a moment, her better sense told her that if she was legitimately going to do this, she should leave her gun out here in the alley. If she went in there and things got out of hand, she'd almost have to use it. And that would probably mean losing her job. That was, of course, unless she could spin a fabricated story as to why she was there in the first place.

She toyed with the idea for a bit longer, but it all came apart when she heard the rest of the conversation.

"Mr. Spurlock says we're already five minutes over," someone called from further

away. “Lock the door.”

“You got it.”

That was all the convincing Ava needed. Keeping her gun on her, she stood up, grabbed the rail, and vaulted up onto the platform. She did it very quickly and when she stepped to the door, the man who had been speaking closer to her was reaching for it. He looked shocked by the sudden appearance of a woman at the door, but because Ava had been expecting someone where he had not, she easily got the jump on him.

She dished out a right-handed jab that caught him squarely in the mouth. As he opened his mouth to yell, Ava stepped forward, grabbed him by the back of his head, and rammed it into the doorframe. The speed and violence of it even took Ava by surprise but she knew that she couldn't afford to hesitate. She heard the man groaning as he fell to the dock, but she trusted she hadn't doled out anything too bad—maybe a busted lip or some chipped teeth at most. And certainly a doozy of a shiner on his head.

She looked ahead right away and saw only a short, dimly lit hallway. It emptied out into what looked like an old storage room. The place smelled of sweet tobacco and pipe smoke. She could hear movement ahead, and a few voices speaking casually, but she could see no one. She reached behind her and drew the door closed, setting the lock to make sure the one man she'd already taken out would stay out of the equation.

As she moved forward down the hallway, more of the room came into view. There was a large poker table set up to the right, and she counted five men sitting around it. She looked them over closely and could see no signs of weapons on them. She wondered if this was by design, making sure some friendly gambling remained as friendly as possible. As a detective, she knew very well that at least two or three men a week died or were seriously injured over gambling arguments. The only man she

was unsure of was the one she'd seen in the overcoat. The coat was draped over a chair at the table and she had no way of knowing if there was a gun in there or not.

As she scanned the table closer, she spotted Jim Spurlock. Her heart went cold and she had to restrain herself not to pull out her gun right then and there. No, she needed to play this smart. If she went ahead and—

“Can I help you, sweet thing?”

The man's voice from her right caused her to jump. In her alarm, she realized that she'd been so transfixed on the poker table and the sight of Jim Spurlock that she hadn't bothered scanning the rest of the room.

The man beside her was grinning and making a dramatic scene out of looking over her entire body. “Hey, guys, you see thi—”

Ava's old boxing instincts kicked in. Her feet took their appropriate positions and, like some strange second nature, her left arm blasted out two rapid punches. Both landed true, right on the man's left cheek. She finished it off with a right hook that dropped the man like a sack of bricks.

Two of the men from the poker table rushed over to her, one drawing a knife from his pocket. Behind them, Jim Spurlock and the others watched with rapt attention. And as the two men came at her, Ava knew that this was not the time for talking. The knife in the man's hand was proof of that. She was here for Spurlock and she'd get him. She might break her hands from throwing punches and she may very well lose the fight in the end. But the bastard was right there and she had to try.

The first man came at her with the same macho attitude as the one she'd just knocked out. “You got that kind of fire in the bedroom, little lady?”

She faked a punch, which he reflexively tried to block. With his arms going up to block the punch she did not intend to deliver, she kicked him in the crotch. When he howled and dropped to his knees, she sent a hard right cross that connected squarely with his brow. A little jolt of pain went up her arm as this man also fell to the ground.

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By the time this man was on the ground, the man with the knife came lunging at her. Ironically, it was in dodging this man's awkward lashing motion that Ava realized her wound from earlier was bleeding again from all of the movement and action. Sidestepping the man's attack, she grabbed his arm and wrenched it hard, twisting it to the left. She'd intended only to twist hard enough to get him to drop the knife, but she was on fire, could feel adrenaline and anger coursing through her, and she lost track of her own strength.

She heard the man's wrist snap, followed by a sick pop as his shoulder came out of socket. With her right hand still aching, she relied on her left hand. Knowing she wasn't as powerful on that side, she had to make the strike mean more. Rather than going for the head, she landed a blow in his ribs and then another in the throat. The man hunched over in pain, almost spastic in that he couldn't decide what hurt more.

"That's enough, Detective Gold."

She turned to see Jim Spurlock on his feet. On the table, the cards were still stacked neatly, as there had not yet been a single game played. The other two men were flanking him, standing slightly in front of Spurlock. One of them looked spooked, unable to believe what he'd just seen. The other, built like a boxer from what Ava could tell, looked a bit more confident.

"You know who I am?" she asked.

"Of course I do. You're the infamous woman detective. The woman who had a stand-up fellow as a husband. Killed while trying to stop a bank robbery."



He was moving forward as he spoke, closing the distance between them to ten feet, then eight.

“Killed by you,” Ava said.

“And?”

Ava pulled her gun and for the first time, Spurlock looked worried. “Put your hands in the air, Mr. Spurlock. And you other two, sit down at the table.”

Spurlock and his two goons were less than five feet away from her now. “Please tell me you didn’t take this job just to come after his killer,” Spurlock said. He was not raising his hands. In fact, the three of them were stepping even closer.

“Stop where you are right now,” Ava said.

“Fine, fine,” Spurlock said.

When he stopped, the other two did as well. Then, immediately after all three had stopped moving, Spurlock moved. He moved quickly, in an attack Ava would have never predicted. He shoved the smaller of the two goons directly at her.

When they collided, Spurlock went running for the hallway and the loading dock door beyond. She turned to go after him, but in doing so caught a right-handed blow from the man with the boxer’s build. It rocked her a bit, but she kept her feet. Meanwhile, the man who had been shoved into her also took off running behind Spurlock.

The man in front of her threw another punch but she was able to block this one just before it slammed into her nose. With that punch blocked, she jammed her gun back into its holster and used her aching right hand to deliver a hard jab into his solar plexus. He stumbled back but then came charging at her, his shoulder lowered in

preparation to tackle her.

Ava waited for the right moment and brought her right knee up as hard as she could. She'd meant to catch him in the face, but she'd been a half second late and, instead, caught him under his chin. The sound of his jaw cracking and his teeth clinking together was like some strange, out of tune sound from a piano. He swayed on his feet for a moment and somehow remained standing. As he swayed, Ava put every ounce of her remaining strength into her right arm and took him down with a devastating roundhouse blow.

Panting and still slightly jarred from the punch she'd taken on, Ava started for the hallway. Spurlock and his goon were already gone. Ava pulled her gun from its holster and hurried along to the doorway, kicking it open and pivoting outside. But the only thing she saw was the man who had previously been standing by the door, the first man she'd taken out on her way to Spurlock.

Now angrier than ever she hurried down the alley, rushing for the street where the two cars were parked just along the side of the block. As she neared the end of the alleyway, she saw one of those cars, well-polished and sleek black, speeding to the east. As it passed no more than fifteen yards ahead of her, she could see Spurlock in the front seat. He was adjusting his hat and Ava had to force herself to holster her gun to prevent herself from taking a shot. While she did have a deep, dark desire to kill him, she knew it would be giving him the easy way out. No, she wanted him properly arrested, properly taken in so that he could suffer the rest of his life in prison for killing her husband—for killing a cop. And maybe, as an added bonus, to know it was a female detective who had done it to him.

She made the rest of the sprint to the end of the alley and looked to the right. The car was merging into traffic and already taking a turn to the right. She started to run in that direction but even in her anger and frustration, she knew it would be useless.

She'd had him. She'd been so close, had him right there in front of her. She was

trembling with the disappointment and still-surging adrenaline.

As she walked back to the front of the building to try to calm down, one thing resonated in her head and brought a sense of calm to her. It was an odd thing to find peace in, but she was now able to rest comfortably in knowing that Jim Spurlock was aware of her. He'd known about her even before she'd dropped in on his little club this evening.

He knew who she was and why she was after him. She could only hope he'd live in fear in the last few days of freedom he had, wondering if Ava Gold was on his tail.

Ava quickly walked back into the makeshift club and took a look around. Two of the men she'd bested were started to get to their feet but she had no real interest in them. She scanned the tables and the floor, looking for anything of interest. And there, on the floor beside an overturned stack of poker chips, she saw a small book of matches.

She leaned down and picked it up, not sure if it would come to anything. But she couldn't go away empty-handed. She knew that for sure. She studied the book of matches, which was adorned with simple type that read: THE ASH LODGE. She pocketed the matches and hurried out before she'd have the need to confront the two men who were slowly coming to their senses.

Ava stepped back out onto the street, her nerves finally settling down. She rubbed her fingers against the matchbook in her pocket while flagging down a cab. The reality of how close she'd been to her husband's killer still weighed heavily on her as she readjusted Lottie's bandages on her arm. With her home, Frank, her father, and her son less than fifteen minutes away, it felt peculiar to be thinking about vengeance. But after this evening, there was one solid and undeniable truth that took roost in her heart and mind.

Jim Spurlock's days were numbered.

Having seen him face to face and nearly capturing him, she was more determined than ever. One way or the other, Scurlock was going to prison. And if he continued to disrespect her deceased husband as he'd done tonight, it might not be prison he'd have to worry about, but the grave.