



# Heat of Justice

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Detective Cody Miller earned her stripes on the streets of New York. As her partner, Ellie James, jets off to Italy with her neurosurgeon girlfriend, Cody takes on a strange case. A woman is missing; or so Kim Reed, an alluring lawyer with a loaded past and an unusual gift, seems to think. As Cody investigates, her attraction to Reed reaches fever-pitch...

But can they trust each other?

Meanwhile, Cody's superior, LT. Quinn Wesley, is in trouble.

Someone is trying to destroy her reputation, career, and sanity with vicious, targeted online blogs. Quinn's wife, award-winning filmmaker Lia Kennedy, will be damned if she lets anyone attack the woman she loves. But as Lia investigates, her own past comes back to haunt her with a vengeance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 97

## chapter 1

Catching up on neglected admin work was always a killer, but Ellie James had volunteered to tackle the latest growing pile for her partner. It seemed only fair since she was about to cash in on a couple of years of previously ignored vacation time and jet off to Europe for a two-week break with her girlfriend. If, that is, the paperwork did not bury her completely.

“There. It’s the last folders.”

Ellie glanced up as Cody Miller dropped a bunch more files on her desk.

“Huh,” she grunted. “Better be, or I’ll never make it out of here alive.”

“It’s not that bad.” Cody optimistically snatched a folder off the top and tossed it onto her own desk. “Here, I’ll do some. You hungry? I think we’ve got some pizza left over.”

The small office they shared, located on the first floor of the Lewiston Police Department building, used to be Cody’s alone. Now it also included Ellie’s desk, slotted in to face hers at an awkward angle that seemed to defy the laws of regular three-dimensional space. A single metal file cabinet was squashed in the corner, as well as a tiny fridge, and Cody’s personal coffee machine, a treasure they both enjoyed. On the bare wall facing the only window was a rectangular corkboard they used to pin information relevant to ongoing cases. Cody was a perpetual disaster when it came to filing paperwork, but her board was always meticulously organized. On this late Friday afternoon in June, she had just cleared away the scene photos and

names of persons of interest involved in their latest investigation. This case was now closed.

“We should get a microwave in here,” Ellie remarked.

“No space for it.” Cody shrugged. “And I like cold pizza.”

With a sprinkle of chili flakes and mayonnaise, which the detective with otherwise impeccable credentials liked to ‘collect’ from fast-food outlets like MacDonalds or Pizza Hut.

“Here you are, El.” Cody handed her a pepperoni slice on a paper plate, along with a can of Coke and two sachets of stolen mayo. “Enjoy.”

Having missed lunch earlier, a regular occurrence in their work life, Ellie knew she would, no matter what. She watched Cody sit behind her desk with her own plate, open the file folder in front of her, scowl at it, and reach for the chili flakes instead. Delaying the inevitable.

“What is your driving license renewal letter doing stuck in the middle of an autopsy report?” she asked.

“Ah, you found it!” Cody looked pleased as she reached for the letter. “Been looking everywhere for that thing.”

Ellie rolled her eyes for effect, but she was amused. As far as she was concerned, being assigned as Cody’s partner was like striking gold. Only four years older, Miller’s years as a detective with the NYPD had shaped her into a talented investigator. She was a tough cop with solid experience and an innate talent for the job. With her lean, slender body, blond hair in messy layers that just brushed the nape of her neck, and a pair of sparkling, intelligent blue eyes, Cody was the sort of cop

Ellie no doubt would have had a major hero crush on when she was still a rookie. Same way she used to feel back then about Quinn Wesley, the lieutenant in charge. A year into her own career as a member of the special crimes task force, and with a string of excellent results to her name, she was no longer quite so green, of course. Not so susceptible to being dazzled by her more experienced colleagues. Still, Ellie recognized a true model of excellence when she saw one, the sort of woman she could learn from and emulate in the best ways. Cody Miller was definitely one of those.

“Are you going to miss me?” she prompted.

Cody shot her a cool, steady look from behind her desk. “Hmm. Yeah. I might, actually.”

In spite of herself, Ellie experienced a flicker of pleasure and pride at the admission.

“Not just because I handle the paperwork?” she insisted.

“Not just. You pull your weight. You’re smart, thorough. A good cop.” Cody’s full lips curled in a wry smile. “Besides,” she added, “you don’t take care of admin work often enough for me to miss you for that reason.”

“True, that’s why it is in such disarray.”

“Hey, don’t offer to do the work and then complain about it, alright?”

Ellie chuckled. “Yeah, fair enough.”

Cody squeezed another sachet of mayo onto her pizza, took a bite, and sighed in obvious contentment.

“I wasn’t so hot about having a partner,” she reflected. “As you know, I’ve always worked alone before, and it suited me just fine.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“That was until I met you, kid.”

Well. Way to go to ruin a good compliment, Ellie decided, calling her ‘kid’ like this. Then again, she’d learned early on in their partnership that Cody loved to banter and tease. The glint in her eyes said it was the case now too.

“Thanks, grandma.” Ellie replied in kind, earning herself a chuckle.

At least Cody had not come up with a worse nickname. The lieutenant still called her ‘rookie’ from time to time. Once, after a slightly irritated Ellie asked her when she might grow tired of it, Quinn smirked in reply.

## Page 2

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‘Who knows? Maybe never. Lieutenant’s privilege. You should be glad I didn’t opt for Baby Cop.’

Truth be told, Ellie did not mind this stuff. Before she knew her girlfriend, the police department had been her entire life and world. Nothing mattered more to her than to earn her detective shield and prove she deserved it. Now that she had done both, the squad was still family. As the youngest member of the team, funny nicknames and the odd extra chore assigned to her were to be expected. It was like a rite of passage, and she relished it all, cold pizza included. For the next hour, she was quiet and kept her mind on the task at hand. Cody also did not say much as they went through the files. Finally, she slapped the last folder down with a triumphant smile.

“Done! And none too soon, I tell you, because my eyeballs are about to fall off. You need a ride home?” she inquired as Ellie laughed.

“Yeah, that would be great. I need to pack, then book a taxi for the morning. Jan will be working until late today, and I’d like to clean the apartment for her as well.”

“What time are you guys flying tomorrow?”

“Five A.M.” With an added rush of excitement, now that the work was done and she was a step closer to her dream vacation, Ellie whipped out her phone to show her partner a few pics. “Look, this is the bed and breakfast we booked for our first night in Janet’s hometown.”

“It looks great.” Cody smiled in approval at the rustic stone mansion. “Very Italian, huh? With that neat line of cypress trees in front of it?”

“Yes. Jan said there are olive fields in the back, and—”

Before she could share any more, a female voice interrupted sharply.

“If you two are bored, Detectives, ask another team if they need any help. I don’t expect you to stand around wasting time on personal business, is that clear?”

Ellie’s mouth dropped open in surprise at the rebuke, and she also almost dropped her phone when she looked up. Their commanding officer stood in the open doorway, watching them with both hands fisted on her hips and flashing blue eyes in her tanned face. Ellie’s stomach knotted unpleasantly as well as she realized that the lieutenant was not joking in the least, and that her expression was not just mere disapproval. Quinn Wesley appeared pissed in the extreme, in fact, which also was extremely strange. Only a few hours ago, she had clapped them both on the shoulder with a heartfelt ‘Well done’ for closing their latest case, which involved the revenge murder by her lunatic husband of the CEO of a long-established local firm. Quinn even joked with Ellie about making sure that she did not get too soft during her Italian vacation, or she would have to ‘kick your ass back into proper shape, rookie’. The change in mood and attitude now was both unexpected and worrisome, especially as the lieutenant was normally steady as a rock. Quinn Wesley, former army captain, did not panic or get emotional on the job. She did not micro-manage her teams, and she certainly did not snarl at her officers for engaging in the odd personal chat. In fact, she encouraged this sort of thing. Ellie could not help her thighs turning a little weak under her hard stare.

“Um,” she started. “Yes. That’s clear. I was just—”

“We’re two hours off the clock, Boss,” her partner easily cut in to inform Quinn. “If something came up, I’ll take it, but Ellie needs to go home and pack.”

Of course, it would take a lot more to ruffle Cody’s feathers. Ellie admired her

response, and also reminded herself that she was supposed to be just as cool and collected. With that in mind, she stuck her shoulders back and flashed a confident smile at the woman in charge.

“We just slayed a bunch of admin, Lieutenant. All files are up to date.”

She noted a tiny muscle in Quinn’s jaw flex and a flicker of emotion across her eyes. A flash of regret, maybe? It was there and gone too fast for Ellie to be sure, but Quinn seemed to relax a fraction.

“Good,” she said and shifted her gaze to Cody. “I’ll be on personal time until further notice. You need anything, Miller, go straight to Captain Wilson.”

Tough as she was, Cody probably knew not to question the order at this stage.

“Roger that, Lieutenant,” she simply answered.

“And you, Detective, see you when you get back. Take care of yourself and of Janet over there.”

Forget being pissed off, Ellie thought when Quinn forced a brief smile for her. She looked upset. Hurt, even. Ellie could not help herself.

“Lieutenant, is everything okay?” she blurted out in sudden concern.

“Everything’s fine,” Quinn stated, tone back to razor-sharp once more in a clear warning.

On that note, she spun on her heels and walked off without a single other word. Puzzled, the two detectives glanced at each other.



“Something’s wrong,” Ellie repeated.

“Mm... Maybe. We’ll see.” Cody shrugged and went on to fish her car keys out of her jeans pocket. “Don’t worry about it, eh! Get packing and enjoy your time off, El. You sure as hell earned it.”

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Quinn slid behind the wheel of her classic Chevy Camaro, and she made the engine roar as she peeled out of the parking lot behind the station. A couple of uniforms walking in stared after her. One of them shook his head in disapproval. She noticed that in her rearview and wrapped her fingers more tightly around the wheel. Goddammit. She hated losing her temper; anywhere, at any time, but particularly in front of her people. Everyone here, from the youngest recruit to seasoned cops like Cody Miller, looked up to her to set the tone of behavior. Quinn had learned early in her army days that it paid to lead by example. As a result, she held herself to the highest standards of both personal and professional excellence. The officers that she personally recruited for the special crimes task force were all consummate professionals as well. They worked hard and put everything on the line to achieve justice for their ‘clients’: innocent victims of gruesome murders, sexual exploitation, drug trafficking, and all kinds of related violence. The personal preferences and moods of the police officers involved did not enter the equation in this game. It just could not. Checking one’s attitude at the door and going above and beyond for duty was a basic requirement for anyone in this job. Shouldn’t have unleashed on Miller and Ellie like that.

Granted, it was just a snap, and Miller reacted well to it. No surprise there. Ellie, naturally the more outwardly sensitive of the two, immediately dropped into caring mode. Though Quinn knew for sure that neither of them would hold it against her in the long run, she was aware the reprimand had been uncalled for. Definitely out of line. Stopping at a red traffic light in view of the beach in the distance, she rolled her

window down. It was warm out. Usually, summer weather of this kind and the sharp salty tang of the ocean breeze were enough to ground her after a bit of trouble or difficulty on the job. Tonight, though, she barely registered either. The real reason for her loss of control with her two detectives was still stuck sideways in her throat. It was too big and felt too painful to digest at this point, and Quinn was torn between wanting to punch something hard and bursting into tears. For God's sake, Wesley!

“Keep it together, Lieutenant,” she ordered herself.

## Page 3

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Yeah, it was bad... But losing her head over the situation would only make it worse. Just get yourself home, she told herself. To Lia.

### chapter 2

“It may not be for me to comment, seeing as I feature so heavily in this production, but damn, Lia, it’s good!”

Lia Kennedy chuckled in satisfaction as Sam Wakefield, the lead helicopter pilot for the medevac team at Lewiston General, shared her enthusiastic opinion on the final episode of her new docu-series.

“You are indeed one of the main characters in this film,” she approved. “Which is why I am so happy to hear you say you like it, Sam.”

“It’s more than like,” the former Marine corrected with a serious nod. “I think you’ve done an excellent job, Lia. If I weren’t already flying the chopper for the crew, your film would make me want to. Or join the team as a doctor or a nurse. It’s bound to inspire a lot of kids to join the profession.”

They sat in Lia’s home studio, a converted bedroom in the apartment she shared with her wife, recording an interview to serve as additional promo material. As a reporter for a regular news network, in what she referred to as her previous life, Lia used to operate in dangerous conflict zones around the world. When she had accepted the role of public relations officer for Lewiston P.D., it was without any particular ambition. Three years out of her career, spent caring for her ailing father, had left her exhausted, single, and pretty disillusioned. For Lia at the time, the Lewiston

assignment was just meant to be a freshstart and sorely needed at that. She had been both surprised and delighted when she started to ride with the officers on their daily rounds of duty to discover that it was every bit as fascinating and exciting as reporting from the frontlines of the Middle East. Also, from time to time, just as dangerous. The resulting high-octane, feature-length documentary that she produced at the end of her first year with the police won a bunch of prestigious awards upon release and a special prize from the Sundance Film Festival. Even so, the real jackpot, as Lia never tired to say, was not her new career as an independent filmmaker but meeting Quinn Wesley, the heroic cop who would become her wife. Just as she thought of her, and noticed how late it was getting to be, she heard the front door open and shut.

“Lia?” Quinn called.

“Yes, in the office, darling!”

Quinn walked in, dressed in her usual uniform. A pair of tight blue jeans, Nike running shoes, and a white t-shirt under a thin layer of Kevlar bulletproof vest. She carried a police-issue Glock 19 in a holster on her right hip and a not-so-standard combat knife only Lia knew about in a hidden sheath strapped around her left ankle. My cop, Lia thought with a little shiver of appreciation. Even approaching their third year of marriage, the sight of her wife coming home at the end of the day never failed to make Lia go nicely still and attentive on the inside. With her surfer-blond hair, chiseled physique, and clear blue eyes, Quinn routinely attracted plenty of looks, from men and women alike. Lia loved the fact that she had eyes only for her.

“Hi, babe,” she greeted her.

“Hey...” As always, Quinn focused on her with the intensity of a heat-seeking missile, but she checked herself when her gaze fell on the other woman in the room.

“Quinn, this is Sam Wakefield,” Lia offered.

Oddly enough, tonight, lacing an arm around her waist felt like embracing a block of granite. At intimate times, Quinn was both lithe and supple, and she moved like liquid heat. Generally, she carried herself with the grace and assurance of a woman at ease in her own skin, one who had been tried and tested in battle, and come out of it scarred but victorious. At the same time, that gorgeous body never lied. Lia suspected something was not totally okay, even if no one else would ever guess it from the flash of Quinn’s smile.

“Sam.” She held out her hand with an engaging nod. “Very nice to meet you at last. I’ve heard good things about you.”

“You as well, Lieutenant,” the chopper pilot answered with a grin. “And I hear we’ve got another mutual friend in the next town.”

“Oh, yeah?” Quinn prompted.

“Yes. Tom, a.k.a. The Hulk.”

“Right. He’s a great guy and a talented chef.”

“You bet. His food is to die for.”

The man in question, also a former Marine, now owned a restaurant in Carson City. Lia had great memories of the place, as it had been Quinn’s choice of venue for their first official date. This all being said, she then watched her struggle a bit with the small talk. Sam must have felt it too.

“It’s getting late. I should leave you to it,” she suggested politely.

“No, no, finish what you’re doing,” Quinn countered. “I’m going for a run.”

As she left the room, Lia moved to follow.

“Just a minute, Sam, okay? I’ll be right back.”

“Sure, take your time,” the woman answered easily.

Lia caught up with Quinn as she was locking her weapon in the safe in their bedroom.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Quinn...”

## Page 4

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“Some crap going on at work,” Quinn admitted when she insisted. “I’ll tell you about it later. I don’t want to interrupt your interview.”

“We won’t be long. Just a couple more takes, and I can wrap this up.”

“Fine. Don’t rush.”

“Are you going to the beach?”

“Yes, I’ll do the usual route.”

“If you’re not back by the time I finish, I’ll come get you.”

“Okay.” Quinn brushed a soft kiss over her lips. “I’ll look forward to it.”

“Me too.”

“Now go back to your hotshot, don’t make her wait.”

This remained a playful joke between them from the day Lia came home to reveal that the star of her brand-new film would be a black-haired, green-eyed stunner of a woman. One who also happened to be a talented rescue pilot and decorated military officer. ‘A regular hotshot’, according to Quinn, who may or may not have felt a tiny bit ruffled by their association. Lia had enjoyed this unique glimpse into a more vulnerable side of her. Then she proceeded to remind her wife that there was only one hot woman in her universe. The only one she would ever want to kiss and hold for the rest of her life. And Quinn was definitely it.

“Be safe out there,” she told her now.

“Yes. No worries.”

Quinn’s smile was a little forced, which made Lia hesitate to leave her. At the same time, she knew her wife. Quinn’s career as a police lieutenant meant a great deal to her, and she held Lia’s vocation in the exact same regard. Except when some type of emergency, or a serious injury, such as the time she was shot in the line of duty, came into play, Quinn would not allow Lia to put her own work on the back burner in order to care for her, not even when Lia was sorely tempted to do it. This kind of respect was just one of the many reasons Lia was so deeply in love with her. The longer they were married, the better it seemed to be with Quinn...

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After dropping Ellie off at her place, Cody was recalled to the police station. It was a usual occurrence, no problem at all given her dedication to the job. The sorry state of her personal life, or lack thereof, also meant that she welcomed the distraction. When she arrived, she headed straight to the desk to find the officer on duty looking more than a bit harried.

“Busy night, Lance?” she smiled.

“You can say that again. I’m just—Oh, damn, hold on.” She nodded as he picked up the phone, listened hard, and rolled his blue eyes under a set of bushy eyebrows. “No, this isn’t Fred’s Pizza, ma’am. This is Lewiston P.D. Yes, yes, I am very sure.” He slammed the receiver down. “Can you believe this crap?”

“Hardly.” Cody was amused.

“Someone called earlier about some apparently weird lights in the sky. Asked me if



there were reports of UFOs around, or if it might be an Elon Musk launch. As if we were X-Files Central over here or something.”

“Crazy,” she empathized. “Is it a full moon tonight?”

“People don’t need a full moon to be insane anymore these days,” he announced, wiping sweat off his bald head with a meaty hand. “Anyway. Thanks for coming in. I’ve got a strange one for you in Room Five.”

“Define strange,” Cody prompted.

“Alright: woman walks in here like she owns the place and everyone in it, all but slams her fist on the counter when I don’t get to her fast enough, and demands to speak to an officer. When I try to find out what this is about, she just flat-out refuses to tell me.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Says she’ll only speak to a senior guy. Well, all the detectives are off-duty or in the field at the moment, so I again offer to have a uniform take her statement. Man! If looks could kill, I’d have suffered a painful death, I can tell you. She dug in her heels and repeated her demand. Looking at me as if I were deaf, or stupid. Or both.”

“Mm. Intriguing, I’ll grant you that.”

“Yes, quite.” He shrugged. “At any rate, I know you tend to enjoy the quirky ones, so I thought you wouldn’t mind helping me with this one too much.”

“Not at all. You got a name?”

“Kim Reed. Doctor Reed, PhD., and don’t you forget it. She is a board-certified

criminal defense lawyer; also a family lawyer licensed to work here and in Texas.”

“Never heard of her as a lawyer.”

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“She’s a recent transfer to the city. I think she comes across as entitled as heck and with a massive chip on her shoulder. My personal opinion.”

“Okay, great.”

“Ya think?” he grunted.

“Not sure yet, but I’ll speak to her.”

“Thanks, Miller, appreciate it.”

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As Cody walked into Interrogation Room Five, she immediately found herself under the scrutiny of a pair of golden-brown eyes shining in a beautifully sculpted face. The woman’s skin was the color of indulgent nutty chocolate. These gorgeous eyes flashed as Cody entered. Not really with any kind of entitlement, Cody thought, but with obvious caution and weariness. Kim Reed; Doctor Reed, sat with her legs crossed and her shoulders back. She was dressed as if for a court appearance in black pants, a white silk shirt under a fitted blazer, and elegant heels. Cody’s own gaze was momentarily drawn to her shapely, naked ankles. She noted the small outline of a prowling tiger tattooed in red ink on the inside of her left foot. Normally not overly keen on tattoos, it occurred to her that this one added a nice touch to the woman’s overall look.

“I’m Detective Miller,” she announced, closing the door behind her.

Reed flicked a strand of curly black hair off her brow with an impatient toss of the head.

“Homicide?” she insisted.

“Special crimes,” Cody allowed. “Including but not limited to homicide, yes.”

Will that do for you? she almost added in challenge, but then thought better of it. There was no point antagonizing the lawyer before she knew the problem.

“How can I help?” she invited.

Reed blew out a breath. “I think one of my clients may have been murdered.”

“Okay.” Nice and straight, no beating about the bush. Cody pulled a notebook and pen out of her pocket. “What makes you think that?”

“We were supposed to meet at my office yesterday, but she never showed up. I can’t get her to answer the phone. I also visited her home twice today, but she was not there.”

Reed’s naturally smoky voice would probably sound great on the radio, no matter what she talked about. Not many would pick up on the slight hint of fear also laced in her tone, expertly subdued and subtle as it was. But Cody was trained to listen for this sort of thing, and she noticed. Like the line of tension in the set of her shoulders, it was all obvious if you paid attention. Without asking her if the woman wanted one, she went to fill a cup of water from the cooler just outside the door and set it in front of Reed.

“What’s your client’s name?”

“Cassie Lee Winters.”

“Address?”

“65 Old Pier Road, Lewiston West.”

Cody jotted it down, as well as the woman’s phone number.

“We’ll check on her,” she advised.

“Okay. Thanks. When?”

“Soon as I’m done with this conversation.”

“Right. The sooner, the better.”

“Sure. But you also know how it goes, don’t you? People miss appointments; they forget to check their messages or their phone runs out of juice. It doesn’t necessarily mean they were murdered.”

“I’m well aware, Detective. But my client was in an abusive relationship for years,” Reed stated in an icy tone.

Was, Cody noted. She sounded pretty convinced.

“Ms. Reed, I understand you’re a criminal defense lawyer,” she prompted. “What did your client hire you for?”

### chapter 3

Kim did not allow herself to lean her elbows on the metal table and press the palms of both hands over her burning eyes. They felt dry. Gritty. She did not want to appear tired, weak, or even worse, unhinged in any way in front of the cool-eyed detective. She maintained her posture, even though what started off as a low-level line of tension behind her eyes early that morning and plagued her throughout the day now threatened to erupt into a vicious headache. The harsh fluorescent lighting affixed to the ceiling in this room did not help. She had barely slept, skipped breakfast and lunch, and was still looking ahead to some kind of food in the future. Dinner... Maybe. Hopefully! She could feel it all catching up with her. Her right hand shook a little as she took a sip of water to steady herself. *Goddammit!* The detective noticed.

“Are you alright, Ms. Reed?”

“Of course, I’m alright.”

A flicker of warmth and compassion in Miller’s eyes made Kim want to snap at her even worse. Total self-preservation, she knew. She was running on fumes at this point, aware that a good-looking woman offering even a hint of comfort might undo her completely. Even upon the first encounter, this one here inspired confidence and respect in equal measures. Something else, too... Kim would have had to be dead not to notice the way her khaki trousers highlighted slender muscles in her legs or the subtle rise of small but apparently firm breasts under her maroon shirt. Rolled-up sleeves afforded a glimpse of smooth skin and sinewy muscles in her forearms, and the three buttons open at the collar revealed a slender, graceful neck. For all her physical elegance, Detective Miller also projected plenty of self-assurance and power.

The black handgun in a holster clipped to her belt no doubt helped with that... But if anything, it was her eyes: alert, steady, and sparkling with quiet intelligence, which achieved it even better. Annoyed at herself for noticing these details, even under such dire circumstances, Kim took a calming breath of her own.

“I don’t work on the defense side of things anymore. I’ve switched to family law,” she offered. “From time to time, I do pro bono work for a women’s rights association, through which I met Cassie.”

“Is your client married? What’s her situation?”

Her situation is that she’s dead! Though Kim was tempted to scream this out loud, she knew it would not get her the help she required any quicker... especially if she was forced to go into the real so-called ‘crazy stuff’ later on. Frankly, she did not see how it could be avoided. How would Detective Miller react to that? Hopefully, well enough, as she seemed experienced. But it was hard to be sure. Kim swallowed her frustration and gave her a bit more useful information for now.

“She’s been married twice to the same guy.”

“Twice?”

“The first time, she initiated divorce proceedings after she caught him screwing around with another woman. Literally. At home, in their bed. When she freaked out, he just laughed and invited her to join them.”

Miller pursed her lips but did not comment on that specific point.

“Please, continue,” she invited.

“Six months later, believe it or not, the son of a bitch got her to take him back. He

apologized, told her she was the love of his life, promised it would never happen again, and convinced her to remarry. That's when the violence started. Before then, he was just an unfaithful jerk. Bad enough, but not life-threatening. The second time, he became a vengeful drunk. He said he was going to make her pay for the divorce."

"And now you think he killed her?"

"Correct. Cassie was terrified of him. It took her three years to work up the courage to try and get some help."

"What was the trigger for her finally doing it?"

"He broke her wrist. Smashed her nose. She ended up in the ER, claiming it was all just an unfortunate accident, of course. But she caught the attention of a nurse who discreetly put her in touch with the women's association. By the time she finally came to me, Cassie was one hundred percent determined to leave her husband. For good, this time."

"Good," Miller muttered, showing personal opinion for the first time.

"I helped her to set up a bank account, so she could start to save a bit of money from her job as a bakery assistant. Not surprisingly, he controlled the finances. If she needed anything, she had to ask him. I gave her a burner phone, and my private number, so she could reach me in an emergency. Detective..." Kim leaned forward intently. "Cassie would never just miss an appointment with me."

"Has it occurred to you she may just have cut loose and run away?"

"Yes, it has. And no. She wouldn't."

"You seem very sure of that."



“Totally. It’s not her type.”

Miller held her gaze, eyes hot and probing. She was intense, to say the least, and Kim struggled not to respond to that vibe. Amazed to find herself so uncharacteristically drawn to the woman, and instantly annoyed, she blamed the reaction on her own fatigue. It was a long time since she’d allowed herself to look at another woman. Even longer still since one registered enough on her radar to be tempted to do something about it. All of a sudden, it also struck her as a painful eternity. Meanwhile, Miller’s captivating blue eyes never left her face, searching deep, as if she were hoping to penetrate all the way into her soul. Kim shivered in spite of herself.

“Please, help me,” she murmured.

“Believe me, I’d like nothing better,” the detective replied, and she sounded sincere. “But you do need to be honest with me, and I don’t think you are right now. Not totally.”

Ah, damn. Kim did her best to stay composed.

“I am telling you the truth,” she stated.

Miller only fixed her more intently.

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“Here’s the thing,” she replied. “In my experience, only two kind of people ever can say for definite that a person has been murdered. Either a witness to the crime, or the perpetrator. Ms. Reed, I need to know. Which one are you?”

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By the time Lia wrapped up with Wakefield, Quinn was still not back from her run. Not worried, but definitely a bit concerned, she grabbed her keys, jumped in the car, and headed straight to the beach. The weather was great; blue sky, not too much wind, temperature in the mid-seventies. As a result, even on a week evening, the area was busy. Plenty of joggers, dog walkers, and surfers out there. Kids running around, playing ball or frisbee. A few couples were out for a stroll, holding hands. Lia parked up, and she scanned the beach. It did not take her long to spot her. Quinn sat on her own not far from the currently closed Lifeguard station. Something else was unusual about this. The high-energy woman would struggle to be still for even five minutes. She was always busy and on the move and did not come to the beach to sit and gaze at nothing. Lia kicked off her shoes and jogged over to her.

“Quinn. Hey.”

Relief, mixed with a tiny flicker of reluctance, flashed in her eyes as Quinn looked up. She sat with her knees bent and her arms resting on them, fingers linked. Distracted, Lia reflected. Also not the norm.

“Hi,” Quinn murmured and moved to allow her in. “Work all done?”

“All done.” Lia knelt between her legs and framed her face in both hands. “How was

your run, darling?”

“Ah... Fine. Just a couple miles.”

“Not in the mood?”

“Nah, not really.”

Lia ran her fingers through her hair, bringing her close for a gentle kiss.

“It’s okay.”

She lingered into the kiss, every sense keenly attuned to the woman she held. Relishing the feel of her wife’s lips caressing her own, the intimate swirl of dancing tongues, the sweet heat of the moment... Kissing Quinn was never the same, yet always reassuringly familiar. Part of the appeal for Lia was that she could never predict if it would end on a tender stroke or lead to more explosive stuff, and the sort of sex they both enjoyed: playful, daring, a little rough when the mood struck them and always beautifully tender. Not on the beach, of course, though Quinn held her when she started to move away. Surrendering to the pull of her arms, Lia wrapped hers around her neck. The kiss grew a little more intense, even surfing on the edge of frantic for a moment, until Lia felt her start to lose her breath. Not from desire, she was sure of it. Sensing a rising sob, she pulled back but kept a protective hand on the back of her neck.

“Breathe.” Catching these amazing blue eyes swimming in tears gave her a hell of a shock, and she stared in genuine alarm. “Jesus, Quinn... What’s the matter?”

The words came out on a sharp exhale. “I was suspended from the job today.”

“What?” Bewildered, Lia gasped.

“Wilson put me on admin leave until further notice. He had no choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“He acted on the mayor’s order.”

“But... Why?” Lia prompted, beyond baffled at the news. “What happened?”

Though Quinn wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand, the misery in her gaze was not so easily dispelled. Seeing it broke Lia’s heart.

“Tell me what’s going on,” she insisted.

“Remember a few months ago, when Ellie almost beat that guy to death?”

“A suspect who was running from you both,” Lia corrected with a curt nod.

“Yes.”

“A child abuser.”

“Yes, yes. But the point is, she might have killed him if I’d not been there to stop her. Internal Affairs looked into it and cleared her of any wrongdoing. It helped that I did not mention her loss of control in my report.”

“Subjective loss of control,” Lia was also quick to recall. “He threatened her with abduction and sexual assault. Punched her, tried to strangle her, and slashed her with his knife. He would have killed her.”

“You’re right. But I—”

“You stood for her, darling, for all the right reasons,” Lia interrupted. “The suspect did not even press charges at the time, did he? Whatever his name was. Or has he done so now? Is that what this is about?”

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“No, I don’t think he’s involved in this.” Quinn took a deep breath, let it out in a long exhale, and went on to explain. “The author of an online blog recently published accuses me of being a dirty cop. And claims that Lewiston P.D., Captain Wilson, and the mayor, are aware of it. Giving me a free ride because they’re all corrupt as well.”

“Bullshit!” Lia exclaimed and was rewarded to see a ghost of a smile on her wife’s lips.

“Thanks, babe,” Quinn murmured.

“I’m only stating the truth,” Lia declared as her indignation flared. “You are the best cop in this city! The most selfless person I’ve ever met.” She pointed toward the pier in the distance. “Have Wilson and the mayor already forgotten what you did when four armed lunatics shot their way through the shopping strip over there two years ago?”

“Lia...”

“You jumped in front of an innocent woman to save her life. You took a bullet that was meant for her!”

Lia would never forget witnessing Quinn’s dramatic arrival at the hospital after the shooting. Lying unconscious in the back of a police cruiser. Bleeding from a severe wound that would no doubt have been fatal if Ellie James, the officer in question, had not clamped her hand over her ruptured femoral artery to slow the bleeding down. Quinn would have died without her presence of mind and quick, daring intervention.

“You’re upset,” she said.

“Outraged,” Lia snapped. “Let’s go home. I want to see that stupid blog for myself.”

???

Nothing like having the sexiest woman on the planet in your corner, Quinn reflected as her wife took her hand, laced their fingers, and gave her a firm squeeze and a tug-along. The simple gesture carried plenty of weight. It grounded her. Once upon a time, Quinn had been utterly convinced of the fact that she did not need, and would never want, this sort of support from another woman. She was too independent, hyper-resilient, and used to doing things on her own terms. Her life before Lia only included her job, her running and CrossFit training, and the odd one-night stand when she felt like letting off steam with a willing partner. Relying on a lover to feel good or happy, let alone falling in love, struck her at the time as lame and dangerous. Ridiculous, verging on stupid. Definitely not for her. But then, a gutsy reporter with plenty of character, a streak of attractive stubbornness, and the sort of attitude Quinn could not help but admire, walked into her carefully ordered life and proceeded to set fire to it. Lia was gorgeous. She kissed like an angel, knew how to soothe or inflame in equal measures, and always with perfect timing. She slipped under her skin in a hot minute and captured her heart in even less. Quinn Wesley, always famously intent on remaining aloof and single, not only fell head over heels in love but decided to get married as well. Not a day went by now that she did not marvel at her own luck. Lia was the best lover, wife, and partner she could ever have hoped for.

“Huh!” Lia snorted now, without humor. “The Crooked Blue Line. What a stupid, lousy title for this blog.”

chapter 4

“I agree with you.” Quinn went to sit close to her on the couch, both facing Lia’s

laptop on the low table in front.

Again, Lia reached for her hand to hold it tightly in both of hers. When Quinn leaned against her, unconsciously seeking a bit more reassurance, Lia was prompted to pass one arm around her shoulders.

“It’s going to be okay, babe.”

“Yeah, I know.”

It felt bloody good to hear Lia say it, though. Getting called into her commander’s office earlier that day, Quinn had no idea of what was about to hit her. The dark look on his face hinted at some bad news, but working special crimes came with its share of this. Of course, she never imagined it would be about her. The blog that her captain went on to show her was short but nasty. Even so, it may not be so bad at first glance, as it only related to a bunch of false accusations. Yes, Quinn had sailed a little close to the line after the incident with Ellie; but like she told her at the time, nothing was ever completely black and white in their area of work. The blog clearly adopted another point of view.

“It says you lied, falsified reports, and destroyed evidence. What the hell.” Frowning in dismay and disbelief, Lia turned to her. “How can Wilson believe any of this crap about you?”

“To his credit, he doesn’t.”

“Is it the mayor, then?”

“The mayor doesn’t know what to believe. If Wilson backs me up, he’ll go with that.”

“Then why on earth are you on suspension?”



“I guess because it’s an election year, and Mayor Everleigh needs to be seen to be doing everything by the book. Especially in matters related to security and the police. You know these are hot issues.”

Lia’s dark eyes flashed in anger this time.

“This is about politics?” she exclaimed. “You have got to be kidding me!”

“I wish.” Quinn shrugged with a quick sigh. “I guess it’d be one thing if I were the only one accused of wrongdoing in this article, but it also points the finger at Wilson and Everleigh.”

“Without proof.”

“True. But it’s bad publicity.”

“That’s for sure.” Incensed, Lia stood up to pace in front of the window. “And suspending their finest officer, in the face of unproven, reckless accusations, goes to show how spineless they both are! I’m still involved in PR for the department,” Lia added. “Wilson should have called me in straight away to record an official statement. Both he and Everleigh should be issuing a joint one right now, to make it clear to everyone that this blog is just a piece of trash. And that they support you one hundred percent.”

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Quinn sighed again. She was right, of course...

“I told Wilson everything you just said,” she nodded.

“And what was his reply? Oh, wait, I know: to sacrifice you to the gods of public opinion!”

“He said he was sorry; that his hands were tied. I still have my badge and weapon. This reaction... A lot of it is for show, you know.”

Lia narrowed her eyes. “But not all?”

Quinn rolled her neck under another wave of unwanted tension. “There will be an investigation.”

“You have impeccable records.”

“Yes, I do. But again, I kept Ellie’s loss of control out of my report at the time.”

“And has she given you or anyone else any cause since then to regret it?”

“No, Ellie’s a great cop.”

“There you go. You did the right thing, Quinn. And Wilson knew, didn’t he?”

“Yes, I told him everything.”

“He signed off on your report,” Lia insisted.

“Yes. He did ask me if there was any chance this thing might come back to bite us on the ass, and I said no. In a way, this is still correct. Gonzales, the convicted child abuser, couldn’t be behind these allegations. He’s serving a twenty-year sentence at a max-security prison in New Mexico. He’s got no access to a computer, and any communication with the outside is monitored. I’m told he’s been keeping a low profile.”

“Good. And good riddance. I hope it’s hot in New Mexico and that he’s got no AC.”

She was so fired up as she delivered that line and looked so gorgeous that Quinn forgot for an instant the trouble she was in.

“I love you, Lia,” she told her with a grin.

“Me too, babe.” Lia returned to straddle her lap and lock her arms around her neck. “I thought Wilson was a good guy, you know? But now, not so much.”

“Like I said, it’s not his fault. He’s under a lot of pressure from above.”

“Then I hate Mayor Everleigh’s guts even more for putting that wounded look in your eyes.”

Again, she sounded fierce, and she sure did not mince her words. Quinn did not dispute that being wounded was exactly how she felt. Betrayed. Her superior, angry himself to have to kick her to the touch, had made it clear that he disapproved of the mayor’s decision. Wilson said he had advised the man strongly against it. Still, the result was the same. Quinn pulled her wife closer onto her lap. She laid her fingers on her thighs, drawing comfort from the feel of her.

“It helps to be able to share this stuff with you.”

“Good.” Lia kissed her again, nice and slow.

“I snapped at Miller and Ellie earlier. Shouldn’t have done that.”

“They’ll live. Who do you think is behind this blog?”

“Unfortunately, I have no idea.”

Lia trailed her fingers gently through her hair, helping to ease some of the tension in her shoulders.

“You do make a lot of enemies in your job.”

“Yes... Then again, the article makes a veiled reference to the internal investigation that was conducted at the time of the Gonzales affair. Only a handful of people knew about it.”

“Are you looking at an insider?”

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“No. At least I hate to think it could be,” Quinn added with a wince. “But someone who’s got access... a person who knows where and how to dig. That, yes. Definitely.”

“Well, I know how to dig, too,” Lia declared with narrowed eyes.

“I don’t want you involved in this, Lia.”

“Too late. Already am.”

“I mean it,” Quinn insisted, and her heart tightened.

It wasn’t a new feeling where Lia was concerned. From her first day on the job as a police reporter, when she strapped on a Kevlar vest and went out on patrol with Lewiston P.D. officers, Lia had been intimately involved in her professional life. Before this, as a war reporter, she had spent time on the ground with various military units. She had taken plenty of risks in her own career and lived to tell the tale. She was streetwise, far from naïve, and Quinn had seen her in action too. She knew her wife was well able to fend for herself. Even so, the desire to protect her, to keep her safe and out of harm’s way, was always a strong impulse.

“Anybody could be behind this stupid blog,” she muttered. “I don’t want you to take risks.”

“No risks, I promise. But I will take a look.”

Quinn hissed in frustration. “You can be so damn stubborn; you know that?”

“Why, thank you, darling, it’s one of my best qualities.”

“Not funny, Lia.”

“Isn’t it?” Lia challenged with a roguish smile. “What did you expect when you married a reporter?”

“Exactly. A reporter, not a private detective.”

“Some would argue there’s a fine line between the two.”

“Whatever. Just don’t cross it.”

The smile turned into a smirk. “Or what, Lieutenant?”

The way her dark eyes flashed so invitingly and a familiar, attractive rush of color across her cheeks also prompted Quinn’s temperature to rise. Before Lia could react or wriggle off her lap, she wrapped both arms tightly around her waist and twisted to the side, pinning her startled lover to the couch with the weight of her body. The move earned her a delighted giggle.

“Run out of words to argue your case, babe? Going to resort to force now?”

“If you ask me nicely.”

As Lia laughed, Quinn trailed a line of heated kisses behind her ear, down the side of her neck, along the edge of her jaw. She nipped playfully at her bottom lip but pulled away a little when Lia tried to steal a kiss.

“Behave yourself, Ms. Kennedy.”

“No,” Lia shot back with a fiery grin.

On that, she fisted her fingers firmly in her hair and yanked her back down to claim the kiss she wanted. Quinn offered no resistance; just a smile as she melted into it. Lia had so many adorable ways to disarm her... Quinn often marveled at the fact that she understood her so well, and also that Lia seemed to want her for exactly who and what she was, scars and all. This kind of love was special. A gift, for sure, and the best feeling in the world. Especially after today. Quinn thought she had done pretty well in Wilson's office to control her initial fury, even as she told him, point blank, what she thought of the suspension order. She did regret letting her temper show with her detectives afterward, but yeah, as Lia said, they were tough cops. They'd deal with it. Compared to the sort of anxiety Quinn used to be plagued with, debilitating flashbacks of traumatic times in the army and equally disabling panic attacks, letting out a verbal rebuke was nothing. The rest of it hurt, though, and Lia would be able to guess how much. To have her ethics brought into question when Quinn took her duty so much to heart was like a vicious punch in the face. To realize that she was not trusted at the higher levels, not worthy of proper support when she held her oath to serve and protect over and above even her own life, was so totally—

“Relax,” Lia murmured. “Stay with me, Quinn, don't drift off in your head.”

To help with that, she slipped both hands under her t-shirt, raked her fingernails over the strong muscles in her stomach, and grunted when she encountered a sports bra instead of naked breasts.

“Take this off.”

“Roger that, Ms. Kennedy.”

As Quinn sent her t-shirt and bra flying across the room, Lia rolled off the couch to do the same with hers. She stood there half-naked, with her nipples at attention, and

flashed a devilish grin.

“Catch me if you can.”

Laughing, she took off down the hallway, prompting Quinn to chase after her. They rejoined at the entrance to the bedroom and fell on top of the bed with their arms wrapped around each other. It had not taken Quinn very long to discover that married sex was incredibly better than all the meaningless encounters she used to have. Married sex with Lia easily topped off the mind-blowing chart by a mile. As they fought briefly for dominance, a playful tussle, Lia lost her panties, which happened to be her last remaining item of clothing.



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“Now, what will you do?” Quinn teased, already naked and facing her on her knees across the king-size bed.

In reply, Lia licked her lips, lunged forward, and brought her down in a rough tackle. Before Quinn had time to retaliate, she pressed her leg in between her thighs and pushed upwards. The result had Quinn seeing stars and moaning out loud.

“Mm,” Lia purred. “Tough cop that you are, you do squeal like a girl.”

“I do not,” Quinn laughed.

“I beg to differ.”

“No, I think you just want to— mmm...”

Lia flashed a mischievous smile as she captured her mouth. The move sent another spark of heated tingles between her legs that made Quinn forget her own name, let alone other words of argument. As the exchange turned slower, languid, she gave up trying to regain control.

“Are you going to behave now?”

Lia’s warm breath, like a caress against her ear, made her shiver again.

“Yes,” she murmured. “I surrender.”

With an erotic chuckle, Lia whispered a satisfied ‘Good’ and then resumed the kiss.

Quinn stopped moving. She stopped thinking. She focused only on the exquisite sensation of her wife's talented hands skimming all over her, sparking desire on her skin, expertly stoking her arousal until she was struggling to breathe.

## chapter 5

Quinn was the stoic type. Never the sort to complain about any-thing that happened to her, whether on the job or otherwise. She absorbed the shocks of life with seemingly perfect equanimity and kept going. Only Lia knew the price of that control. Now she lingered over muscles made so tight that there was no way it wasn't painful. She caressed her lover, focused on undoing all the nasty tension she could feel under her skin. She used her hands, her fingers, her lips, and her tongue to soothe and enthrall at the same time.

"Lia..." Eyes closed, Quinn whispered her name.

"Yes." Lia found her already wet and swollen, but she knew how to make the pleasure last.

Quinn groaned when she fingered her clit, and sighed when she started to stroke her.

"Let me—"

"No, letme." Lia tightened the arm she kept folded around her neck as Quinn attempted to roll over on top of her. "This is all for you now. I want you to relax."

"I just—"

"Sshhh."

Lia flicked her with her thumb, making her jerk, laugh, and fall back against the

pillows.

“Okay,” Quinn conceded. “But be careful.”

“Or what?”

“I’ll explode.”

“Not yet, you won’t. Not until I let you.” Lia breathed low against her ear, and once again, she relished the way the tight, muscular body shivered in reaction.

A much better kind of tension. Quinn watched her intently, eyes blue and feverish. Lia knew every nuance in her gaze, when to hold back and when to push. She brought her up slowly but no less surely, watched these eyes gradually lose their focus, and Quinn obviously fight to stay in control. Lia grew wet against her thigh at the knowledge that she could take it all any second she wanted to.

“I wanted to punch him, you know.”

Lia had just pressed her fingers over the swollen length of her, but she eased off a little at the words.

“Wilson?” she prompted.

“Yeah. When he told me about the suspension, I wanted to hit him square in the jaw.”

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“That’s my girl.”

“Mm. Yeah. I felt so alone. So let down and... helpless, I suppose. I just wanted to run to you, Lia. You are my safe place. My everything, really.”

“Oh, baby...”

Touched beyond words, Lia replied with a deep, long, and steadying kiss. Then she chuckled at her next words.

“Please. Keep going.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lia.” With a grunt of pure impatience, Quinn guided her hand back into place.

“Feeling needy?” Lia teased.

“You know it. Don’t let me distract you from your—Oh, man!”

Lia squeezed her one time, nice and hard, and caused her to convulse. She smiled at the sight of an attractive wave of ripples in her well-defined abs. So damn sexy. But again, she released her.

“Please,” Quinn half-chuckled, half-begged as she twisted, trying unsuccessfully to recapture her fingers.

“Are you going to relax and let me take care of you, then?” Lia prompted. “Or do I have to get tough with you?”

A knowing, hopeful grin, spread across Quinn’s lips.

“I think I’d like both,” she said.

“Greedy.”

“Yes. With you, always. Is it okay?”

The question, loaded with the sort of openness Quinn only allowed herself with her, and no one else, made Lia melt.

“Very okay,” she promised. “I adore you for this.”

She pressed another reassuring kiss to her lips and resumed her slow, intimate massage. Soon, she had Quinn throbbing in her hand. The more she watched her wife losing herself in the rhythm that she established for her, the more aroused and tighter Lia grew in response. She squeezed her legs around her thigh, pressed her engorged clit into her flesh, and bit on her lip with a moan of her own.

Quinn gasped. “You are so hot, Lia.”

“I’m getting very, very close.”

“Make me come with you.”

Make me. Her plea had Lia trembling with a fresh surge of desire. She trailed a couple of fingers through her dripping folds, watched that gorgeous body arch off the bed, and Quinn throw her head back.

“Oh, babe...”

“Don’t close your eyes, Quinn. Let me see you.”

The sight of her so open, exposed, and trusting, panting on the edge of release, brought Lia right up there with her. Time to give and take. With one last precise stroke for Quinn, and a hard thrust of her own, Lia sent them both flying.

???

‘Which one are you, Ms. Reed? Witness or perpetrator?’

Kim stared at the detective, momentarily taken aback at the question. Certainly, she had expected to have to explain herself; one did not just waltz into a police station to report a murder and swing back out again without a certain amount of scrutiny. But for some reason, which now struck her as incredibly naïve, if not outright crazy – she was a damn lawyer, after all! – it never occurred to her that she might be considered a suspect. Something about the detective’s manner was also slightly unusual and definitely intriguing; pleasantly so. Miller’s question was blunt, but her eyes remained warm on her face as she waited. Lost in contemplation, mesmerized by attractive layers of swirling blue, Kim forgot to speak.

“Ms. Reed?” the detective prompted.

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Impatience sizzled in her tone. When she frowned, all trace of warmth washed out of her eyes. Kim swallowed, wondering if it was even there to begin with. Steady up, for God's sake! What the hell is wrong with you?

"No," she replied. "I am neither witness nor perpetrator."

That last word also sent a little rush of indignation coursing through her. Good, she thought. She would use it as fuel.

"Do you have a third option?" Miller asked.

"I saw..." Catching a tremor in her own voice, Kim cleared her throat. Keep cool. Just tell her, get it over with. "I had a vision of her dead."

"A dream?"

"Not a dream," Kim snapped. "I said a vision."

Miller blinked, and her expression sharpened, though not in any disbelief or amusement.

"Right," was all she said.

Kim briefly closed her eyes. She shook her head and sighed. Now forgetting to keep herself so much in check, she did lean her elbows on the table to rub her hands over her face.

“I know it sounds crazy.”

“Hmm. Different, for sure.”

“I considered just calling in and asking you to do a wellness check on Cassie.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know...”

“Sure you do,” Miller invited. “Come on, hit me with it.”

“Well, I’ve been a lawyer for fifteen years.” Kim shrugged. “And if my career taught me anything, it’s that trying to avoid difficult situations never leads to anything good.”

???

Cody was pretty sure that there was more to it. The words of the duty officer also floated back across her mind; ‘People don’t need a full moon to be insane these days.’ Kim Reed did not strike her as that kind, though. Just tired, obviously on edge, and extremely wary. Plenty reluctant, too, with a razor-sharp attitude. In spite of this, she was asking for help; begging for it, almost, which must not come easy to a woman as proud and self-possessed as she also appeared to be. Cody was open to hearing the rest of her story, at least. She may not experience visions herself, but she had developed a keen cop sense over the years, the sort of instinct she could never explain but trusted implicitly. A deep intuition that allowed her to connect random links in the cases that she worked, to progress in leaps and bounds not based on anything concrete, where others may remain stuck. Her partner liked to refer to it as her ‘spooky sense’.



“I’ve never worked with a psychic, but I know the police sometimes do,” she remarked, eager to make the woman feel a bit more at ease.

The attempt clearly failed.

“I’m a lawyer,” Reed muttered unhappily. “Not a psychic. Not a killer either.”

“Okay. So, tell me about this vision you had.”

Finally! Reed’s expression seemed to convey.

“I saw Cassie’s face,” she began. “Her eyes were open and fixed. Empty of any expression, and covered with a layer of fluid. Dead eyes, you know?”

“Yes.” Cody picked up on her words. “I’m curious; how do you know what dead eyes look like?”

Reed stared daggers into hers.

“My grandfather died at home after a long illness. I arrived not long after and closed his eyes for the last time. They looked like that. I can assure you I did not murder him.”

“Understood, Ms. Reed.” Cody answered calmly, hoping it might catch. “And as you must know, it’s my job to ask pointed questions. I assume that’s why you wanted to speak to a more experienced detective instead of a uniform?”

Reed blinked once and let out a controlled breath.

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“Yes.” She nodded. “Yes. I do apologize.”

“No problem. Please, continue.”

“Her cheeks, eyelids, and lips, all had a bluish tinge as if she’d been under the ice or in a freezer for a long time. Her hair was wet.”

Cody took note of this.

“Also, more than the look of her, what hit me was the sense of absolute despair that I felt.” The lawyer shivered as she said this, and some of the color drained out of her own face. “It was like... Like a feeling of death, I suppose. To describe it as cold and hopeless doesn’t half do it justice. Physically, it felt like iceseeping into my bones.” She hugged herself as if for warmth, indeed. “It was the worst kind of despair. I don’t know how else to say it.”

“This is fine. Did you see the rest of her body? Any clue as to location?”

“No, just the face. Also, I sensed...”

“What?”

“Terror. Pure and absolute. I felt it.”

The look in her eyes was so fierce that if Cody were not careful, it might make her shiver too. She cast a brief glance at her notepad.

“Okay. I get the picture.”

Reed flashed a wan smile. “You work special crimes...”

“Correct, I do.”

“So, is this special enough for you, Detective?”

“It’s unusual, for sure.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” She sounded both doubtful and almost pleading.

“Yes.” Once again, Cody met her gaze. “I believe you saw what you saw, and that you don’t think it was a dream.”

“It wasn’t,” Reed confirmed. “I was getting in my car at the time. Fully awake. I sat behind the wheel, started the engine, and the world disappeared. There was just Cassie’s face in front of my eyes, and that awful feeling.”

“You said you’re not a psychic, so I take it this sort of thing hasn’t happened before?”

“Not in this way.”

Getting personal information out of the woman was as easy as squeezing blood out of a stone.

“In what way, then?” Cody encouraged.

“I mean I’ve always been extra sensitive to people’s feelings and emotions,” Reed clarified. “I can tell when their words don’t match what they’re really thinking, for instance.”

“Must be handy as a lawyer.”

“Sometimes, it is. Though I suppose it more or less comes with the territory in our line of work. I bet you can easily tell if someone’s lying to you.”

“Nine times out of ten, yes.” Like I saw that quick shadow on your face, as if you remembered something unpleasant, you don’t want me to know about.

Cody did not ask, but she noticed for sure. She looked at Reed. Their gazes locked. In the loaded silence that ensued, the last thing Cody expected to see was a flash of sexual heat in the woman’s gaze. But she could have sworn it. She watched her darker skin light up, and a line of color flare across her cheeks. Wow. Cody stared, taken aback at the reaction. It was there and gone in a split second, so fast she might have thought she had dreamt it... But her body obviously received the message loud and clear and reacted to it before she could consciously decide not to. A familiar pulse began to pound between her legs. Heat rose in her own face. She was aroused. Damn! I hope she’s not catching any of this... Fat chance of that, probably. The instant the question occurred to her, Cody watched all the light in Reed’s golden eyes vanish. It was like a roller shutter slamming down on her emotions, denying Cody any further insight behind her private lines.

“Do you need anything else from me?” the lawyer asked in a cool voice.

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“Uh, no.” Cody cleared her throat. “I think that’s it.”

“Good. Then we’re done here.”

Reed stood up and walked to the door without waiting for confirmation.

“Hold it,” Cody prompted, earning herself a stormy glance she chose to ignore. “Take this. Call me if anything more comes to you.”

Reed took the card she handed to her, barely glanced at it, and shoved it in her pocket.

“You will keep me posted.”

Though she made it sound like an order, Cody did not need to be psychic to sense her level of anxiety. For this reason, she was not reluctant to answer.

“You can definitely count on it,” she approved. “I’ll speak to you soon, Ms. Reed.”

### chapter 6

Cody watched her leave. Reed walked proudly and, some might say, with a hint of arrogance in the tilt of her head. Like she did own the place, and everyone in it as well. Except that now, Cody knew a lot more about what was going on with her under the surface than Reed let on. She went back to her office, cast a thoughtful glance at the empty crime board, and decided that she would take a look into the Cassie Winters case after all. Swinging by the woman’s apartment on the way home seemed

like a good idea to kick things off.

“Later, Lance,” she tossed on her way out.

“See ya.” He nodded and rolled his eyes as the phone went off again. “Fun never stops.”

“Come on, you love it.”

“Yeah, right. Watch out for the crazies out there.”

“Of course not; where would be the fun in that?”

He laughed and waved her off. Thirty minutes later, Cody parked her unmarked unit in front of a two-story building on the outskirts of what used to be Lewiston town. Now it was referred to as old-Lewiston, to differentiate it from the sprawling urban area that had sprung all around it. Lewiston used to be a surfer town. Low on crime, easy on the families who lived there. Now, part of it attracted rich people who could afford the old homes and sprawling mansions with striking views of the ocean. The other part, where Cody hoped to find Cassie Winters alive and well, was a little more run-down. Definitely grittier. Surfers still hung around the place, also popular with a number of artists, and the odd drug dealer. Cody took a second to assess her surroundings as she got out of her vehicle. The apartment building appeared in fairly good nick. Of course, there was graffiti on the side, and the front door’s locking mechanism seemed to be busted. She’d seen a lot worse. Inside, she opted for the stairs instead of the tired-looking elevator. Music, the sound of a TV, or a crying baby, could be heard from behind some of the doors she passed. She paused in front of Cassie Winters’ apartment and had a quick listen. Male voices. Sounded like a group of them in there. Cody knocked once and stepped out of the line of the spy hole while she waited. It did not take long.

“Yo!” The door swung open on a lingering cloud of cigar smoke. A stocky, balding guy about six feet tall, dressed in blue jeans and a grey tank top that may have once been white, eyed her speculatively. “Huh. You’re not the pizza guy.”

“Correct, I’m not.” She lifted one side of her shirt to display the badge on her belt. “Detective Cody Miller, Lewiston P.D. I’m looking for Jack Winters.”

“Yeah, he’s in.” As he said this, the man also raked his eyes all over her from top to bottom.

“Problem?” she asked, as he looked baffled.

She also did not like the way that he fixed her.

“No, no.” He shrugged. “You’re not what I expected, but come on in.”

Alert and ready, she walked in after him into the darkened apartment. It stank of cigar smoke and cheap alcohol. The source of it all was the kitchen, where three other men sat around a table, playing cards. A reasonable stack of twenty-dollar bills was piled in the middle. Empty beer bottles lined the counter; Cody spotted some on the floor next to their chairs. The men all looked pretty much the same. Big beefy guys who may have been athletic and healthy once upon a time. Judging from their current appearance, Cody bet none of them had seen the inside of a gym in a good few years. The only lifting they did now probably just involved beer bottles.

“Jack Winters?” she repeated.

“That’s me.” The one directly in front of her leaned back in his chair to give her the same sort of once-over that the first one had.

“Huh,” he grunted when she introduced herself. “They run out of Pamela Anderson

or what?”

His buddies all laughed. Inside joke? Cody wondered. It was clearly at her expense. Their eyes roaming all over her were like little critters crawling on her skin, and she fought the impulse to shiver.

“Anyway, go on,” he grunted, staring at her breasts.

“I’m sorry?”

“Let’s see what you got under there.”



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Cody did not smile when he grabbed his crotch.

“I’m here to see your wife,” she informed him.

“Huh?” He frowned as if she were speaking Chinese.

“Your wife, Cassie.”

“You’re not the stripper?”

Jesus!Cody’s heart briefly went out to the woman who was going to show up here to entertain this bunch of thickos. Just like pizza and beer, they would consider her as a commodity instead of a real human being. Something,instead of someone, that they could just place an order for.

“Detective Miller, Lewiston P.D.,” she repeated sharply. “Is your wife here, Mr. Winters?”

“Pfft. ‘Course she ain’t here.” One of the friends snorted as if the question were a personal insult to him. “This is our poker night. Right, Jack?”

“Right,” Winters approved in a jovial tone.

His eyes never left her face, though, and they told a different story. His gaze was cold, calculating. Cody watched it linger, no longer on her breasts but on the concealed weapon under her shirt. She was glad he was aware of its presence.

“Let’s talk in private, shall we?” she invited.

He dragged his feet to the main lounge, no doubt wanting to signal with this that her presence was a huge inconvenience. As if she cared. While he dropped his heavy frame in the middle of the L-shaped sofa that lined the corner, she looked for signs that a woman also lived in this space. A single flower drooped over the rim of a long-necked glass vase on the windowsill. Dead flower, Cody noted, and hoped it was not a sign of things to come. One of the cushions that Winters carelessly used as a prop for his booted foot was the same cream color as the carpet, minus a few stains. Someone may have tried to accessorize a bit in here; fair to say it was not him.

“Where is your wife, Mr. Winters?” Cody asked.

“Hell if I know,” was his reply.

“Does she live here with you?”

“Huh.”

“Was that a yes?”

“Nah.”

Though he did not smile, she could see he took pleasure in controlling the exchange. Thought he was in charge. It would be her pleasure to demonstrate otherwise.

“I suggest you cooperate with me right here and now, Mr. Winters,” she advised him. “Or, if you prefer, I can put you in handcuffs and drive you to the station. You can cooperate there in the morning, seeing as it’ll be too late by then to continue this interview.”

“She used to live here,” he said with a snarl.

“When did she leave? And why?”

“Day before yesterday, and I don’t have a clue. Bitch always threatens to leave me.”

“Mm. Why is that?”

“Couldn’t tell you.” The exaggerated look of innocence on his face told her he knew she knew he was lying. And did not give a damn about it. “I work my butt off to give the woman a good life, but she ain’t showing much gratitude in return.”

“What do you do for a living, Mr. Winters?”

“Construction. I’m a bricklayer.”

His hands were the size of dinner plates, with thick fingers that looked like meaty sausages. The muscles in his arms were not as well-defined as they may once have been, but he was built like an ox and still powerful. Cody figured even just a slap from a guy like him would easily knock a small woman out. He struck her as the type who would abuse his power.

“So, Cassie left the day before yesterday?” she prompted.

“Yup.”

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“Do you know where she went?”

“Nope. Good riddance. She divorced me once, you know? I won’t take her back this time. She wants to go, she can go. Didn’t even leave me a note. Now, that’s cold.”

She wasn’t buying his version of events.

“Has it occurred to you that something may have happened to her?”

His eyes went wide. “Like what?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Winters. You tell me.”

“Hang on a minute... Are you accusing me of something?”

His outrage also came across as fake. She noticed he seemed to be enjoying toying with her, or, again, thinking he could. What an asshole. Well. Two could play this game.

“Do you hit your wife, Mr. Winters?”

“Of course, I don’t.” No shock there, she noticed. As if he’d been asked the question once or twice before and automatically delivered a rehearsed answer. “I love my wife. She has a bunch of issues, but...”

“What issues?”

“Mental.” He tapped his temple with his index finger. “You know what I mean. Seems to be the thing these days. Anxiety. Personally, I work too hard to be affected. Don’t have time for this shit.”

“Is your wife on medication?”

“Nah. Just goes to show it ain’t that serious.” He laced his nod with a cold smile. “Women tend to be that way, don’t they? I think they called it hysteria in the old times. Weak in the mind. Poor things.”

His thinly veiled insult slid off Cody like water off a duck’s back. She was beginning to feel intense dislike for this guy, but it was not personal. She dealt with men like him all the time in her job. Being an asshole was not a crime.

“Do you have any idea of where your wife could be?” she repeated.

“Nope.”

“Do you think she’s okay?”

“Hope so.” He grinned. “Sure. I wish her the best.”

“Do you even care that she’s missing?”

“Why should I? She’ll come groveling back when she runs out of cash. And when she does, I’ll be glad to tell her to keep on going.” He was curious about one thing. “So, someone reported her missing?”

His tone was light, but Cody watched his eyes sharpen. She noted a flicker of temper across his gaze, quickly brought under control. It occurred to her that it might not take much to light this guy’s fuse, and that he would be dangerous, if and when this

happened.

“Something like that, yes,” she told him.

“Mm... Who was it?”

“A friend.”

“Right.” He sneered, cold and cruel. “Funny that, I didn’t think Cass had any friends.”

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“Good morning, beautiful.”

Quinn woke up to a gentle kiss on her cheek, a silky strand of coconut-scented hair drifting tantalizingly across her face, and warm fingers massaging her shoulders. Lia...

“Mm...” Not fully awake yet, she smiled. Started to stretch and roll over, then caught a ray of sunlight across the room that made her blink in alarm. “Oh... Shit!”

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She nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Shhh, it’s okay,” Lia said instantly, in a reassuring tone.

“It’s morning!”

“Yes. And?”

“I missed my run. I’m going to be late for—”

It hit her then like a ton of bricks. Suspended. No work today. Maybe not for a long time...A rush of emotion grabbed her by the throat, and tears stung the back of her eyes. Quinn covered her face with one arm.

“It’s okay,” Lia repeated as she, very gently, pulled her arm away. “Babe. It’s going to be fine.”

“Yes... Yes.” Quinn took a deep breath and blew it out. Then again. She placed her own hand on the one that Lia kept on her chest, right above her heart.

“Alright, baby?”

“Yes. Sorry—”

“Don’t be sorry.” Lia leaned in to press her lips over hers. “You woke up, and it hit you all over again?”

“Yes. That exactly. What time is it?”

“Eight o’clock. And yes, you did miss your run.”

“Why didn’t you shake me?”

“Because you didn’t hear the alarm, and you were sleeping like a rock. I figured you needed some rest, and I’d let you take it.” Lia caressed her cheek with the back of her folded knuckles. “Plus, I enjoyed watching you sleep. Watching over you and keeping you safe.”

No job-related stress would ever match the emotion Quinn felt rushing through her at these words.

“You know, I would never let a woman do this in the past.”

“I know that, yes.” Lia fixed her with a pensive smile. “You are the selfless kind who prefers to watch over others. The sort of cop who’ll always keep everyone safe, no matter what it may cost you.”

“You make me sound way more heroic than I am.”

“I don’t think so. I know you, Quinn.”

“Maybe I just didn’t like sleeping with strangers before,” Quinn attempted to tease. “Yeah, I’m a cop. You bet. I know how crazy even so-called sane, normal people can be.”

“You didn’t like to feel vulnerable,” Lia reflected. “I guess you still don’t, hmm?”

“That’s only partly true.”



## chapter 7

Abandoning the banter, Quinn pushed up on an elbow so that they were eye to eye. She slid one hand behind the delicate curve of Lia's neck and brought her gently close for another kiss.

"I like being vulnerable."

Lia flashed a languid smile. "Do you really?"

"Yes. With you."

"I like where this is going. Tell me more."

"You are the only woman on earth who can get me to admit this, but..." Quinn moved into her arms when Lia opened them. She lay with her face against her breast, closed her eyes again, and held on tight. "I do like sleeping with you and knowing you watch over me. I don't mind being helpless with you."

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“Don’t mind?” Lia murmured.

Quinn smiled. Her gorgeous wife, the tough reporter, never let her get away with anything.

“I like it,” she corrected.

Lia squeezed her in her arms, then let out a small chuckle. “Are you blushing, Lieutenant Wesley?”

“Might be,” Quinn grunted.

“No question; you are. I can feel your cheek catching fire on my breast. I like that, for sure.”

“Can’t help it.” Quinn looked up to meet her dark, laughing eyes. “I have a hot wife.”

“You are such a charmer.”

“I love being married to you, Lia. Being yours.”

“Me too, darling. No, Quinn, don’t think about that now.”

Quinn did not ask what she meant by this. Lia obviously caught her change of mood as she contemplated her situation. Thinking about work and doing something—anything—to get herself reinstated.

“What’s the plan for today then?” she prompted instead.

“Let’s be together and make the most of the good weather. I want breakfast in town, a long walk on the beach, and maybe check out the new dive school that just opened on Ocean Street. Today, we rest. Tomorrow, we fight back.”

“What about your own work, Lia?”

“You come first today.”

“Are you sure? It’s—”

“Totally sure. Don’t argue,” Lia said firmly before breaking into a smile. “And the answer is yes, by the way.”

“To what question?”

“The one floating in your gorgeous eyes. You’re wondering about jumping in the shower with me.”

Quinn laughed. “I was, actually.”

“Good.” With a beaming smile, a very naked and equally gorgeous Lia stood up and held out her hand to her. “Come on, Wife. Let me take care of you.”

???

In her office on East Lowell Street, an area of Lewiston that had sprung high-rises to rival New York City in recent times, Kim sipped herbal tea and called on the spirit of Themis, the goddess, and personification of law and justice in ancient Greece, to grant her patience.

“Let me make sure I’ve got this straight, Mr. McAllister,” she stated. “You do not just want your soon-to-be ex-wife to reimburse you for the cost of the breast enhancement procedure she had done... You want her to reverse the process?”

“That’s correct.”

His face was totally serious as he nodded in reply, and still, she looked for the punchline. It had to be a joke.

“You want her to have the implants removed?”

“Yes, totally.”

“But—”

“It’s like this, Counselor,” he cut her, catching her frown.

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He shifted in his chair, keen to explain, and she was treated against her will to a flash of hairy belly flesh protruding between two tight buttons of his expensive shirt. Everything about this guy was flashy and expensive, from his Gucci three-piece suit to the gold Rolex on his pudgy wrist. Just goes to show that accessories don't make the man...Kim forced herself to look interested as her potential new client went on outlining his case.

"She can never truly reimburse me for the cost of her new breasts because, through our divorce, she will be granted a few million of my hard-earned savings. Payback or not, it's still my money she'll be using."

"I see."

"So, I want her to go back to being no-boob-Rita."

"I beg your pardon?" Kim blinked once, mystified.

"Yes, that's what she was known as at the time. Haha!"

He slapped a hand over his short thigh and let out a thick, gravelly laugh.

"My cheating wife did not have much going for her before I draped her in diamonds and made her Mrs. McAllister, I'll tell you that. Then, she thought she was someone special. Started to believe her own bullshit. Now, we are going to wipe the slate clean and return things to their original state. Give her a much-needed reality check." He flashed her a fat wink as if they were co-conspirators in a good prank. "Flatten the pancake, Ms. Reed, if you see what I mean."

Yes, Kim did see very well, except probably not in the way he hoped. This was, she decided, so trivial! Really, the height of pettiness.

“Mr. McAllister, as a divorce lawyer, I can help you with a lot of things...” she started.

“Good!”

“Yes, but it won’t go as far as forcing your wife to undergo surgery she doesn’t want.”

“If she has any sense of justice, she will want it,” he asserted with a righteous nod.

“Okay. Well.” Kim outlined what she would be able to pull off for him if he hired her as counsel, which did not include his wife’s ‘boobs’. “Think about it and let me know,” she concluded. “Take your time.”

Hoping he would use it well, perhaps choose someone else to represent him and save her from having to decline, she saw him out and checked the time. Going on eight P.M. Another late evening, but all good as far as she was concerned. Hopefully, keeping busy would prevent more psychic occurrences. Kim reached for the card on her desk and stared at the name on it. Cody Miller. The detective had been on her mind one hell of a lot, on and off, since their first encounter the previous night. Kim realized with a pang of guilt that it was not only because of the missing, and presumably dead, Cassie Winters. Something else entirely kept bringing the image of the blond-haired, blue-eyed cop flashing back in front of her eyes. The impulse to call her, not just for news of the case but to hear her voice, also had not left her all day.

“You are losing it, Kim...” But she did take out her phone and dial the number.

“Miller.”

The woman had struck her as extremely professional the other night... so the fact that she answered even before the end of the first ring should not have surprised Kim so much. Still, for an instant, her mind went blank. Might have had something to do with the sound of that attractively deep, warm, and confident voice, indeed. Either way, her hesitation prompted a sharp note of impatience to creep into it.

“Hello?”

And damn if this was not also very attractive. Would Miller prove herself as demanding in other ways? Oh, come on! Don't give her any more reason to believe you're crazy!

“Yes, this is Kim Reed, Detective,” she said firmly.

“Ms. Reed. How are you?”

Was it all just in her mind, or did a little bit of extra warmth come back into her voice? Was there a smile there? Kim also did not expect to be preoccupied with this sort of question.

“I'm fine,” she said softly. “How are you?”

“Not bad. Can I see you?”

“What?”

“I need to talk to you about Cassie.”

“Oh, God, have you found her?” Kim exclaimed.

Her heart began to race. Hit with a sudden wave of light-headedness, she grabbed

hold of the edge of her desk to steady herself.

“Not found her yet, no,” Miller answered. “I just have a few more questions for you.”



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“Okay...” Kim exhaled. “Yes, of course. I will do my best to answer them.”

“I would prefer to meet in person. I can come to you now if that’s okay.”

Kim could just ask her to the office. She should definitely tell her that. But it was late, and she was tired, hungry, and feeling strangely alone. With all that, she found herself issuing a shocking invitation.

“There is a place downtown called G4GIRL. Can you meet me there?”

It was Miller’s turn to hesitate. Only briefly, to be said, but enough for Kim to understand that she must know the place. She shivered with a sudden rush of adrenaline but just managed not to gasp in reaction.

“Alright,” Miller said. “I can be there in twenty minutes.”

“That’s perfect.” Kim swallowed, fighting a slight tremor in her right hand. Just stress, she told herself. Steady up.

???

Cody realized it was a first for her, meeting in a lesbian bar with a... What? she wondered. Potential witness? Suspect? Informant? Throughout the day, as she conducted her investigation, all these terms did apply at some point or other. At least, she no longer considered Kim Reed a suspect in the case. Which made it okay and above board, she told herself, to meet her here on a Friday evening. She caught sight of the woman as soon as she walked in. Taken aback once again by the sheer power

of her presence, just like the previous night when she had first laid eyes on her, she stopped for a moment to observe. Reed had selected one of the booths at the back of the room. Good choice, Cody thought, as they would need some privacy to discuss abduction and murder topics. Dressed in an emerald-green skirt, matching heels, and a fitted blazer, Reed sat with her elegant legs crossed and a glass of white wine in front of her. She appeared rather lost in thought as she gazed across the rest of the room, not looking at anything or anyone in particular. Detached. Remote. Very beautiful. Cody noticed that she attracted plenty of looks and interested glances from the many women here tonight. A tall one in jeans and a black leather jacket, butch as they come, finally worked up the nerve to go and chat with her. Sliding onto the opposite couch seat without even asking, she leaned with her elbows on the table and flashed the kind of smile that would make plenty of women swoon. Cody was both interested and amused to see that Reed seemed totally unaffected by it. Though too far to hear what she said to the woman over the music, it was enough to make her potential suitor nod, smile again, and move away swiftly. Reed handled herself with the ease and confidence of a woman used to being in this kind of place. Cody also experienced a startling sense of satisfaction at her seeming lack of interest in the other woman. Steady up. Don't forget this is work, not a personal date! But her resolve not to feel anything faltered as soon as the lawyer zeroed in on her from across the room. Reed's previously blank stare lit up. Those dark amber eyes fired in recognition and a puzzling flash of heat. Again! For me? Cody could not help but wonder. Such sizzling intensity, she reflected, was attractive and hard not to respond to. She made her way to the booth, oblivious to the many admiring glances she drew as well.

“Detective.”

“Ms. Reed.”

“Any news?”

For sure, Reed did not beat around the bush. As she joined her at the table and slid

across from her on the wide seat, Cody noticed that she looked intense, at once hopeful and anxious in equal measures.

“I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Maybe that’s good.”

“In what sense?”

“Perhaps I did not interpret the vision correctly.” Reed bit nervously on her bottom lip as she contemplated the possibility. “I was so sure, and it felt so real! But, you know... Maybe.”

Cody was tempted to rest a hand over hers in reassurance, but she held back. Instead, she gave her a blow-by-blow account of her investigation.

“The husband doesn’t have a criminal record. I—”

“Are you sure?” Reed blinked in astonishment. “It seems a little hard to believe.”

“Maybe, but it is true.” Cody nodded. “I spoke to him and got a detailed account of his activities since the last time you saw Cassie. Everything seems to check out.”

“Right.” Reed digested the information. “That’s... good.”

“I visited Cassie’s place of work as well and spoke to her colleagues. I ran background checks on every single one, and did not find any red flags there either. I don’t think she had much of a social life outside of work, is that correct?”

“Yes. Her husband would not allow it.”

## chapter 8

“He told me Cassie has mental health issues.” Cody reminded herself to speak in the present tense about the woman. At this time, Cassie Winters’ whereabouts were not known. This made her a missing person, not a dead one. “Can you confirm or deny this?”

Reed’s golden-brown eyes flashed again, this time in fury.

“No, she does not have mental health issues. The only thing Cassie suffered from was an abusive asshole of a husband. Of course, he would tell you otherwise! She was terrified of him, Detective, but also lucid and smart enough to realize that it was time, finally, to break free of the relationship.” She slapped an open palm on the table. “And take action on it despite her fear, for God’s sake! In my opinion, this makes her wise. And brave. Not crazy. Jesus!”

She drained the rest of her wine as she finished the rant and stared hard as if daring her to object. Cody had no intention or desire to do so.

“I agree with you, Ms. Reed,” she answered in a calm voice. “You’re preaching to the choir here.”

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Reed eyed her fiercely a moment longer, then her shoulders dropped, and she let out a heavy sigh.

“Shooting the messenger, more like. I’m sorry, Detective, I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s okay. No problem.”

“You’re very kind. What happens next?”

This part, Cody suspected, was bound to be tricky for the woman to accept.

“You know, sometimes, people disappear who do not want to be found. Maybe—”

“Have you checked her bank account?” Reed interrupted.

Cody did well not to roll her eyes. It helped that she could hear a hint of despair in the lawyer’s voice.

“Yes, I did,” she confirmed.

“And has she used her card?” Reed insisted. “For cash, or to make any payments for a hotel room? Or a one-way train ticket out of here?”

“No,” Cody answered. “No activity on the card.”

“Detective Miller, I hope you’ll believe me when I say this: I wish with all my heart to be wrong about Cassie. I hope she’s alive, on her way to somewhere safe where

she can make a fresh start. If that's the case, I don't care if she didn't tell me. This kind of ego isn't what I'm about."

"Yes. I understand."

"I really do hope so. But, you know..."

"You had that vision." Cody nodded.

"Yes." Reed blew air out and stared at her empty glass of wine as if trying to make it full again with just the power of her mind. "What happens next?" she asked. "Will you continue to look for her? Is there something I can do? You wanted to ask me questions. Ask away; I'll do anything I can to help."

Cody focused on this rather than admitting that she might have to pass the case to the Missing Persons department pretty soon. With luck, they might get a lead. If not, and no matter how much it would pain her, the woman's disappearance might end up as an unresolved cold case.

"Mainly, I wanted to run this stuff past you again," she let her know. "And ask you about yourself too."

Reed frowned. "Am I still a suspect?"

"Not at this point, no."

"But you looked at me."

"Yes, of course." Cody calmly held her gaze. "It's my job to look at everyone involved, if only to eliminate them from my list of potential suspects."

As per normal routine, she had run a complete background check on the woman. A graduate of Harvard Law School, Reed had gone back to her native Texas soon after finishing top of her class. She passed the bar exam equally successfully and opened her own private practice in Houston. She specialized in criminal defense, and her record indicated that she was extremely good at it. Even so, less than a year and a half earlier, she had relocated to Lewiston and switched to family law. Something there, Cody thought. It seemed like an abrupt move. Reed answered with a shrug when she asked about it.

“When my dad passed away, I had no reason to remain in Houston,” she explained. “I was also after a change of scenery. I think it’s good to shake things up every ten years or so. It keeps you fresh.”

“Right. So, tell me about the visions.”

“Oh, jeez.” Reed briefly closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out. “If we’re going to talk about this, I need another drink,” she declared.

“Fair enough.”

“Can I get you anything? How about some food?”

Cody decided they might as well. It was late. As per usual, she had kept herself too busy during the day to remember to fuel up properly. Technically, she was off duty now too.

“I’ll have a beer and a cheeseburger,” she nodded.

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“And fries,” Reed decided. She hailed a passing waitress and ordered for the both of them. As their drinks were promptly delivered, she took off her suit jacket and raised her glass. “Well. Cheers.”

Cody had the distinct impression that this signified a marker in the evening as if Reed had metaphorically gone off duty herself with the gesture.

“Cheers,” she replied and clinked her bottle against the rim of her glass. “Ms. Reed—”

“Please, call me Kim. I find formality gets in the way after a while.”

Cody instantly wondered in the way of what... Intimacy? A little annoyed that it was the first thing that popped into her head, she didn't ask and just agreed.

“Okay. Kim. Before we move on to that, though, there's one more thing I'd like to know.”

“Sure. Fire away.”

“How close were you with Cassie Winters?”

Reed's left eyebrow instantly arched up. “Close? Are you asking me if we were lovers?”

“No offense, but yes.”



“None at all taken. Cody.” Reed used her first name with a smile only tempered by a flash of sadness at the mention of the missing woman. “To confirm, I tend not to date my clients. It’s bad for business.”

“Of course.”

“And Cassie also never looked at me that way. She was firmly heterosexual. Which you probably already guessed I am not.”

One of the regulars here, a woman Cody had been intimate with a couple of times, flashed her a flirty wink as she walked past the table.

“Hey, Detective. Nice to see you.”

“Hey, Bree. You too.” Cody did not linger with the greeting, though, and her occasional partner moved along after a knowing glance at Reed.

???

She thinks we’re together. And of course, she would, Kim reflected. Two women at a lesbian bar, sharing drinks and a bite to eat...Of course. Kim held back from shaking her head at her own self. Part of her still struggled to comprehend what had got into her to ask the detective to meet her at this bar, of all places. Buying her dinner, encouraging her using first names, and bluntly admitting to not being straight were also as far out of character for Kim as they could be. And yet... Another part of her, long denied, was not sorry at all to be seen spending private time with the handsome detective. Tonight, Miller was wearing jeans, well-worn military-style boots, and a light red-checked shirt over a simple black t-shirt. Kim assumed the shirt was only there to hide the weapon on her belt, but the style suited her. Cody wore no make-up, not that she needed it with those brilliant blue eyes. She had long, black lashes. And her hair was attractively messed up as if a woman had just run her fingers

possessively through the blond strands. Kim caught herself fantasizing about doing just that to her now. She watched Cody sip her beer straight from the bottle. Her lips looked full and attractively moist, fastened loosely around the mouth of the bottle, and Kim wondered what her mouth would taste like. Desire rose in her unexpectedly, hot and bright like a healing flame. Still, before she could fully embrace it, a single memory struck to steal the heat. Icy tendrils wrapped around her throat, replacing joy with a sense of terror, squeezing hard enough to hurt and make her gasp unconsciously.

“Ms. Reed. Kim.”

Startled, Kim refocused to find that Cody was watching her. No ice in her eyes, just pure warmth and a hint of polite concern. Her fingers, firmly laced around her forearm, radiated plenty of heat.

“Sorry,” Kim mumbled.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, fine. Just drifted for a second.”

“Not another vision, was it?”

“No, no.” Kim sighed. Might as well tell her a bit more about those, so she understood how it worked. “All the women in my family happen to be very sensitive.”

“Psychic?”

“Yes, but sensitive is the word we use.”

“Alright.”

As their food arrived, Cody let go of her arm, forcing Kim to suppress another shiver. This one not due to a bad memory, but to the sudden loss of contact. She felt it acutely.

“When my parents got married, they moved to Texas,” she volunteered. “My father worked in the oil industry at the time. I was born in Houston, but the family has ancestral roots in Louisiana and before that, the French Antilles. My great-great-great grandmother, Camille, apparently had the gift.”

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Cody flicked her tongue over a spot of ketchup on her lip, prompting Kim to be tempted to stare again.

“The gift,” she repeated. “What? She was a witch?”

Kim did not often share this side of herself and her story... As in, never. And she might well have taken offense at the crude labeling if the look on Cody’s face had not been so open and earnest. It made her look younger. More innocent. Not as tough, for sure. Kim found herself wanting to smile in spite of herself. The detective appeared enthralled. Cute.

“I guess some people would use that word,” she allowed.

“What would you call it?” Cody prompted.

“Again, I’d say a sensitive. An intuitive.”

“Less dramatic; and more appropriate. Right?”

“Yes. The phenomenon is a little more mundane than you probably imagine.”

“I do have a vivid imagination,” Cody granted. She smiled and pointed to her food.

“Please, carry on. And also, don’t forget to eat.”

What Kim might forget if she were not careful was the real reason for their meeting tonight, actually, and the fact that Cody was a cop. Well, maybe not completely for the latter since it was part of the attraction... But still, this was starting to feel less

and less like a professional encounter. The woman was incredibly easy to talk to. Friendly, obviously kind, with the sort of looks that were not easily ignored. Kim found even the risk of nasty memories coming back not enough to completely extinguish the flame of desire she had felt earlier. Cody Miller was a little bit special. For sure.

“Basically, the gift runs in the family,” she went on. “My grandmother had it very strong. I think it bypassed my mother and jumped to me directly.”

“How did it start for you?”

“When I was four years old, living in Texas, I used to play with the neighbors’ dog in my yard all the time. My mom called it my imaginary friend, as she could never see the dog and thought the neighbors didn’t have one. One day, when I pleaded for her to believe me, she grew exasperated and went to them to ask. Turns out I had described their Australian Shepherd, Jed, to a T. Even down to the little silver tag he wore on his collar. But there was a catch.”

“What?” Cody prompted. “Don’t stop there!”

She laughed, and Kim could not help but smile again at her enthusiasm. Yes, she reflected. Very attractive.

“The neighbors said that Jed had passed away four months earlier. We’d only been in the house for three.”

“Wow.” Cody stared. “You played with a ghost dog?”

“Apparently, yes. Things stabilized for me after a few years. My mother also did nothing to encourage my ability, and I guess it’s like a muscle in that way. Use it or lose it.”

“Your mother did not want you to have the gift?”

“She was not a fan of this kind of stuff. Moving to Texas, with her left-brained engineer husband, was a chance for her to distance herself from the family lore.”

“What about you?”

“As I grew up, my unusual talent turned into a keen sense of intuition, like I said.”

“Yes, you did.” Cody’s eyes narrowed slightly. “And that it can be useful in your line of work.”

Had she noticed her hesitation and strong reluctance when Kim first mentioned this? Hence why she brought it back now? Kim schooled her expression into neutral.

“Yes, that’s it,” she nodded.

“But no more playing with ghosts,” Cody invited.

“No, that was a one-off.”

“And no visions?”

“None.”

“Mm... Okay.”

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It was all Cody said, but her keen blue eyes lingered on her face. Feeling the pressure mounting, Kim reached for her burger and hurried to change the subject.

“You’ve got a slight accent, but I can’t really place it,” she observed. “Where are you from originally?”

“New York City, born and bred.”

“Ah, yes. What made you move over here?”

“Take a guess,” Cody prompted.

chapter 9

“Are you testing me?”

Cody enjoyed the way Kim suddenly fixed her, with a hint of healthy warning in her gaze, a little bit more than she knew she probably should.

“Kinda.” She shrugged and opted for honesty. “Yes.”

Then she watched an even more attractive gathering storm in the lawyer’s dark eyes hover there for another second before Kim shook her head and flashed a smile. Such an attractive shift in the way her emotions played out across her face...

“Fair enough, I suppose,” she said. And without hesitation, added: “I think a woman broke your heart in New York. Badly.”

“Oh, really?” Casually, Cody reached for a fry.

“Yes, really. Am I right?”

“Spot on, actually.”

“Yeah?” Kim appeared surprised enough to laugh, but not for long. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

“I’m not laughing at you, but because it was such a lucky guess on my part.”

“You guessed? No psychic trick?”

“Total shot in the dark, yeah. You have an excellent poker face.”

“Cop face. A necessary skill in my trade.”

“Yes. Also, um...” Kim lingered with a thoughtful smile, leading Cody to ask.

“Also, what?”

“I didn’t expect you to confirm a broken heart.”

“Why not?”

The lawyer bit on her lip in slight hesitation, but she never broke eye contact and clearly went with her first answer.

“You strike me more as the kind who would break hearts,” she admitted.



“Oh? And not the other way around? Do I strike you as a heartless womanizer?”

“No, of course not. I mean that you look like... Who would want to...” Apparently struggling to translate her thoughts into words, Kim shrugged in obvious frustration. “Just forget I said anything. I know it’s a silly thing to assume anyway.” She took another bite of her burger, nodded while she chewed, and hit her with a remarkable conclusion: “You are only human, after all.”

Cody had to laugh. “Thanks for noticing, eh!”

Was a compliment buried in this series of odd remarks? It occurred to her that Kim Reed seemed to want to flirt with her almost against her will. As if the impulse to do so kept occurring to her, and was a total surprise every time. Cody herself was no stranger to the feeling. Despite what the woman may think, she was not a serial dater. Also, not against the idea of ever finding herself in a serious relationship again. A part of her, which Cody kept under ruthless control, actually craved it... But since New York, she hadn’t met anyone she was tempted to try with. She decided to share something else, which she rarely did. Her boss, Quinn Wesley, knew about it. So did her partner, Ellie, because being partners was a special kind of relationship, and her side-kick deserved to know a little more than most people. But other than Ellie and Quinn, no one else.

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“Her name was Emma,” she offered. “She was a cop too.”

One probably would not need to be a sensitive in order to catch the heavy note of sadness in her tone. Kim went still.

“Oh, Cody,” she murmured. Anticipating the worst, which, again, would not be too hard to guess. “What happened?”

“I had just passed my detective exam. Emma liked working the streets, and she wanted to stay in uniform. That night, we went out to celebrate my promotion. The next day, on patrol, she was shot by a guy who’d just knifed someone in the subway and was running from another cop. She died before the medics could get there and help her.” Cody nodded sharply as she remembered getting the call and her own desperate race to reach the location. “I was too late as well.”

“I am so sorry.”

Kim reached across to touch her forearm, a sweet gesture loaded full of compassion. Cody had time to feel that her fingers were very hot when they landed on her skin, almost unusually so, as if she were running a fever. But it was all she had a chance to reflect before the woman gasped, her eyes emptied, and her face turned white as a sheet.

“Kim?” Cody frowned. “Hey, are you okay?”

As she covered her fingers with her own, Cody was struck by the fierceness of her grip. She also felt a hard tremor coursing through her.

“Kim,” she repeated, a little more intently this time.

The lawyer did not reply. Her eyes remained just as fixed and unseeing, wide open in something that looked disturbingly like fear. Cody quickly slid to the other side and onto her seat. She passed an arm around her shoulder and called to her again.

“Look at me,” she urged. “Kim!”

It was like flicking a switch. The very second Kim stopped holding on to her, she blinked a few times wildly, and her focus returned.

“Oh, God,” she moaned. “Cody!”

“Yes, I’m here.” Cody kept her arm around her as Kim stared back with wounded eyes slowly filling with tears. “Kim, what’s going on?” she demanded. “You’ve gone so pale I can see right through you.”

“I’m okay. I just—” Again, she shivered hard.

“Did you have another vision?”

“No.”

“Did you see Cassie?”

“No, it was—Oh, hell, I’m going to be sick!”

On that warning, Kim pushed past her and flew toward the restrooms, almost knocking a waitress down in her haste. The waitress shot Cody a commiserating look as she watched her follow, probably assuming an emotional argument of some kind had happened between them. Cody flashed her a quick, reassuring nod and kept

going. She found the elegantly-dressed lawyer on her knees in one of the thankfully spotlessly clean stalls. With one arm braced against the wall and her head above the toilet, throwing up everything she had. Cody gave a sympathetic wince. She squatted next to her and laid a soothing hand on her back.

“You don’t have to be here,” Kim panted.

“It’s okay. I want to be here,” Cody assured her.

This earned her a reluctant grunt just before another wave of sickness overtook the woman. Once over the worst of it, Kim scrambled to her feet, still refusing any help, and she staggered to the sink. Obviously must be the stubborn kind. Cody did not catch everything she muttered under her breath, but the word ‘Disgusting’ was part of it, and a few heartfelt swear words. She kept a close eye on her as Kim rinsed her mouth and splashed cold water over her face, and dared to take a step closer when she rested, holding onto the sink with her head down.

“Talk to me. Are you alright?”

She was spared a single glance and a terse word in reply. “Yes.”

“What just happened here, Kim?”

Cody could feel her impulse to withdraw into her own self, so she intentionally tagged her name at the end of the question in order to keep them connected. She was a skilled interrogator. Both in the job and personally, she could play stubborn with the best of them. Something deep in her also did not want to let go of this particular connection. Why it should feel so personal, she had no idea... But she would worry about that later, if and when she needed to.

“Kim—”

“No.” Kim raised her hand in a stopping gesture. She also took a step back. “Don’t.”

Cody stilled instantly when she recognized the look in her eyes. It was the kind she so often saw in victims of all kinds of serious crimes. Suspicious, weary, even fearful...

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“I’m not going to hurt you,” she promised. “I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I told you, I’m fine.”

“Alright. Good. I just—”

“And don’t talk to me in that tone,” the lawyer snapped.

“What tone?”

“Cop to victim. That’s not me.”

“Okay. Sorry.” Cody nodded, aware she had automatically dropped into that mode without realizing it. “But what made you react so strongly, Kim? Almost violently? You laid your fingers on my arm, and then...”

She gave a little shrug and allowed her unfinished sentence to float between them. Kim stared a moment longer, suspicion and reluctance written all over her face. Then she took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and clearly made an effort to relax. From the remaining lack of color on her face, Cody assumed that she was not there yet. But at least she opted to share.

“This tragic experience with your... With Emma. I felt its impact when I touched you, Cody,” Kim confided. “Everything you didn’t put into words. Your emotions, the pain... Such acute pain. I felt it.”

Cody’s first reaction to this, a little spike of anger at what felt like an intrusion,

surprised her. She thought she had left that sort of thing behind. Anyway, it melted instantly as she noticed the look in Kim's expressive dark eyes. Naked, raw empathy, and again, a touch of her own pain.

"I'm sorry you had to go through this," the beautiful lawyer murmured.

"You really felt it?"

"Yes. Your emotions."

She sounded so sure...

"How?" Cody prompted.

Kim sighed. "It's like... ink in water. You know how as soon as a drop of ink touches water, it spreads through, and the water is fully colored by it?"

Cody just gave a quiet nod.

"When I touched you, my mind went blank. I couldn't see you or the room anymore. Emotions spread across my mind like ink through water. I felt fear, guilt, fury. There were flashes of a busy street. A donut store. Blood on the tarmac. I am so sorry." Kim shook her head when Cody exhaled, perhaps more sharply than she intended. "The last thing I want is to bring these feelings back."

"It's okay. I asked."

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Right now, I'm a bit more concerned about the effect this had on you."

“Don’t worry about it.”

“But I am. Come on, be honest with me,” Cody insisted. “How often does this sort of experience happen when you touch somebody?”

“It’s incredibly rare.”

“Define rare.”

“Three times that I recall in all my life, including with you.” Kim stepped forward, coming to stand in front of her. “Please... may I touch you again?”

“Why?”

“Just to make sure it won’t repeat.”

Heart beating a little faster than she would care to admit, Cody nodded. “Okay.”

Kim held her bottom lip between her teeth, and she looked to be holding her breath when she raised her fingers to her face. She touched her lightly at first, tentatively, as if afraid she might get zapped. Then a bit more firmly, when nothing of the sort happened. Finally, she cupped her cheek. Exhaled nice and slow. Only then did some color come back into her own face.



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“Thank you,” she murmured and stepped into her arms.

The move was unexpected, but it also seemed incredibly easy. Pretty much like the most natural thing in the world to happen at this stage. Anyway, Kim did it before Cody had time to react. Her fingers on her cheek had felt so damn good... Cody absorbed this. She was almost sorry the touch did not last a bit longer. But now, a full embrace... She stiffened a bit, in surprise more than anything else, when Kim leaned into her. And soon realized that she was on fire everywhere they came into contact. The hug was both exciting and grounding at the same time. Again, without thinking, Cody tightened her hold. When Kim responded in kind, she was thrilled. And when these hot fingers came to rest at the back of her neck, on naked skin, she closed her eyes. Exhaled deep and slow. Wow... It had taken her a long time, following the death of her girlfriend, to feel like having sex again. Being intimate with another woman took her a couple of years, and even then, something always felt like it was missing from every encounter. Now, for the first time since Emma, Cody took real pleasure in being in the arms of another woman. Her heart jolted at the realization. She felt it begin to race. Before emotions could flood and maybe get the better of her, she pulled back. Kim met her gaze, looking in equal parts settled and questioning. They stared at each other in total silence for a little while.

“Okay?” Cody murmured eventually.

“Yes.” Kim nodded, once again reaching to touch her cheek. Her golden eyes flashed at the renewed contact, but she quickly dropped her hand. “Ah... Sorry, I—”

“What’s the matter now?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on, Kim.”

“No, really. It’s... There’s something different about you, that’s all.”

“In a good way?”

“Yes,” Kim answered after another brief silence. “In a good way, for sure.”

As another customer walked in and glanced toward them, she took a step back and let go. Different, yeah, Cody reflected. Tell me about it.

“I’m not really sure what just happened,” she admitted.

Kim flashed a thoughtful but reassuring smile.

“Neither am I,” she mused. “But it’s okay.”

## chapter 10

Quinn parked in her usual spot at the station. She walked in via the back door, also as per her habit, and walked briskly along the corridor that lined the admin wing. Lia still had a desk in there that she used from time to time. Not today, though, and Quinn did not stop to say hello to anyone else. Not in the mood for chit-chat. She strode right past the office of the chief administrator with its open door and kept going. Or tried to, when an urgent voice sounded behind her.

“Hold it! Lieutenant Wesley.”

Quinn barely glanced over her shoulder. “Hi, Demi. Sorry, gotta go—”

“Stop right there.” Demi Adjimitrios, who compensated for her short height with lots of character and a bright personality, pinned her with a sharply assessing look from behind her wire-rimmed glasses.

“I’m due in Wilson’s office in five minutes,” Quinn advised.

“Good, then you’ve got time to chat with me first. And don’t you roll your eyes,” Demi warned even without looking, rightly anticipating her reaction. She took her wrist and pulled her into her office. There, with the door closed, her eyes flashed full of concern and a hint of indignation. “What the hell, Quinn? Is it true?”

“If you’re talking about my suspension, yes, it is.”

“No way! Has everybody lost their goddamn mind?”

Wisely, since it would cost her to disagree, Quinn just gave a silent shrug in answer.

“This is nuts!” Demi went on. “Oh, for goodness’ sake! I just had an amazing long weekend with Carole and Luke. Total bliss, but now I come back to this crap. What—”

“Are Luke and Car both well?” Quinn interrupted and was pleased to watch her friend’s face light up at the mention of her wife and young son.

“Very well, thanks.” Demi grinned as she relaxed. “We had a cracking time in the mountains. Luke learned to kayak on the lake. Carole and I tried paragliding, which was awesome once I started breathing again.”

“Oh, yeah,” Quinn nodded. “It sure helps.”

“We went on really good hikes, enjoyed lovely food, and had a fire at the cabin

every evening. Next time, you and Lia should come with us.”

“Good idea.”

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“Right. Now tell me what happened before we run out of time.” Quinn did. Predictably, Demi’s reaction was outrage. “I’m out four days, and everyone goes crazy here! You said Wilson wants to see you now?”

“Yeah.”

“To lift the suspension?”

“No idea. Hopefully, yes.”

Demi did not often shift to maternal mode now that Quinn had, in her words, ‘A good, strong woman to look after you’. But she used to in the past, and now she laced one arm around her waist and kissed her on the cheek in a gesture reminiscent to the way she acted with Luke.

“Do you want me to come with you, darling?”

“To hold my hand or kick Wilson’s ass?”

“Either. Both. Whatever you need.”

“Thanks, Dem.” Quinn chuckled at her fiery resolve. “I can handle it.”

Demi delivered a brief but heartfelt hug, and then she punched her on the shoulder for good measure. “I’m here for you, don’t forget.”

“I know. Thanks.”

Quinn took a deep breath before walking into her captain's office. Wilson was a good leader, one she respected and trusted. He had stood up for her in the past. She hoped he would do the same again this time.

"Have a seat," he invited, turning from the window.

"Sir, have you seen the latest blog?" she prompted.

His eyes narrowed. "What? There is another one?"

"Yes." Quinn handed him a printout. "It was posted over-night."

She remained standing as he read, noting that his left hand went up to twirl one end of his luxuriant mustache between his fingers. This was a sign of irritation with him. The gesture was well-known among his officers, who often used it as a barometer of his mood regarding any situation. Judging from the amount of twirling in evidence now, no doubt Wilson was as pissed off by the blog as Quinn had been when she first read it. He looked up when he finished and studied her face.

"Someone sure has it in for you, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," she grunted.

He read some of it out loud. 'Lieutenant Wesley was kicked out of the army after a disastrous operation, poorly planned and conducted, which cost the lives of many soldiers under her command. A civilian journalist also lost her life.'

Quinn gritted her teeth. I retired. Honorable discharge.

Wilson went on a bit more.

‘Lewiston P.D. ignored all the red flags when they hired her. Now we, the citizens of Lewiston, are paying the price of their incompetence. If Mayor Everleigh knows what’s good for him, he’ll do the right thing by getting rid of Quen Wesley – A BAD COP!’

“Can’t even spell my name right,” she growled. Wilson did not quite smile, but she saw a tiny twinkle in his eyes. “There are no red flags,” she pointed out, “either in my military or civilian record.”

“I am fully aware of that, yes.”

“And paying what price? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Quinn fell silent, trying to remain patient while he skimmed through the article again.

“In a way, this new rant might play in your favor, Wesley,” he concluded.

“Yes.” She nodded. “It’s overly personal, badly written, and full of obvious lies. A lot less credible.”

“That’s right.”

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“Then again, Everleigh might sacrifice me to save his own skin.”

“Some might say you’re the victim here.”

“I’m nobody’s victim,” Quinn grumbled.

“I mean, it might not hurt for the mayor to think so. I’ll do my best to make him see this is a load of bullshit designed to hit at him and damage his re-election campaign. You just happen to be fodder for the fire.”

“Mmm. Or maybe not ‘just’.”

“Tell me what’s on your mind, Wesley.”

“Oh, I think it’s bullshit, alright.” Quinn spat the word out. “But if someone specifically wanted to hurt Everleigh’s political career, there are plenty of ways to do it that wouldn’t involve me. The fact that I am fully front and center in this blog cannot just be an accident.”

Wilson sat behind his desk, rested his elbows on the arms of his chair, and steeped his fingers. Better than mustache-twirling, she figured.

“Any idea who might be writing this stuff, then?” he asked. “If it is no coincidence?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Working on finding out, are you?”



Quinn decided not to share that Lia had taken charge of the matter against her best wishes. Her wife had contacted a friend of hers in Boston, a freelance writer for a tech magazine who specialized in online security. According to Lia, he was a proper geek... and proved a useful one, too. In no time at all, he had confirmed that the anonymous blogger was taking measures to hide their location—unless they really sat with a laptop on top of Mt. Blanc in the French Alps.

“You can’t expect me to be idle,” Quinn just said.

“And even if I did, you probably wouldn’t,” Wilson replied.

Since it didn’t sound like a question, Quinn remained quiet. Then, with a rush of impatience, thought better of it.

“Captain, you know this suspension hurts the department more than it does me. My team needs me around and available. We have several active cases on the go. The people of Lewiston are paying for me to do my job, not stay at home and watch Netflix all day.”

She made that last bit up. No Netflix for her; she was using her unexpected free time well, running and training more. But that image of her wasting time and tax-payers money would be good ammo for when Wilson spoke to Everleigh again on her behalf. On Lia’s instructions, Quinn did nothing to try to hide her irritation. It was good advice.

‘I think you should get in there and let ‘er rip a little, Quinn,’ her wife had told her. ‘I know how much respect you have for your captain, the department, and the chain of command in general. But this is wrong. You know it. So do I. You shouldn’t make it easy for them to keep you off the job.’

“I’ll speak to Everleigh in the next hour,” Wilson promised. “Jeff Mills from Internal

Affairs will also want a word with you about this stuff.”

Oh, Jesus!

“It’s like the worst case of Déjà Vu.” Quinn sneered. “Mills had a word with me and Detective James at the time when her actions came under scrutiny. He closed that file right there and then.”

“It’s procedure, Wesley.”

“A pathetic waste of all our time. Sir,” she added, catching his warning frown.

“I agree. Trust me, Lieutenant, I hate these games of politics as much as you do,” he assured her. “I will do my best to have you back on the job ASAP. In the meantime, I expect you to let me know if you discover who is behind these blogs. Not act on your own.”

“Understood.”

“Alright.”

Quinn remained in place as he made a gesture to indicate that the conversation was over.

“Sir. Permission to check on my team,” she asked.

He fixed her intently and seemed to weigh the pros and cons and potential consequences of not rigidly enforcing the terms of her suspension. Then nodded just once.

“Unofficially, Wesley. Go ahead.”

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Cody came off the phone with one of the last women's shelters on her list to contact about Cassie Winters. And still no sign of the missing woman. She had widened the search toneighboring counties, including hospitals, clinics, and morgues, and come up empty-handed. It was as if Winters had totally vanished, which gave weight to the idea that she may have left of her own will and did not want to be found. What will Kim say about this? Cody was disturbingly aware that the urge to call her had less to do with this puzzling case than an urgent desire to speak with her again personally. To check on her and make sure she was okay. Just to talk, period. The beautiful lawyer had been on her mind day and night since their last, admittedly intense encounter. And what was up with that? At any rate, it was a recurring question that she struggled to find an answer to.

"Miller," a strong female voice prompted. Cody looked up, just managing not to appear startled, as her lieutenant strode into her office. "How's it going?"

Wesley fixed her with the kind of direct, commanding look that still had the power to make her younger partner squirm occasionally. Or snap to attention. Cody would not, but she noticed it all the same. Quinn seemed to be moving on a cloud of temper that she clearly could not be bothered to hide. Probably wouldn't take much to light her fuse.

"Hey, Boss." Cody greeted her with a single nod. "I heard... Are you back?"

"I'm here right now."

“Sure. Okay. Well, if you need any help, I’m always up for a little OT,” Cody offered. And when Quinn met her eyes, silently probing, she made sure her lieutenant knew where her loyalties lay. “Anything at all, Boss.”

“Thanks.” Quinn briefly held her gaze, signifying with this that she got the message. Then she turned to her board and the few new photos Cody had tacked on there. Kim, Cassie Winters, her suspicious husband. “Who are these people? What are you working on?”

Cody told her, sharing the salient points.

“A lawyer who is also a psychic?” Quinn remarked, raising an interested eyebrow. “You sure don’t come across one of these every day.”

“No, you’re right.”

“You think she’s legit?”

“Hundred percent,” Cody confirmed.

Something in her voice must have triggered Quinn’s own well-honed intuition because she narrowed her eyes and stared. Shit, Cody reflected. She knew what would come next.

“This isn’t the type of case I expect you to be working,” the lieutenant added, right on cue. “You know we have a missing persons’ department, yes?”

“Yes, Lieutenant. But I was in between other cases, so...”

“Kim Reed, you say,” Quinn mused, lingering on her photo on the board. “Her name rings a bell. Defense lawyer?”

“Used to be, yes.”

“Right, then. I do remember her. She was a force to be reckoned with in Texas. She’s known for her diligence and thorough research, and she doesn’t cut corners. She hits hard and well and wins more cases than she loses. She tell you why she switched to family law and left Houston to move over here?”

“She said she likes to make big changes every ten years or so. It keeps her fresh and on her toes.”

“I see. Do you believe her?”

“Uh—” Cody hesitated only briefly, but it was still enough for Quinn to seize onto it.

“You don’t,” she asserted. “Why is that? She a suspect?”

chapter 11

She had a quick mind and was thinking out loud, of course, not considering anything Cody had not already thought of. But the lieutenant was also annoyingly putting words into her mouth and rushing to the wrong conclusions. Cody did a poor job of hiding her displeasure, which obviously was not lost on Quinn.

“What’s up?” she prompted immediately.

“Nothing. But Kim’s not a suspect. She—”

“Kim?” Her eyes narrowed again.

Oh, hell! Of course, Wesley would remark on the use of her first name. She paid attention and never let even the tiniest detail go unnoticed. Cody recognized in her

the traits of a brilliant cop and a skilled interrogator. She happened to be made of the same stuff. Right now, though, she also mentally kicked herself for her less-than-professional reaction.

“Yeah, Kim.” She shrugged. Too late to take it back. “She’s not a suspect in this case.”

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“And you know this how?”

“No motive. And anyway, she doesn’t ring for me.”

Quinn pinned her with a hard stare, then promptly hit her with the next predictable question.

“Are you attracted to her?”

Again, fair enough. In her shoes, Cody would have asked exactly the same thing. She stiffened with a wave of reluctance but still held her ground in front of her commanding officer. No matter how intimidating Quinn could be when she was in this mode, like a hungry wolf hunting prey, Cody had earned her cop stripes on the mean streets of New York City. She was not scared, let alone intimidated. Just a little irritated at the situation, she supposed. She could and would deal with that.

“Kim Reed is not a suspect,” she stated calmly. “And yes. Maybe, I’m attracted to her.”

“Which one? Yes, or maybe?”

“I’ll let you know when I figure it out; how about that?”

Quinn must have appreciated the note of challenge in her reply, and a flash of simmering temper laced through it because Cody spied a small smile wobbling on the corner of her mouth. It did blossom eventually, even though Quinn shook her head at the same time.

“Ah, man!” She unceremoniously dropped into one of the two chairs in front of her desk, rubbed her hands over her face, and shot her a pained look. “Really?”

“Like I said,” Cody shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Be careful, Miller. Sounds to me like she’s way down your list of potential suspects but not totally off of it yet.”

“Noted. And to be honest, Lieutenant, I do not have a list of suspects as yet because, technically, there’s been no crime. Kim Reed said she saw Cassie Winters dead in her vision, but there is no body. Even the woman’s asshole husband told me she’s been threatening to run away for a while.”

“He certainly would say that if he killed her.”

“Yes. I am keeping this in mind as well.”

Like the tenacious cop she was, Quinn circled right back to the previous topic.

“Reed’s explanation for moving here and her shift to family law strikes me as a bit weird. When I asked if you believed her, you hesitated. Tell me why,” she ordered.

“Just because it also strikes me as a little strange,” Cody admitted with a light shrug.

“Ah...”

“But I think there must be a personal reason for it, nothing to do with this case.”

“All the same, are you going to dig?”

“If I need to.”



“If?” Quinn raised a dangerous eyebrow.

“Correct, Lieutenant.” Cody swallowed her impatience; she would stick to her guns.

“Look, I’m not ignoring warning signs about her. I just see no reason to delve into her private, personal life at the moment.”

“I disagree. What about the psychic ability again? Do you really trust her on that?”

Remembering the startling episode at the bar when Kim had touched her, how sick she was in the restroom afterward, and the things she’d said, Cody had no problem nodding in the affirmative. Kim was not faking it. Proof of this was in a crucial detail she had mentioned: there was indeed a Dunkin’ Donuts store in the street where Emma was shot.

“It seems genuine to me, yes,” she repeated.

“I remember one time when the department brought in a professional clairvoyant to help us on an abduction case,” Quinn offered a little more thoughtfully. “Years ago, when I was still in uniform. Detective Roberts, in charge of the investigation, was certain he had the right guy in custody, but the man wasn’t talking. We thought his latest victim must be still alive and locked up somewhere. It was the height of summer, though, in the middle of a heatwave. If he didn’t tell us where she was, and we couldn’t find her, the poor woman would likely die of thirst before lack of food killed her.”

“Damn. Did the psychic help?”

“Yes. He led us to her after only two days.” Quinn nodded. “I know from experience this sort of thing isn’t just bullshit and make-believe.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:22 pm*

“That’s good.” Cody was pleased to hear it. “You know, Kim also would have nothing to gain from lying.”

Again, a touch of careless earnestness earned her a pointed look in reply.

“Don’t let personal feelings get in the way of professional sense and cloud your judgment,” Quinn warned. “It won’t help the case, and it could get you hurt.”

“Come on, Lieutenant,” Cody finally protested. “You know me better than that.”

“Mm. I do know you.” Quinn kept her eyes on her. “You’re a solid cop, Miller. You have good instincts.”

“Thanks,” Cody grunted.

Quinn surprised her again with a personal reflection of her own.

“I just remember what it was like for me and Lia. Neither one of us wanted a serious relationship. I did my best to fight the growing attraction between us. Avoided running into her at all cost.” She grinned. “But I couldn’t stop thinking about her. Not being with Lia was like being deprived of oxygen. Next thing I know, we’re getting married in Mexico.”

Cody had seen the lieutenant and her wife together a few times, either at one of Demi’s parties or a barbecue on the beach. The two women positively sizzled. She flashed her a quick grin.

“I’m not there yet, and possibly never. But I’ll let you know if I plan to elope.”

Quinn answered with an ironic chuckle. “If it comes to that, Miller, don’t plan and don’t tell me.”

“Got it. Um, Lieutenant?”

“What?”

“Permission to continue working on this case?”

Quinn stopped at the door and turned back to fix her with a cool, assessing glance. Cody returned it, just as unflappable, even though her heart was beating fast.

“For now,” Quinn granted. “Keep me posted.”

“Will do, Boss.”

“And Miller?”

“Yes?”

Quinn’s eyes flashed. “Be careful.”

???

“It sucks being a kid.”

Cody eyed the little blond girl in front of her as they shared a leisurely ice cream at the Ben & Jerry’s in old Lewiston. It was Sunday afternoon, and she was off duty. Anna Brockmann was the daughter of one of her former colleagues, Frank

Brockmann, a Lewiston P.D. patrolman who tragically lost his life when he stopped to help a driver with a flat tire on the side of the road. Another vehicle, driven by a man who was later found out to be more than twice over the legal drink limit and on his phone, to make it even worse, plowed into him while he stood talking to the stranded driver. At first out of a sense of duty, then because she really liked the kid, and Anna liked her back, Cody started to take her out a few times a month. For a bike ride, to the movies, for a swim at the beach, or a round of ice cream, like today. The girl's aunt, Jackie, had taken her in since her brother happened to be a single dad. She worked full-time as a nurse supervisor at Lewiston General and, with no other family available in town, was grateful for the help. It was no hardship for Cody. Over time, she had come to really look forward to her outings with Anna.

“You mean it sucks right now?” she queried.

She also knew better than to assume what was on the girl's mind or take it lightly. It was still less than eight months since her father's death. Though she was doing well, Cody knew from her aunt that she had nightmares at night. Sometimes, even seemingly innocent comments were loaded with a few layers of unspoken, unconscious grief. There was also the fact that even though she was only nine, the kid often sounded and behaved more like a wise thirty-year-old with an attitude. It paid to take her seriously.

“Not right this minute,” Anna let her know with a typical roll of the eyes. “But in general. It's boring.”

“Oh yeah? Generally?”

“Yeah. It's like, Exis-ten-tial.”

Cody suppressed a smile at the way she said it. “Where did you learn that word?”

“I read,” the girl shrugged. “I learn.”

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“Okay, so what’s boring specifically about being a kid? It’s a long time since I was your age, so tell me.”

Anna tapped her spoon unenthusiastically against the rim of her Choco-lotta Cheesecake Sundae cup.

“School,” she finally announced with a dramatic sigh.

“Ah. Right. Well, it won’t be forever.”

“But I just want to be a cop!”

She bounced in her chair to punctuate in a very endearing and childlike manner. Wisely, Cody opted not to point that out to her.

“I know,” she simply said. “Just gotta be a bit patient.”

“Did you like school when you were my age?”

“Well... Yeah, it was alright.”

“No, tell me for real, Cody.” Anna insisted with a warning glance worthy of Quinn Wesley at her most formidable. “I may be younger than you, but I’m not stupid. So don’t put sugar all over it.”

“The term is sugarcoat,” Cody corrected gently. “And yeah, of course, I know you’re not stupid. Like you know I never lie to you; right?”

“Right,” the girl admitted. “That’s why I like you. And my aunt too. You and Jackie always tell me the truth, even when it’s hard stuff.”

“There you go. So, I can’t say I was tremendously in love with school, but I got it done with no drama. Also, you’re doing well, aren’t you? I mean, straight As all the way...”

“Just because I get good grades doesn’t mean I like school.” Anna licked her spoon and managed a knowing smirk. “But I’ll be patient and finish it.”

“Good to hear. Continue to work hard, and keep your head down. You’ll be grateful for your results by the time you apply to the Academy.”

“Can I see your shield?” Her eyes lit up when Cody slid it across the table for her to hold. Emboldened, she held out her other hand. “And your gun.”

“Nope,” Cody chuckled. “Don’t push your luck, girl.”

“One day, I’ll be a detective just like you.”

“I think you’ll make a great one.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“Tell me why.”

Though the girl covered it with an edge of sass, an almost desperate need for approval and reassurance pierced through her young voice. She sounded a bit lost, definitely vulnerable... Cody kept a neutral face. She did not let her see how it affected her, but

it sure twisted her heart.

“Because you’re really smart,” she replied. “Motivated. And strong.”

“Sometimes, I want to cry.” Anna’s vibrant blue eyes filled up with the admission. Her bottom lip wobbled. “But I don’t let myself do it.”

“Why not, kiddo?” Cody asked softly.

“Because it’s like you said. I have to be strong, even if I miss my dad.”

Just like she had with Kim the other day, Cody slid next to her to pass an arm around her shoulders.

“Anna, you can cry and still be strong,” she assured her.

“Do you cry?” the girl prompted in challenge.



“Yeah, of course.”

“No!” In pure astonishment this time, and Cody chuckled.

“Well, yes! I’m a cop but still human, you know? It’s good to let go with a good cry sometimes. It’s totally natural and nothing to be ashamed of. Doesn’t mean I can’t be hard and mean when I have to.”

Anna fixed her with fierce, glistening eyes. “When you’re dealing with bad guys? Then, you’re mean?”

Wanting to bring a real smile back on her sweet little face, Cody told her point-blank.

“Bet your ass, kiddo. I’m a total hard-ass bitch. Every bad guy’s worse nightmare.”

A flicker of a smile flashed across Anna’s eyes at her choice of colorful language.

“Me too. I’ll be a total kick-ass cop.”

“Hell, yeah,” Cody approved with a grin.

Anna flashed her badge. “Detective Brockmann, Lewiston P.D.”

“I like the sound of that, kid.”

“Maybe I’ll be a lieutenant, actually.”

“Awesome, then you can be my boss.”

That did the trick, and Anna beamed in pleasure. “First, I gotta finish school, huh?”

“Yeah, you gotta. Sorry.”

“That’s okay, Cody.” The young girl kissed her lightly on the cheek. “I’ll get it done, and no drama.”

## chapter 12

Cody was home and sound asleep when the call came. She rolled over to grab the phone, grunted a terse ‘Yeah’ into it, and came fully awake with her next blink. She was used to being called out in the middle of the night. Sometimes, the request would come from regular dispatch; at other times, it might be her lieutenant. More often than not, this type of wake-up call meant that a dead body, or more than one, loomed large in her future.

“Yes, this is Miller,” she prompted when no one spoke and frowned at the sound of rapid breathing on the line. “Hello?”

Then, it came.

“She’s drowning!”

Okay, then. Not Quinn, who might go with ‘Yo, Miller’, or often no greeting at all, before she gave her an address to get to ASAP and a one-sentence summary of the situation. Also, not dispatch, whose seasoned operators would not sound so out of breath and distressed.

“Who is—” Cody started, then it hit her. “Kim?”

“Yes! Cody, she’s drowning!”

“Who? Where are you?”

“It’s Cassie!” The name came on a gasp. “I see her! She’s not breathing anymore!”

“Are you having another vision?”

“Please. No. You have to come!”

Hard to make sense of what she was saying. Anyway, Cody was already up and pulling on clothes.

“Stay home, Kim; I’m on my way to you now.” She grabbed her badge off the dresser, her car keys, and clipped her Glock-19 in its holster to her belt. “Kim, did you hear me?”

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“Yes, I hear you. I’m right here, Cody.” From sounding like she was drowning too, in obvious panic, only two seconds ago, Cody now heard the cool and controlled tone of the unshakeable lawyer. “Meet me at the docks,” Kim requested. “I think she’ll be there.”

“I’ll meet you at home,” Cody retorted. “Wait for me.”

“Can’t, I’m already driving.”

“For God’s sake, Kim—”

“It’s okay, just come quick.”

Cody pulled on her boots and rushed out the door, down the stairs of her apartment building.

“It’s two-thirty A.M., Kim,” she reminded her. “The docks aren’t safe at this time. At least wait for me in your car when you get there. You got that?”

Another silence greeted her words.

“Kim!” Cody growled.

“She’s under the bridge.” Again, her voice wobbled.

As she jumped in her car and shot out of the underground garage, Cody got the real sense that she may be in and out of a vision. Definitely not in control. From what she

had observed the other day, it would be like being drunk, or even worse, under the influence of a powerful drug.

“Stay on the phone with me,” she instructed.

“Cassie... She’s so cold. So afraid!”

“I’m on my way there now.”

“There’s no time. I have to help her!”

“Kim, listen to me.” Cody spoke in a calm voice, hoping to get through to her as she flicked on her emergency lights. At the upcoming junction, she slowed down just enough to check that the way was clear, then blew through the traffic light on red at sixty mph. “Do not go walking outside on your own, okay? Wait for me. I’ll be with you in ten minutes.” Quicker if I can. “Kim? Are you still with me?”

But Cody found herself talking to silence. Shit! She kept her line open and just dropped the phone onto her lap to be able to grip the wheel in both hands. She kept her foot down and overtook a slow-moving delivery truck. It was a good thing the streets were almost empty at this time of the morning, but also not surprising, given the fact that she was racing away from the heart of the city. The docks were part of a large industrial area on the west side of town. Many construction and manufacturing companies were headquartered there. As such, it was not inherently a dangerous part of the city, and the bridge that Kim mentioned, no longer in use, would be a helpful landmark to help locate her. At the same time, it was also a clear marker of a much more dangerous zone. In recent years, the area around and under the bridge had turned into an unofficial campground for the destitute. Long-term homeless people built their own encampments. Thanks to the mayor’s shocking Laissez-Faire attitude, which was nothing short of criminal as far as Cody was concerned, the whole place had become a slum that existed outside of the system. Cops rarely ventured into

‘Docktown,’ as it was known, unless it was for a sanctioned bust, with lots of guns and plenty of backup. The place attracted addicts and interested dealers. Prostitutes, either daring or desperate, on the hunt for a beneficial hook-up, along with their sordid clients. And the odd murderer after a spot to dump a body; Cody knew this last one from another case she had worked. Would Cassie Winters be discovered here tonight? She picked up her phone again.

“Kim, can you hear me?”

Unnervingly, there was only silence on the open line. Cody raced toward the bridge in the distance, keeping a keen eye out for the woman. The only other car in sight was a white Model S, parked close to the chain link fence on the open side of the road. A former defense lawyer seemed like the type to drive a Tesla. Cody also knew it wasn’t likely to remain untouched for long in this area. She stopped next to it and jumped out of her own unmarked Subaru, leaving the red and blue grille lights on. As soon as she started to advance under the bridge, the signs of people living there were obvious. Tents, cardboard dwellings, and all manner of creative shelters were erected along the sides. She clocked three men, sat in front of a fire burning inside a metal drum. Two of them had their eyes closed, leaning against a piling. The third one was busy pushing a syringe needle into his forearm. He looked up when Cody walked past, staring expressionless into her eyes while he injected his poison. His mouth soon went slack, and he, too, slumped against the concrete piling. She kept going, every sense on alert, and with her right hand lightly on the butt of her weapon. Gravel crunched under her feet. People could be heard talking in the distance, and even the odd bark of laughter. A woman’s voice sounded.

‘I need my fucking pills, Jimmy!’

Rough. Angry. Definitely not Kim. Damn! Where was she? Cody moved the beam of her flashlight, catching bits and pieces of the same sort of thing. More shabby tents, piles of trash lying around, the signs of down-on-their-luck humans who had given up

on hope. Desperation hung in the air like a cloud of dust.

“Kim?” she allowed herself to call.

“Shut the fuck up.”

Her weapon was in her hand before the words even fully registered in her brain, and she swung around to face whatever threat may be there.

“Whoa,” the woman half-laughed and half-shrieked. “Take it easy, stranger. I’m no threat to ya.”

Taking the measure of her, Cody realized it was probably true. At first glance, the woman looked as old as time. Missing her two front teeth and with tanned leathery skin, she was dressed in cut-off jeans, unlaced sneakers, and a dirty T-shirt. In spite of her feral appearance, her blue eyes shone surprisingly bright in her ancient face. Cody slowly re-holstered her weapon.

“Hey,” she nodded. “How’s it going?”

“Good! I didn’t mean to scare you, friend, but you really shouldn’t draw attention to yourself around here.” As her gaze fell on her badge, the tip of the woman’s tongue darted out to touch her top lip. “Don’t you know it’s not wise for an agent of the law to be here alone?”

“I’m not alone,” Cody replied, thinking it wouldn’t hurt for her, or anyone else listening, to believe that. “I’m looking for a woman. Dark-skinned, golden-brown eyes, black curly hair.”

“She doesn’t belong here.”

“Did you see her?”

“Saw her, warned her,” the old one stated. “Find her before they do and get outta here quick, cop. Shoo! Shoo! Don’t belong with us. Get out while you can. Shoo!” She used both hands to make a sweeping, dismissive gesture.

Something was not quite right with this one, Cody understood. She had gone from friendly to threatening in less than a minute, and the slightly unhinged look in her eyes now triggered a tiny shiver down her spine. Not that she was scared, but the whole thing was a little eerie. She did not ask who ‘They’ might be and moved on under the bridge toward the water. Hushed murmurs in the shadows. More improvised campfires. Though they were hiding, she could feel a bunch more people’s eyes fixed on her. Watching, tracking her progress. A big rat scurried past. A bit further on, another lone junkie was poking at the insides of a dead seagull on the ground. Cody glanced at him, then did a quick double-take when she saw him bring his fingers to his mouth. Urgh. Was he eating that thing? She clenched her teeth and picked up the pace before he could see her. Kim, where the hell are you? Just past the next pillar, she came to the water, and now another worry took hold. Surely, she would not have gone any further... With a renewed sense of dread, Cody glanced to her right. Nothing there. She looked left and finally let out the anxious breath she’d been holding. Right over there, on the edge, the woman stood on her own.

“Kim!” Cody hissed.

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In jeans, a pair of sturdy boots, and a white t-shirt, the blond-haired, blue-eyed police



officer looked startlingly like an angel when she emerged from the shadows. She exuded raw, vital energy and brought with her a tremendous sense of safety and normality. Death seemed to lurk around every corner under this bridge, but the detective walked through it like a beam of light slicing through the doom and gloom.

“Cody.” Kim gasped in relief.

She had been the one to initiate an embrace the other night. Shocked herself down to the bone with that gesture and a bit more when she was unable to forget it in the days that followed. Pretending that she’d only been wanting to comfort the woman after Cody revealed her painful story did not work. It was like she told her at the time; everything about her hit differently. Seeing her again, even in such weird and unusual circumstances, only reinforced the feeling. So did the way Cody grabbed her by the shoulders when Kim reached her, the gesture at once a little rough and fiercely protective.

“Are you okay?” she snapped.

“Yes...”

“Are you sure? You’re not hurt?”

“No, no,” Kim nodded in reassurance. “I’m fine now.”

“Now,” Cody repeated, blue eyes flashing in concern. “You don’t look too fine, actually. Your face is white as a sheet again, and your pupils are too wide.”

“I had another vision.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

“It was so strong... It led me here.”

“This place is like murder central, in case you didn’t know. Dammit, Kim!” Cody sounded a mix of furious and relieved to be reunited with her. “I can feel you trembling. Are you cold? Have you been sick?”

“No, I’m just running on pure adrenaline. I don’t remember leaving home and starting to drive. I was almost here when I felt like...”

“What?” Cody prompted when she trailed off.

“Well, when I settled back into myself, you could say. And I called you.” Kim wrapped her fingers around her forearms as Cody kept hers on her shoulders. She held her gaze. “You came for me.”

“Of course, I—” The sound of glass breaking, not too far in the shadows, made Cody turn and stare hard in that direction. Somewhere, a man started to laugh. It sounded like a scream. “Let’s get out of here, okay?”

“Wait.”

“Stay close to me and keep going.”

“No, please.” Kim held her back, even as the detective took her hand and pulled. “Cody, wait.”

Impatience, then realization, flashed across Cody’s eyes.

“Oh, man,” she grunted. “She’s here? You found Cassie?”

“I can’t say for sure, but I—” Kim shivered as the previously slight tremor in her

body grew in intensity. A vivid image of the missing woman's face floated back in front of her eyes. Help me. It's cold. Please...

"Breathe." Cody squeezed her hand when she struggled to do so. "It's okay, Kim. Stay with me."

Kim managed to take a deep breath. She kept her eyes on hers, using Cody as an anchor.

"There's something in the water over there."

“Where?”

“Next to the pillar on the far side. I can’t tell what it is, but the vision in this particular spot... The feeling right here, it’s—” Again, Kim shuddered. “It’s bad here, Cody. There’s fear.”

“Okay.” It was Cody’s turn to lay her hand on her cheek in a gentle, steadying gesture. “Show me.”

### chapter 13

Cody waded in up to her knees to confirm that a large garbage bag, caught around the base of a piling, contained a human body wrapped up in bits of rope. She made the necessary calls then, requested backup units, a forensics team to process the scene, and the medical examiner. Soon, the area was shut down and crawling with police. Any junkies in the vicinity either fled or retreated into their living holes. She was confident that her men would find them and extract any relevant information.

“I can ID her.” Pale and shaken, Kim insisted on doing so. “She has a little flower tattooed on the inside of her left wrist. Please, let me look and see.”

“Alright.”

Because she understood how much she would need to take this final step now to see for real what she had only previously caught glimpses of in her visions, Cody allowed her to approach the gurney on which the body had been transferred to a thick bio-hazard bag. Kim took one look at the bloated face, winced, and shook her head. A

long time spent in the water had done its work on the flesh, obviously.

“I think it’s her,” she stated. “But I need to see the tattoo.”

“Inside the left wrist, please,” Cody asked the ME’s tech.

As he exposed the arm of the lifeless victim and twisted it so that she could see the spot on her wrist, Kim was instantly able to confirm.

“Yes, this is Cassie. Oh, God...”

Cody ripped off the gloves she had pulled on to help secure the scene and retrieve the body. She clasped her hand in hers as Kim turned away and pulled her aside, deliberately moving in front of her to shield her from the rest of the scene.

“I’m okay,” Kim snapped. “It’s not my first dead body.”

“No, but this one is personal. Right?” Cody prompted.

“Yeah.” Kim blew air out again. “Yes. Very.”

Cody could see what it cost her to maintain her composure. She understood and admired this kind of courage. It was neither the time nor place for an emotional display, so she held back from pulling the woman into her arms. It cost her. She did allow herself to brush a curl of her hair behind her ear, and to cup her face in both hands. She looked deep into her eyes.

“We are going to need to take your statement.”

“Of course.” Kim smiled without humor. “I know how this works.”

“Someone else will do it while I finish up here. Okay with you?”

“It’s fine.” Kim raised her hands to hers, held there and her gaze briefly for a second, then let go. “You do what you have to, Cody.”

“Okay.”

Cody had a uniform escort Kim back to her car with orders to record her statement and keep an eye on her. She wanted to do things by the book here. Not only because it was the way she always dealt with her job, and the victim deserved her absolute best, but also because Kim challenged her in ways she had never expected to feel again after Emma. She could not let her feelings affect her performance on the job. As it was, Cody could imagine what her lieutenant might say following their last conversation if she knew that Reed had led her straight to a dead body. She took a deep breath to clear her head and went to join the ME’s assistant.

“Right off the bat, what can you tell me?”

“Couple obvious things.” He nodded. “A: someone put the body in that bag and tied the rope around it. B: she’s got a hole the size of a golf ball at the back of her skull.”

Cody exhaled. “So, she was killed first, then thrown in the water?”

“Or severely incapacitated, then thrown in, yeah.”

“Either way, we’re looking at murder in the first degree.”

“Correct. I’ll be able to tell you more about the manner of death once we autopsy her.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting.”

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The sun was rising when Cody came back to confirm that they were looking at murder in the first. This was not even remotely surprising to Kim.

“I don’t suppose you can share any of the details with me at this stage,” she prompted.

“No, I can’t.”

“You need to look at the husband again, Cody.”

“Listen, I’m not able to talk about this now. I’d like to drive you home if that’s okay.”

Kim knew what she was not saying. Until I am 100% sure, this topic is off the table. She pursed her lips with a quick flash of anger, soon tempered by the obvious realization that Cody was doing her job. And extremely well, to be said, judging from her response to her call for assistance earlier, the way she directed her team at the scene, and now her gentle but firm refusal to compromise the investigative process.

“Sorry,” she sighed. “You’re right.”

“I’m going to find who did this to her, Kim, I promise. Now please, can I drive you home?”

“My car’s here.”

“I’ll have an officer take it back for you. Please?”

Under regular circumstances, Kim would never allow this to happen. She could take care of herself. Didn’t need some cop, no matter how kind or attractive, to babysit her. Not even if she said please, in that respectful way Cody had about her, but now, Kim handed her keys to the uniform in question, managed a grateful smile, and followed Cody to her own vehicle without a backward glance. She wanted, needed, to go with her. Neither of them said a word until the bridge was no longer visible in the distance. Cody was the first to break the silence.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Tired. Empty.” It was bone-deep as well, the sort of fatigue Kim did not experience often. Catching the exit sign for Silver Beach coming up in the distance, she touched Cody’s arm. “Turn off here, please.”

“Okay.”

Cody did not ask why. She just took the turn and drove to the edge of the sandy beach. Kim got out, kicked her shoes off, and walked briskly across the open space. Breathe... Back at the bridge, a penetrating darkness had clung to her like a shroud. Death permeated the air, a sense of terror and dread. Here, now, facing east, she no longer felt that. The sand was already warm under her feet, and she squinted in the sunshine as she stepped toward the glittering ocean. She kept going when she reached the water, driven by an instinctive need for purification. It was cold, a lovely contrast. Going in up to her waist, Kim inhaled deeply, then allowed her knees to fold. She dropped below the surface. Eyes open wide in the silence, weightless, she watched the strong rays of light pierce through to the white sand on the bottom. Cassie... She thought of her. Called to her from the heart. And watched another flash of sunlight ripple through like a burst of laughter. Kim clearly heard the woman’s voice inside her head.



‘Thank you for finding me! I can go now. I’ll be okay! Thank you! Thank you...’

Again, Cody was waiting when she returned, booted feet planted on the beach, hands on her hips, a serious and watchful expression on her handsome face.

“I needed to cleanse,” Kim explained.

“Okay. Are you aware that you’ve got tears running down your face?”

“Ah... No.” Kim wiped them off and smiled. “It’s just from release. I feel a lot better.”

“You look gorg—” Cody’s eyelids fluttered, and she shifted. Corrected. “I mean, you look much better now, yes.”

Kim stared intently into her eyes.

“Cody. I am not a murderer.”

“I do believe you, Kim.”

“Good.” Kim fixed her harder, urgently. “And I’m not crazy either, even though I’m going to do something a little crazy now. If you don’t mind...”

On these words, she stepped into her, laid one hand on each side of her face, and pressed her mouth firmly to her lips.

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Demi spotted her as soon as Lia walked into her old office at the police station.

“Heyyyy!” She hurried to greet her, a beaming smile on her face. “Hello, stranger!”

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“Hi, Dem.” Lia smiled and hugged her back.

“How are you, my dear? It’s good to see you!”

Lia chuckled now, amused. “It’s not been that long since I saw you, has it? Only two weekends ago, that barbecue party at your house?”

“It was last month, actually. Time flies, girl, but never mind. I’m just happy to see you in the office, like old times.”

“Yes, it’s good to be here.”

“Got some work?”

“I want to update the website and upload a couple of videos I’ve been sent from the K9 unit.” Lia dropped her bag and laptop on her desk and automatically moved to the coffee machine in the corner. “Want one?”

“Yes, please. How’s the new docu-series coming along?”

“Very well. I’m doing a final round of edits at the moment, and planning the release schedule. You and Carole will come to the premiere, won’t you?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Demi took the cup of coffee Lia handed her, and she went on to claim the corner of her desk to sit on—just like old times, indeed, when serious talk was coming.

“So,” she nodded, eyes intent. “How is she doing?”

No need to ask who she was referring to and Lia answered with a little sigh.

“Quinn is dealing with the suspension the best way she can. Spending more time at the gym, unofficially checking on her team and current cases... Hopefully, everything will get back to normal very soon.”

“This is so unfair, Lia.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

“I saw Quinn briefly the other day.”

“Uh-huh?”

“She told me she was fine, but I know how good she is at putting on a brave face even though she’s hurting. I’m glad to hear you say she’s handling it okay.”

“Thanks for checking, Dem.”

“Of course! Hey, you know what else is good for the soul, apart from time in the gym?”

“What?”

“Hot sex,” Demi declared with a mischievous grin.

“Oh, yeah...”

Lia fell briefly silent as she recalled the way her day had begun. She woke up feeling

aroused and soon discovered the reason why. Her hot wife lay between her legs, expertly tending to her. Finding her awake and watching, Quinn flashed her a wicked smile. Then, before Lia could even speak, she pressed her thumb over her most sensitive spot and slid her tongue inside her. It made for an explosive start, even before their first cup of coffee. Remembering the supremely self-satisfied look on her wife's face afterward and the alluring sounds she made as Lia took care of her in return had her smiling in a way that made Demi chuckle.

"I guess I don't need to tell you that, do I?"

"Nope." Lia grinned. "No, we know."

"How long do you think it will take before Quinn is fully reinstated?"

"Not long, I hope. She had an interview with Captain Mills from Internal Affairs yesterday."

Demi frowned. "How did that go?"

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“He pledged his full support. Mills knows the suspension is bullshit. So does Wilson. But they have to be seen to be taking all appropriate measures.”

“This suspension won’t stay on her record, will it?”

“No, don’t worry. It won’t even hover close.”

“Good. I sure hope Quinn receives an official apology from the mayor when this is all over. She damn well should demand one.”

“Yes, but you know this isn’t her style. As a former soldier, she’s used to taking hits. She’s too stoic. It won’t even occur to her to ask for an apology she deserves.”

“But it’s occurred to you,” Demi prompted. “And you will push for one for her, won’t you?”

“Oh yeah,” Lia answered fiercely. “You betcha.”

Quinn was handling the situation well, it was true. She was patient, pragmatic, and not overly anxious about it. Or at least no longer. But Lia would never forget that first evening when she had gone to meet her at the beach. The wounded expression on her wife’s face, the tears she fought back, the way it stole her breath... She would not forget any of that in a hurry. Lia was even more furious about the blog and the ensuing suspension due to the fact that she knew just how hard Quinn had had to work to overcome the emotional trauma of her final mission on the frontline. The blog writer had obviously done their research, and aimed to cause maximum damage.

“Okay.” Demi patted her on the shoulder in approval. “I’ll let you get on then, darling. Like I told Quinn, if there’s anything I can do, you just let me know.”

“There is, actually.”

“Oh, good. What do you need?”

## chapter 14

Lia brought up the copy of each article she had made onto her main computer screen. She placed them two aside on a single slide and hit zoom.

“Take a look at these for me, Dem,” she invited. “What do you see?”

“There’s four of these articles now?” Demi exclaimed.

“Yes; whoever’s writing them has publishing diarrhea.”

“I hope it hurts.”

“Yes,” Lia approved with a heartfelt nod. “The last article is particularly vicious. It makes up a fictitious story about Quinn bullying a young female soldier under her command when she was in Iraq.”

“Jesus! No one who actually knows Quinn will believe this web of lies! Before she took on Special Crimes, she was one of the best field training officers the department ever had. The best coach and mentor, and this coming straight from the mouth of the officers she trained!”

“Yes, but this blog isn’t aimed at the people who know and appreciate her. Now look,” Lia repeated. “What do you see?”

The more she stared at the four blogs aligned in this format, the more obvious it became to her, and the more her heart sank. It only took Demi a couple of seconds before she nodded.

“I notice a pattern. Each blog is about the same size, just one big paragraph with a concluding sentence.”

“Yes.” Lia highlighted each one.

A BAD COP!

A STINKING COVER-UP!

DON'T TRUST THE POLICE!

SHE'S A BULLY!

“All in caps,” Demi noted. “With an exclamation mark. It’s a style of writing, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Like a signature, you might say.”

“Wait a minute.” Lia clenched her teeth as her friend turned astonished eyes toward her. “You sound just like... Lia, do you know someone who writes like that?”



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“Yes.” Lia exhaled long and hard. “Or I used to, at least. A long time ago.”

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There was no time. Cody had to get back to a crime scene. She needed to focus on finding a killer. But for sure, the kiss on the beach dismantled her. Was it a case of mindful manifestation? Because as she watched Kim walk out of the ocean with little droplets of water on her eyelashes, scintillating in the sunshine like diamonds, the thought of grabbing her for a kiss was first and foremost on her mind. Kim’s wet t-shirt clung to her breasts, highlighting erect nipples and giving undeniable proof that she did not wear a bra. A few strands of wet hair clung attractively to the line of her jaw, her eyes sizzled, and Cody failed not to stare. When Kim stepped into her and cupped her face in her hands, her mind went totally blank. She tensed, only for a quick second as her startled brain adjusted to the situation. Then, there were no more thoughts, only pleasure and sensation. What had Kim said?

‘I’m going to do something a little crazy if you don’t mind.’

Hell of a disclaimer to kick things off. And Cody did not mind. Not at all. It was crazy, yeah, how much Kim made her feel with just a simple press of the lips. Perhaps it was because there were layers to this embrace. Gentleness, desire, connection, need... Cody felt it all and then a bit more. Kim’s lips on hers were at once soft, smooth, hot, and tantalizing. Jesus! Amazing. The woman left her breathless and wanting never to stop kissing her. When Kim pulled back and smiled, her honey-colored eyes conveyed all the joy and uncertainty that she clearly felt at the moment. Cody could not resist; she kissed her back, wanting to dispel any doubt in her mind that this may be one-sided. With one hand sliding around the back of her neck, braced

firmly to support her trembling legs, she captured her waiting mouth. As Kim yielded to her, instantly, Cody let out a small whimper. This felt so good... It was so easy! They parted again, exchanged a loaded glance. and

“Mm,” Kim murmured. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Cody confirmed.

Kim raked her fingers through her hair, gripped with both hands and delivered another kiss. This time it was deep, long, and hard. And the very second that silky tongue touched hers, Cody was lost. Not since Emma had a kiss felt so damn right, so perfect. Kim both led and invited at the same time. She directed, but she was not forceful. Her kiss was just exciting. Demanding, you bet, but also gorgeously allowing. Cody tasted salt on her mouth from the ocean. Warm skin. Moist lips. All of it...All of her! So beautifully intoxicating. And again, there was no time. Neither of them said very much back in the car. But they held hands all the way. Tight.

“I’ll be home later,” Kim said as Cody pulled up in front of the building. “Come back when you can.”

“It might be very late when I’m done.”

“Doesn’t matter what time. I just—” She stopped, bit on her lip, stared at her intently.

“What?” Cody prompted, catching a question in her eyes.

“You come only if you want to,” Kim murmured.

“Gosh, Kim, don’t you know I do?”

“Yes, I... I guess I’m just making sure you know it’s okay if you’d rather wait.”

Cody kissed the tempting half-smile on her lips, which held a hint of amazement and wonder. She felt the exact same thing and did not want to wait.

“I will come to you as soon as I can,” she promised.

Kim laid a soft hand on her cheek. Her gaze turned urgent once again. And searching.

“This is crazy,” she repeated. “Isn’t it?”

“Well, yes,” Cody grinned. “Not my usual day at the office, that’s for sure.”

“How do you feel?”

“Great. Perhaps a little dazed.”

A shadow flashed across Kim’s eyes, and she tightened her hold on her fingers.

“I do not want you distracted on the job, Cody.” Nice and sharp now. A lawyer’s tone, laced with intimate concern. “You be careful out there, okay?”

Cody nodded.

“Yes. Always am.”

It was a long time since a woman had said this to her like she meant it absolutely. Cody carried the feeling and the sweet taste of Kim’s lips with her all the way back to the crime scene. Her heart was still racing with the charge of that mind-blowing kiss when she got there. Crazy...But she, too, was a professional, of course. So, she took a deep breath, and stored the memory safely at the back of her mind. By the time she re-joined her team at the scene, her focus was once again total.

“What have we got?” she prompted.

“A footprint,” the chief forensics officer informed her.

Cody stared, frowning at the muddy patch of ground, now cordoned off behind police lines, in front of the water. The area was a mess.

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“There must be a million footprints out here,” she grunted. “Including mine from earlier. How do you know what you got, O’Neill?”

“Because I happen to be ace at my job,” he told her with a knowing grin. “Plenty of prints, yeah, but only one set of ‘em sunk in three times as deep as the others like maybe that guy was carrying a load. Size 15 boots. It got my attention.”

Now it got hers too. “You know what kind?”

“Of course.” He winked. “Logo on the bottom says Carhartt work boots.”

“Right. So this may be the dump site.”

“That would be a logical conclusion.”

“How tall would a guy need to be to wear size 15 boots?”

“Well, I’m six-two and I wear 13.”

She recalled that Jack Winters looked about 6’4. He was a bricklayer. Worked in construction. I wonder if he wears Carhartt boots.

“He dumped the body from here and didn’t care that he left tracks. Your guy is either very stupid or over-confident that no one would care to call the cops in this area,” O’Neill added.

“Over-confidence makes stupid.” And O’Neill was right as well. If not for Kim, no

one would give a damn if they found a dead body here. “What else?” Cody prompted.

“The bag was tied to the base of the piling with a length of rope. I assume to keep it submerged, but he’d have been better off using a chain for that purpose.”

“Not a pro, uh?”

“Definitely not, and I’d say not very bright either.”

“Agreed on that.”

“I’ve got people combing through the open area in front of the bridge to see if we come up with anything else.”

“Okay. Let me know if you do.”

Not surprisingly, given the makeup of the population of Docktown, canvassing for witnesses who had something useful to share proved a fruitless exercise. Either no one had seen anything, or their drug-fueled descriptions were too farfetched to be taken seriously. Or they lied, wanting nothing to do with the investigation. Cody headed to the morgue. At least she was never disappointed with the quality of the information that she received there; the medical examiner ran a tight ship. Cody was pleased to find her already at work on her latest patient when she walked into the exam room.

“Morning, Doc.”

Dr Lee LaRiviere, an interesting mix of British, Chinese, and Cajun French, shot her an assessing glance from behind her pair of magnifying goggles.

“Mm,” she answered. “Are you being economical with your words today, Detective,

or not sure if the morning is good?”

Cody nodded toward the body on the table. “Not good for her, eh?”

“No, but she’s with people who care now.” Lee laid a gentle hand on the dead woman’s shoulder as she said this.

She had her patient positioned on her stomach, with a light sheet covering her. She did care, for real, and also excelled at her job.

“How did she die?” Cody prompted.

“Sadly, hard. Let me show you.”

Lee removed her goggles, and she retrieved a large hammer from a side table.

“Hmm,” Cody grunted when she picked it up, anticipating.

“Yes,” the pathologist nodded. “This is a claw hammer with a carbon steel head. It’s a very handy piece of kit that can be turned into a terrifying weapon. Come.”

Cody went to stand with her at the head of the exam table. From that vantage point, the gaping hole in Cassie Winters’ skull was even more glaringly obvious.

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“She was hit from behind.” As Lee positioned the hammer to show her, it fit so perfectly that Cody could almost hear the shattering of the skull.

She winced. “How many times?”

“Once would have been enough. You can see from all the missing bone that he hit, then pulled sharply to get the hammer out.”

“He used the claw side.”

“That’s correct. The blow would have been devastating.”

“Do you think she knew it was coming?”

“What I can say for certain is that she had her back to him when he struck her. Either because she trusted the guy or didn’t see him coming, I don’t know.”

“Could she have been running away from him?”

“Perhaps.” Lee considered. “But probably not, as I haven’t found any defensive injuries on her. She was not fighting at the time she was struck.”

“Okay. You think the attacker was male?”

“From the angle of the wound, I’d say so, yes. Over six feet in height and very strong. Either male or a WNBA player. Draw your own conclusions.”



“Oh, I am,” Cody murmured.

“Got a suspect in line?”

“The victim’s husband is a 6’4 bricklayer who used to slap her around badly. She was planning her escape. Sadly, it looks like she ran out of time.”

Lee’s feline dark eyes flashed in genuine anger, a rare show of emotion for her.

“I think you should go and see if he’s got a bloody hammer, Detective. Or missing one from his toolbox.”

“My next stop,” Cody confirmed. “Thanks, doc.”

She drove straight to Winters’ place of work and spoke with a frustrated manager who told her that he was three hours late and had not bothered to call. He was not answering his phone either. Cody went to his apartment, but she already suspected that the man would not be there. It was a good guess. She called O’Neill, who promptly arrived with an eager smile on his face.

“We’ve got probable cause to enter,” Cody told him. “Open this door for us, will you?”

“Be my pleasure.”

The search revealed a bunch of clothes apparently missing from the man’s closet. He’d left the door open as if he’d been in a hurry when packing. A hanger was on the floor. All consistent with a hasty departure.

“No Carhartt boots in the closet,” O’Neill stated. “But we’ve got Nike running shoes, size 15. Dress shoes, same size. And two pairs of Carhartt work trousers. So...”

“Maybe he’s wearing the boots.”

“Maybe.”

Cody issued an arrest order for Winters as soon as she got back to the station. She wrote her report, sent a copy to Wilson as per Quinn’s orders, and one to her as well. The lieutenant was still not back on official duty but wanted to be kept in the loop. Then, Cody headed back out to dig into Jack Winters’ personal life. She interviewed some of his friends and co-workers. No one seemed overly surprised to hear that he was the prime suspect in his wife’s murder. The general consensus about the man was that he had a short fuse and a nasty temper and that there had been issues in the marriage. The sad truth of it was that no one cared enough about Cassie to get involved and try to help her. Except for one lawyer...

## chapter 15

Kim had a shower, changed, and went straight to her office after Cody left. There, she spent the rest of the day with her head buried in work. Voluntarily. Gratefully, as she did not want to be able to dwell on the morning’s events. The first part of the day had been dark and terrifying. The other part felt like a slice of sublime cut out of a real-life nightmare. Kim kept it close at the back of her mind as she worked, the memory of that incredible kiss never too far should she want to revisit. She did, frequently, without guilt. Such a wild thing to happen, in the best possible way. The fact that she was attracted to the handsome, bright-eyed detective was not lost on her. But Kim had never planned to kiss her. Didn’t even know she would do it until her lips were pressed against hers. She had felt Cody’s shock. Registered her hesitation. Both were quickly washed out by a rush of brilliant heat, replaced by need and desire to match her own. She would never forget Cody’s smile then, so open and alluring. And Cody had kissed her back. Such a soulful kiss.

“God, Kim...” She groaned and shook her head at her own self.

Soulful kiss?Whatever next?Slushy descriptions were really not her style. She would not call herself a romantic. At the same time, she would admit it had been absolutely that sort of kiss. She told herself to focus and concentrate on work.Just before seven, she went home. At seven-fifteen, her phone beeped.

‘On my way to you now.’

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Kim shivered with a mix of relief and excitement. 'Good,' she quickly typed in reply. Then hesitated, deleted the word, and replaced it with 'Great'. Instantly deleted that too, and went with 'Perfect' in the end. And once again, experienced a twinge of annoyance at her own self. How old are you, dammit?

"Don't," she muttered. "Don't ruin it."

She was old enough to want this and not feel guilty about it, she reflected. Whatever. This may turn out to be with Cody. Fifteen minutes later, a polite knock on the door almost had her running to answer it. She forced herself to slow down and check the security cam first. Cody. Yes... And Kim had never felt safer.

"Hi." She opened the door wide and watched the tired look on the detective's face give way to a slow smile.

"Hi, Kim."

Cody's blue eyes drifted over her like a sensual caress. Kim had changed into a pair of white Indian dhotis and a linen shirt of the same color, open at the top to reveal a flash of bronze skin. She wore a trio of thin gold chains of different lengths around her neck and a gold bangle around her right ankle. Her hair was loose, and she was barefoot.

"Everything okay?" she murmured as Cody lingered, both silent and thoughtful.

"Uh, yeah." The woman's grin returned, as well as a line of color across her cheeks. "Just thinking you look like a princess from an Arabian tale or something."

“Or something.” Kim laughed, but her heart swelled at the candid remark. “Make that a tired lawyer, eh? Come on in.”

“Thanks.”

Cody looked like a treat herself in a fresh pair of blue jeans, brown suede slip-on boots, and a grey V-neck t-shirt. She must have stopped home to change, but she still carried her badge and weapon.

“Are you off-duty?” Kim asked.

“Well, it’s after hours, so, kind of.”

“Meaning you never really switch off, right?”

Cody answered with a light, smiling shrug. “Being a cop is not just something I do for a living. It’s what I am. So yeah, I’m never really off.”

Kim thought herself immune to the selfless hero vibe, but apparently not with this particular woman. The remark struck her as beyond sexy and attractive, as was the intensity in Cody’s gaze as they stood facing each other in the hallway. Kim imagined it must reflect her own.

“Look,” she said. “About this morning. I need you to know this isn’t the norm for me. I don’t go out much. I don’t date. And I certainly don’t kiss women the way I kissed you on the beach.”

“Okay.” Cody nodded slowly, heated eyes still riveted onto hers. “I don’t want you to.”

“What?” Kim frowned.

“Kiss other women the way you kissed me on the beach,” Cody repeated. Then, she slayed her with her next words. “Only me, Kim.”

This time, she made the first move by sliding her hands under her hair and coming to rest on the sides of her neck. With both thumbs firmly supporting her jaw, she tilted her head up and took her mouth with a deep, commanding kiss. The gesture made Kim see sparks behind her closed eyelids. Instantly, she wrapped her arms around her shoulders, as much because she wanted to hold her as to steady herself. She was trembling. The second Cody touched her like this, so sure and confident, Kim’s legs turned to water. A shower of fiery tingles zipped from the top of her head to hit between her legs. She clung to Cody and returned the kiss in exactly the same manner. Jesus! In the blink of an eye, she was primed. Ready. And so damn close! Cody teased her with her tongue in a delicious swirl, then withdrew, prompting Kim to chase the kiss. She heard a sound, halfway between a moan and a sob, and realized that it was her. As Cody deepened the kiss, Kim slid her hands under her t-shirt to caress her naked back. What a thrill to feel that slender but strong body shiver in response! What a delight to feel Cody’s hot and smooth skin prickle under her fingertips. She moved her palms to her stomach and delighted in making the hard muscles tense and ripple.

“Kim,” Cody panted. “I won’t be able to stop if—”

“Good,” Kim answered sharply. “I don’t want you to.”

Using her own words... Cody almost ripped her shirt open in her haste to get to her bra and relieve her of it. As soon as it was off, she broke another searing kiss and lowered to catch a hard nipple between her lips.

“God!” Kim cried out and threw her head back. “Cody...”

She held her close, both hands fisted in her hair to keep her on the spot. She arched

into her, demanding more. Cody sucked her harder, responding to her wordless plea. The ferocity of her own need surprised her, but Kim no longer questioned it. From the first moment she laid eyes on Cody, something in her knew the woman was special. Different, for sure. Mine. With a rush of feral desire, she pulled her up for a scorching kiss.

“I need you,” Cody grunted against her lips.

“I know, baby.” Kim unhooked the belt on her jeans, and she made short work of the buttons. “I need you too.”

She yanked her pants down and slid one hand between her legs. Cody was swollen, hot, and wet. Also, she almost collapsed when Kim pushed her fingers over her.

“Fuck! You’ll make me come.”

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“Not yet. Bedroom. Over here,” Kim prompted.

They tossed remaining items of clothing along the way and dropped onto the bed in a breathless heap, arms locked around each other and their legs tightly entwined.

“Yes,” Cody gasped. “Like this.”

Kim went with her, rocking her hips to the languid rhythm she established. Staring into her eyes, catching waves of rolling emotions, was both surprisingly erotic and ruthlessly intimate. It occurred to Kim that it was a first for her. She had never allowed a partner to look so deep into her before.

“You make me feel so naked,” she murmured.

“You are naked,” Cody grinned, and her eyes sparkled.

“How did we end up like this?”

“I’m not sure. I love that we did.”

“Yes... Me too.”

Kim kissed her, loving the sweet, clean taste of her mouth. The way Cody fondled her breasts only inflamed the hunger she felt. She trailed her fingers over her stomach, her tight abdomen, to settle possessively on her swollen clitoris.

“Oh... Fuck! Kim...”



Cody's pleading gasp almost catapulted Kim over the edge; she was that close. But she held back and started to stroke her. Rubbing the hard little nub between her two fingers, pressing gently. Cody shook and trembled from the touch, but she also endured marvelously. Her face was burning. She was breathing hard. Eyes closed, and with her eyelids fluttering violently, there was no doubt as to the intensity of her experience.

"I could come just from looking at you," Kim exclaimed.

"I'm going to. Kim..."

"Look at me," Kim said urgently. "Please, Cody."

She was the one pleading for that connection now... And as Cody opened her eyes wide and locked that feverish gaze onto hers, Kim almost lost it again. No fantasy sexual encounter she ever had in the privacy of her own mind was as hot and loaded as this one was turning out to be. She grabbed a handful of her lover's hair with her free hand and kissed her hard and rough as the shaking intensified. Cody managed to slide a hand between their slick bodies, and she found her, matching her caresses stroke for stroke. Within seconds, they fell together in the all-consuming fire.

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Later, much later, Cody lay in her arms, catching her breath as she recovered from yet another ripping orgasm. It was number three, as she recalled. As for what time of day or night it may be or what planet she was on, she had lost track of that a long time ago. Glancing up and catching Kim staring fixedly at the ceiling, she pressed a soft kiss under her jaw.

"Are you okay?"

The question earned her a blink and a dazed look, followed by a slow-spreading grin.

“I feel like I discovered sex for the first time,” Kim stated. “That’s how good it was. How are you doing?”

“Destroyed, in the best way. Loved. I—”

Cody’s voice broke on the last word. What the hell did I just say to her? Taken aback at her own words and the veracity of the statement, she stopped abruptly. Tears rose with another hard wave of emotion, too quick for her to contain or hide.

“Hey, hey...” Kim shifted on her side to better embrace her, and also to hold her gaze. “It’s alright. Any way you feel is okay with me.”

Cody swallowed, brushed at the tears, and managed a brief smile. “Thanks. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Kim...”

“Mm?”

As her lover patiently waited, Cody took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Look,” she murmured. “We’re past holding back on each other now, right?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:22 pm*

“Oh, I would say so.” Kim’s expressive dark eyes twinkled, and she flashed a tender smile. “So far beyond, in fact, that we may as well be in a different universe.”

“That’s right,” Cody repeated. She had to say this now, or it would kill her not to. “I would also tell you that this experience with you, both physical and emotional, is incredibly intense for me.”

“Wouldsay,” Kim prompted gently. “Is there a ‘but’ here? Or a problem?”

“No problem,” Cody answered quickly. “But... it also isn’t the first time. I have felt this deep and connected before. This is how it was for me with Emma. Every single time. All the time.”

“Oh.” A touch of uncertainty flared in Kim’s gaze. Maybe a slice of reluctance too. “Of course. Cody, I didn’t mean... You know, I understand. I know I’m not your first.”

“Please, hear me out.” Cody held her back gently when she felt her start to withdraw. “Sorry, Kim, I’m really not very good at this.”

“It’s okay. Take your time.”

“It’s just unexpected for me to feel this way again. I never thought I would. And I know it’s very early between us. Our first time, and all that. I don’t want to make it heavy.”

“It’s alright.”

“It feels so familiar with you. So natural and... Really good. Right. I just.... I needed to tell you that.”

Kim settled against her. She cupped her cheek in a soothing gesture.

“I’m glad you did tell me. I feel the same way, you know? Intense and powerful, deeply connected. Not heavy at all. Did you think I would not want to hear you tell me how you feel?”

“No. I don’t know.” Cody sighed and chuckled at the same time. “Feels like a big admission. Hell, it’s hard to think straight right now.”

“I understand that too.”

She did... Cody watched her eyes glisten with emotion, her own tears probably not far off. She kissed her softly, tasted a hint of sex and passion on her lips, and chuckled again with a surge of joy and happiness.

“You know, you’re very hot for a lawyer.”

“Oh, thanks.” Kim smirked in reply, instantly matching the vibe. “You’re not bad yourself for a cop. How did you enjoy my dominant streak? Oops...” She grinned. “I felt you twitch on my leg.”

“I would and do have to say, I kinda love the way you grab my hair to keep me in place when you kiss me.”

“Mm...” Kim purred. “More than kinda.”

“And now I got you to twitch.” Laughing, charmed, Cody disentangled herself. “I need a break, though. Some food. What time is it?”

“Just after ten. And yes, good idea. I’d like a shower and a drink.”

“We can order in if you like. How about pizza? My shout.”

“Well...” Kim flashed her an amused look over her shoulder as she led the way into the bathroom. “I like pizza, yes. But I can do better.”

Though her beloved pizza would always remain at the top of her list of favorite foods, Cody was pleased to make room next to it for Kim’s offering. Wholesome, nutritious food, the kind that tasted even better due to the fact that it was home-cooked by her. On the menu tonight were tender strips of grilled chickenbreast marinated in Cajun spices, served with wild rice and asparagus heads, also perfectly flavored, and a fresh green salad assembled on the spot. To go with the meal, Kim opened a bottle of chilled white wine. They sat outside on the balcony, with the sounds of the ocean in the distance.

“Cheers, babe.”

“Cheers.” Cody clinked her glass lightly against hers. “You know how you went into the water this morning? To cleanse and relax?”

“Yes,” Kim smiled in reply.

“This is exactly how I feel right now.”

chapter 16

‘I never thought I’d feel this way again’.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:22 pm*

Kim was buzzing from the gorgeous admission. Personally, all this: her crazy attraction to Cody, even as they had their first and rather tense meeting at the police station; calling her for help in the middle of the night while in the throes of a terrifying vision; taking the first step to kiss her on the beach, then inviting her into her home, and making hot, fierce love to her... All of it, yes, was a total first for her. And she had yet to share her most intimate secret with Cody. As they ate, Kim enjoyed watching her. She loved her frequent smiles, sparkling blue eyes, and that focused, attentive, and warm expression Cody always fixed her with. Her blond hair was still a little wet, alluringly messed up from the shower. The badge and weapon stowed on the kitchen counter only made her more attractive and desirable. The badge struck Kim as a beautiful symbol of Cody's commitment to a higher cause. And the gun... Well. In the hands of a cop, it was a safe, good thing, indeed.

"Tell me, Detective," Kim prompted her softly. "Am I still a suspect in your investigation?"

Cody paused to meet her gaze after spearing a last piece of chicken off her plate. Her expression was probing. Her eyes held a hint of surprise.

"I don't sleep with murder suspects, Counselor."

"Of course you don't." Kim waved a hand in dismissal at her own question. "Sorry. I guess that's my clumsy way of trying to find out more about the case. Can you talk about it now?"

"It's okay. Based on evidence, the victim's husband is our main suspect."

“Damn. I knew it!” Kim gritted her teeth. “Do you have him in custody?”

“Not yet. He took off.”

“No way!”

As she slapped a hand on the table, a tiny muscle in Cody’s jaw tightened in response, revealing her state of mind about the situation.

“Sadly, yeah,” she said. “But we’ll get him. I’ve canceled his credit cards, put a trace on his vehicle, and issued a state-wide arrest order for him.” She glanced at her watch and nodded. “I have to get back out there soon.”

“You need to sleep.”

“I’m relaxed enough.” Cody smiled again. “You saw to it.” She offered an open hand across the table, and as Kim laid hers into it, laced their fingers together. “It’s pretty remarkable the way your gift led you straight to the body.”

Kim nodded, even as her heart began to race.

“Yes,” she murmured. “Remarkable is a good word for it.”

“There’s more to these visions than you told me before, isn’t there?” Cody prompted gently.

Kim reached for her glass, noting that her right hand shook lightly as she finished the wine. Cody had not touched hers after the first sip, which made sense if she planned to return to work that night. Maybe she’d like a glass of water. Or something more to eat. Dessert, perhaps. Yes. There was ice cream in the freezer. Kim almost asked if she would like a scoop, then noticed what was happening. Drifting... Her mind’s

attempt at staying off the painful stuff, she supposed. Focus, she admonished herself. Cody squeezed her fingers.

“Are you okay?” she murmured.

“Yes.” Kim nodded firmly. “Fine. And you’re right; there is more I haven’t said.”

It was time, she decided, to tell her the full truth.

???

Quinn stood for a while at the entrance to her building’s private gym, watching her wife kick and punch the living hell out of a training bag. Lia was a swimmer who loved both the fluidity of the sport and the freedom to practice it out in the open ocean. As a teenager on the East Coast, she spent her summers working as a lifeguard. Now, she belonged to Lewiston P.D.’s open-water swim club and specialized in middle-distance events. Though Lia liked to compete, Quinn knew it was the raw and elemental side of the sport that really drew her to it. In the off-season, she had convinced her to start a weight-training program. Lia, naturally gym-phobic to begin with, stuck with it when she noticed that it improved her performance in the water. She was no slouch either when it came to self-defense, but she was not a martial arts practitioner or boxer by choice. The fact that she had decided to hit the gym on her own and was now kicking that bag as if it were a personal enemy of hers for sure got Quinn’s attention. And when the heavy punching bag swung back a little more violently than perhaps expected and almost knocked her down, she wondered how long Lia had been at the exercise. She was covered in sweat and seemed pretty tired too.

“Hello, beautiful,” she said as she stepped forward.

“Hey.” Lia spared her a quick glance. “Not done yet.”



“That’s okay.” Quinn went to stand behind the bag to hold it in place. “Here you go. Now kill it.”

Lia grunted in assent and went on to unleash a fresh series of straight jabs, cross jabs, and sidekicks.

“Harder,” Quinn prompted. “Left, left, right. Kick it. Great! Come on, Lia, all you’ve got.”

Lia redoubled her efforts, punched until it looked like she might fall, then delivered a final searing kick and walked away to collapse on her back in the middle of the mat. Arms spread to the side, tongue out, she lay there with her chest heaving. Quinn stood over her, smiling.

“You are so damn sexy, Ms. Kennedy.”

Lia cracked an eye open and shot her a suspicious stare.

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“Must be true love,” she snorted, “if you really think that in the state I’m in.”

With a chuckle, Quinn lowered herself down to kiss her on the lips.

“Correct. You are sexy, and I love you, even when you are all sweaty and in a bad mood. Even,” she added with a grin as she flicked her finger under her armpit, “when you forget to shave.”

“Get off,” Lia instructed. As Quinn moved to a seated position next to her, she straddled her lap, wrapped both arms around her neck, and held her tight. “I love you so damn much,” she gasped in a voice thick with emotion.

Quinn embraced her. She rubbed a soothing hand up and down her back.

“So do I, darling,” she murmured. “I love being married to you. Nothing makes me as happy or matters more to me than you and our relationship.”

Lia pulled back to regard her fiercely, with the same sort of emotion blazing across her eyes. Then she kissed her, deep and hard, just the same.

“Okay, tell me what’s wrong,” Quinn prompted.

“It’s to do with the blogs.”

“The last one was nasty.”

“They all are,” Lia growled.

“Agreed.”

“And now I think I know who is writing them.”

“What? You do?” Quinn blinked in surprise, then promptly narrowed her eyes. “Well. Who?” she grunted.

Lia shook her head. “I need to show you stuff before we get to that.”

“What stuff? Lia—”

“No, really, it won’t make sense just to tell you without the supporting evidence.”

“Huh. Spoken like a real cop, actually.” Quinn liked that. It made her smile. “Or the hardcore investigative reporter that you are, of course.”

“I feel disgusting,” Lia declared. She sniffed her sweaty t-shirt. “Let me take a quick shower first, and then I’ll fill you in properly. Okay? And you can tell me what you think.”

“You could tell me now.”

“No. We can’t cut corners with this.”

“Okay, then. So long as you let me shower with you, I’ll let you keep the suspense going a bit longer.”

“You’re clean as a whistle. And you smell wonderful.”

“Yeah.” Quinn grinned. “So?”

???

Twenty minutes later, they settled on the couch in front of her laptop. Every muscle in Lia's body ached, but she had needed to let off steam after uncovering said evidence. Kicking the shit out of the punching bag felt like a good idea at the time. Quinn's hand on the back of her neck, stroking gently, was wonderful now. So was the way she had taken care of her in the shower. Another brilliant thing about being married, Lia discovered soon after they got together, was that you always had someone to wash your hair for you if you were too tired to do it yourself. Today, like every time Lia let her do it, Quinn had turned the exercise into a drool-inducing, exquisite massage.

"Thanks for being patient," Lia told her.

"I never have much of a choice when you're so stubborn, do I?" Quinn snorted ironically in reply.

"I'm not stubborn," Lia answered, nicely tongue-in-cheek.

"Of course not. Hey, I won't argue. I've seen how well you can punch, so..."

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“Are you joking?”

“No, I mean it. Your technique is very good, even as you were tired.”

“Thank you, babe.” Lia smiled and brushed a light kiss over her lips. Coming from her wife, who was a powerful and skilled fighter, this was a lovely compliment.

“So, what’s going on?” Quinn prompted.

Without further ado, Lia told her about the patterns she had noticed in the blogs. She did it the same way she had explained it to Demi, by highlighting the sentences that were written all in caps, and talking about a signature style.

“Okay. Nice bit of observation.” Quinn stared intently into her eyes. “You know someone who writes like that?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Brooke Oldfield.”

For a moment, Quinn’s face looked blank; then, she frowned in recognition.

“Brooke?” she repeated. “Your ex?”

“Yeah.” Lia nodded with a heavy sigh.

“But I thought you said you were on good terms?”

“Yes, yes.”

“And she’s the one who broke up with you. Right?”

“Right. Yes. That’s correct.”

Lia had met her former partner on a journalistic assignment to Iraq when both were separately granted permission to embed with a troop of soldiers on the ground. Lia as a photographer, Brooke as a writer for the New York Times. It seemed logical to team up for the duration. The two women grew close during the adventure, and it also made sense, upon their return home, for them to move in together. Considered rising stars of the media, they started to travel the world on various assignments. Along with the best jobs, they also received lucrative contracts from major networks. Building a stellar partnership in all aspects of life, really. Until Lia’s father fell seriously ill, and she decided to put him first ahead of her career. Brooke stuck with her for a few challenging months, but then she made her own choice, and the relationship did not survive. Though Lia grieved the loss of her fiancée at the time, she never harbored a grudge. Especially not now that she was married to Quinn. She and Brooke were not meant to be for the long term. She was fine with that.

“This makes no sense, Lia.”

“Don’t you think?”

“No. The blogs are targeting me.”

“But of course, they are!” Lia exclaimed. “Come on, Quinn. Coming at me directly would never be as effective as hurting you! If Brooke is behind this... Goddammit! I will never forget her for the devastated look in your eyes when you first told me you

were under investigation.”

Even now, thinking about it made Lia’s blood boil in pure rage. Quinn pulled her gently against her.

“Hey. Please, don’t be upset.”

“I’m not upset. I am pissed off and protective.”

“Okay, yes.” Quinn flashed a bright, warm smile if a touch on the sheepish side. They’d already established she found the protective streak alluring. “Now, listen: lots of people write stuff all in caps to emphasize a point.”

“I know. But this is too much coincidence.”

“Have you heard from Brooke in recent times?”

“No. And that’s strange in itself because she used to send me postcards from exotic locations once or twice a year. But I’ve been so busy... And so happy with you, Quinn, that I have not thought of her in a long time.”

“Are you feeling guilty about that?”

“Well.” Lia sighed again. Her wife knew her so well... “Yes, I am, a little bit. And here’s why.” She clicked on another screen, a Hotmail address. “Not long after I met you, I started drowning in junk emails on this thing. I just assumed the account had been hacked, somehow, and created a new one on Google. I’m pretty sure I gave Brooke the new contact, as well as to other friends of mine, but it seems she didn’t get the message.”

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Lia watched Quinn's expression darken as she scanned the long list of Brooke's unanswered emails.

"Wow," she said in a flat voice. "The woman's been busy, huh?"

chapter 17

"At first, I was curious," Kim said. "And I didn't mind having the odd flash of insight about a person or a situation."

They'd moved to the couch when it got chilly outside, with an ocean breeze blowing from offshore. But she kept the window open to allow the moonlight to shine in and just turned on a small lamp in addition. The diffuse lighting added a tantalizing amber glow to her darker skin. The atmosphere was cozy and warm in the apartment, and yet Cody could feel a thread of tension in the air. They sat close, facing each other. She kept one hand lightly on her lover's thigh, just enough pressure for the touch to be felt and meaningful.

"At the time, I even embraced it," Kim reflected.

"How?" Cody asked her gently.

She suspected a little bit of input from her would help Kim to tell her story. Indeed, the question earned her a quick smile and an approving look.

"I found a teacher to work with."



“This was in Texas?”

“Yes, in Houston.”

“What sort of things did you want to learn?”

“More about this so-called gift in general and techniques to ground myself, like meditation. How to remain in control when I was triggered, so I wouldn’t end up overwhelmed by something I saw.”

“Like you were at the bar the other night?”

“Well, yes...”

“Do I overwhelm you, Ms. Reed?” Cody prompted gently.

“You do, a little bit... But just like a gorgeous lover should, so don’t worry about that.”

“Alright, if you say so.”

“I do say so.” Kim leaned forward to steal a kiss. “The other night, I was incredibly stressed about Cassie. Forgot to meditate, for sure. So I’m not surprised it led to such a strong reaction. I’m talking about a different kind of situation, like in the courtroom, for example.”

“Mm, yeah. I’ve testified plenty of times; I know it can be intense. And I would assume even more so when you are the criminal defense lawyer in charge.”

“Correct. As a detective, what is your opinion of defense lawyers by the way?” Kim prompted.

“Oh, they can be a major pain in the ass,” Cody stated, prompting her to smile. “But our legal system is based on sound foundations. Everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty and entitled to a solid defense. I actually have a lot of respect for defense lawyers. I’m sure the job is intense and challenging on a regular basis.”

“It is... Was,” Kim corrected with a small wince. “But like you said, I did it for the right reasons. If I ever found myself in real trouble someday, innocent, but with every finger pointing at me, I would want a good, dedicated lawyer by my side.”

“I would want you,” Cody interjected and was pleased to see her lover’s eyes sparkle.

“Some of my clients were genuinely innocent of the crimes they were accused of. In those cases, it was a thrill when I was able to get them off the hook and avoid a life-destroying prison sentence.”

“I bet you were good at it.”

“I was,” Kim answered with a rush of emotion. “I lived for this stuff.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Terribly.”

Cody waited a beat, prompting Kim to sigh. “Ah, sorry. I’m wasting time.”

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“It’s not wasted. Gives me an excuse to stay with you a bit longer.”

“You don’t need one. And I’m stalling. Look, the first time I met you, you wanted to know why I moved to Lewiston and shifted to family law.”

“I did.”

“I was not totally honest with you”

“No.” Cody nodded with a soft smile. “I’m aware.”

“I know you are.” Kim squeezed her hand. “So, here goes. I had this client, a running coach, who was accused of raping one of his athletes. He did have a rep for being a bit of an incorrigible flirt and a serial dater. But he swore blind that he was innocent of the rape, and it struck me as genuine at the time. I did not get bad vibes from him. Also, not long after I started to dig into the case, it became obvious that the woman was lying. I dug harder, and was able to prove it. Not only that, but she also eventually admitted that the claim was false.”

“She was not assaulted?”

“No. She had sex with another guy, rough sex, on purpose, then she tried to set up the coach. They’d been intimate once, but that’s all he wanted. She felt insulted, apparently.”

“Man, that’s twisted.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Not unheard of, of course, but still.”

“Yeah. The day after all charges against him were dropped, the client showed up at my office with a bunch of roses. Said he wanted to thank me. It was late in the day, and I was just about to leave. My secretary had gone home.” Kim swallowed. “So, I was all alone in the building.”

Sensing where this may be going, Cody suppressed a shiver, and she tensed.

“It’s silly, you know?” Kim went on. “My first thought was that he was going to ask me out for a drink or something like that. It occurred to me he might not know I was a lesbian, which would be weird because it was a very well-known fact about me. I never was in the closet. Or perhaps he thought he could sway me.”

“I don’t like it when guys think that,” Cody reflected.

“I don’t either; like if they insist enough, we’ll finally see the light, you know?”

“I suppose it’s just natural male arrogance.”

“Yeah. So I was a bit annoyed, but then I thought, hey, what the hell? Let’s just be polite, have a quick chat, and send him on his way. I took the roses, started to thank him, and also to make it clear I was on my way out.” Again, Kim exhaled. “The next thing I was aware of was this awful pain in the middle of my forehead. Everything went black; then I realized he had punched me in the face.”

“Jesus Christ,” Cody muttered.

“I never saw it coming. When I fell against my secretary’s desk, he jumped on top of

me. Held me down. Said he wanted to thank me properly for being such a good lawyer. That none of the other women he'd actually raped previously, who may have wanted to come forward with a claim, would dare to try it now since I'd done such a good job of clearing him. And for a woman to do it, too... I remember how he pointed that out and laughed at the irony."

"Kim..." Cody did not move to touch her, not even to offer comfort. She thought Kim might do better with a bit of space at this particular point. So she held back, but her voice betrayed her emotion, sorrow, and compassion. "I am so sorry!"

"He was a big guy. Tall, full of muscle. More like a football player than a runner, even though he coached running. I fought him hard, but I was no match for him."

"He would have killed you," Cody reflected through gritted teeth. "He told you too much."

"I think he probably would have, yes." Kim agreed with a curt nod. "But as we wrestled, I finally managed to hit the panic button under the desk. A security guard was up in seconds and dealt with him."

"How?"

"Coleman—that was his name, was armed with a hunting knife. He did not obey the guard's order to stop and get on the floor. Instead, he grabbed his knife and went for him. So, the guard shot him twice in the chest in self-defense."

"Did Coleman survive?"

"No, he did not."

"Good," Cody opined in a dark tone.

Kim scooted closer to wrap an arm around her shoulders and the other around her waist. Seeking contact now.

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"I must admit I can't find it in me to be sorry," she said.

"Naturally. Now I understand a lot better why you decided to leave Texas and start fresh in another place." Cody returned the embrace.

"Yes. I tried to go back to work, but the spark had gone out of it. Also, I was so angry..."

"Can't blame you for that either."

Cody could not help sounding a little rough as she said this, and Kim kissed her softly.

"I suppose not. Thank you for understanding."

"Of course!"

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay. And you don't have to thank me. I hate that this happened to you with a vengeance. I wish I'd been there to help you at the time... I hope—"

"What?" Kim prompted very gently when she stopped.

"It's crazy." Cody shook her head. "Ah... Forget I said—"

"No, please," Kim insisted. "Tell me. You can be open with me, Cody. It matters."

You know it, so don't be a coward. Cody looked her straight in the eye and said it. "I hope I can be there for you from now on. Equally, for the good and the bad."

"Oh, babe." Kim flashed her a look of such pure tenderness that it eclipsed everything else.

The way she kissed her then was both calming and exciting at the same time. I'm lost, Cody thought. So deeply lost... Also, she had never felt more grounded.

"Hey," Kim murmured.

"Hey." Cody opened her eyes.

"I think we both have to stop saying our connection is crazy every five minutes."

"I think you're definitely right about that."

"Yes." A flicker of amusement flashed across Kim's eyes. "I think you'll find I usually am right about most things."

"And you'll find that's my line."

"Oh, yeah?" The smile blossomed. "Sorry, not anymore."

"We'll see about that," Cody challenged with a chuckle.

"I look forward to it. Although," Kim went on, "I did lose a lot of my confidence for a while. I'd been so sure this guy was innocent..."

"Well, he was for this one case you worked."



“True. But as for my special gift, well... What good was it if it didn’t even protect me? I was furious about that especially. It felt like such a betrayal.”

“No wonder you seemed reluctant about it when you first talked to me. This makes more sense now too.”

“Yes. When I moved here, I thought I’d left this part of my life behind. In the two years I’ve been in Lewiston, I did not have a single flash or vision. Cassie was the first one and stronger than ever before. I don’t know what it means.”

“Maybe it’s a sign of healing.”

Kim looked surprised, then thoughtful.

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“Actually, yes,” she nodded. “Maybe.”

“All in all, I think it’s a good thing,” Cody added gently. “If not for you, who knows... She may never have been found. We can’t bring her back to life, but at least we can seek justice for her now.”

“I had another brief flash of insight at the beach.” Cody was pleased to see her smiling about it this time. “When I went underwater, I felt Cassie there with me. I swear I even heard her voice.”

“What did she say?”

“Thank you. And that she was okay now.”

“Good. I hope she is. How are you, Kim?”

“I’m okay.”

“Yeah?” Cody rubbed her hand gently over the back of her neck.

“Well... Slightly discombobulated, you might say, but okay overall. I’m glad I told you what happened.”

“So am I.”

“And actually...” Once again, Kim’s expression turned both intent and thoughtful. “Forget just feeling okay. What we shared today, Cody, was amazing. Gorgeous. It

really touched me to the core.”

“You told me earlier that you don’t go out much or date,” Cody prompted. “Because of what happened?”

“Yes. I haven’t wanted to be touched in a long time.”

“Thank you for letting me close.”

“You’re special, Cody. I used to go out... before. But there was never anyone serious. Now you also said something to me earlier that struck me right here.” Kim touched her own heart with an open palm. “About wanting me to kiss only you.”

Cody winced a little. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

“Why?” Kim exclaimed, baffled.

“I didn’t mean to sound overly possessive or aggressive, even. Especially now I know what happened to you in Texas. I would never—”

“Forget it,” Kim interrupted. “You make me feel the exact opposite of what happened, Cody. Safe, free, empowered, joyful. Don’t you know?”

“I was hoping, yes.”

“You do. And what you said was beautiful. Possessive, yes, but in a good way. That’s how I took it.”

“Okay. Good.”

“Yes. And please do not confuse aggressive with passionate either.” Kim smiled, ran

her fingers through her hair, and held her the way Cody was fast becoming addicted.  
“I like you a little fierce.”

“I’m glad,” Cody whispered. “Because I’m not sure I can be any other way with you.”

## chapter 18

Quinn insisted on reading through every email. It took a while, but she was the thorough kind, both at work and in private. Lia admired that quality about her.

“Typical,” she declared then, showing she could be overly blunt at times too.

“What does that mean? Tell me more,” Lia invited.

“Well, she starts off all nice and chatty, doesn’t she? Giving you this, ‘Hey, long time no see, how-are-you-darling?’ kind of vibe. But then—”

“She’s not British.”

“What?” Quinn frowned.

Smiling, Lia threw an arm around her shoulders and kissed her soundly on the cheek. “You make her sound like the British Queen.”

“Well, you know what I mean. It begins friendly, then she turns questioning, and finally, bitter and vindictive when you fail to reply.”

“Yes, I noticed that too.” Lia nodded as she exhaled. “Guess I’m just trying to lighten the mood up a little.”

“I’m sorry this is happening, Lia.” Quinn placed her fingers at the back of her neck, expertly zooming on a painful knot and digging gently to dissolve it. Lia tilted her neck the opposite way to help with the process. “I know from things you said that you really cared about Brooke. Probably still do.”

“Probably,” Lia admitted. “We were engaged.”

“Of course.”

“Even if we didn’t see each other or rarely spoke anymore, I still considered her a friend. Or worst case scenario, at least not an enemy!”

“Don’t worry, okay? We’ll sort this out.”

Lia turned to look at her. Mine, she thought as Quinn held her gaze. Her wife, lover, best friend. All sparkling blue eyes and surfer-blond hair, with the sort of body that

would sell fitness magazines like hot cakes. Though, of course, Quinn would never consider being on the cover of one...

“What?” she prompted softly. “I say something wrong?”

“No.” Lia shook her head. “Just... I love you, Quinn.”

Even though she knew it, this kind of open statement still had the power to make Lieutenant Wesley, tough as nails former army captain and equally resilient cop, blush like a young girl in pleasure.

“Ah. I’ll go for that,” she nodded with a grin.

Smiling in return, Lia hooked her arm back around her neck to deliver a deep kiss. She loved to feel the instant softening of this hard body pressed against hers, the way Quinn always yielded for her, no matter what.

“I love you, Lia,” she murmured.

“I think I should go see her. Apparently, she’s still based in Boston. I want to confront her face to face, find out what the hell is going on.”

“Hmm-mm. Yeah.” Quinn bit lightly on her lip. “I thought you might say that.”

“I think I should go alone,” Lia added.

“Thought you might say that too.”

“Yes, I’ll be better able to—”

“No,” Quinn said softly.

“Darling. Listen—”

“You listen.” Quinn wrapped her up in a tight embrace and flashed a blazing smile at the same time. “Don’t call me darling and argue about this, Lia,” she ordered. “We are going to find out what’s going on. Together.”

“Okay, but... No, please, listen to me!” Lia laughed when Quinn rolled her eyes, amusement and impatience both obvious in her gaze. “We can go to Boston together, but I should talk to her on my own.”

“You are such a reporter.”

“Does that mean stubborn and obstinate?”

“You know it does, as I’ve told you plenty of times before.”

“With all due respect, babe; you ever heard of the pot and kettle situation?”

“Lia, are you asking me to stand aside and let you enter your crazy girlfriend’s lair on your own? Sorry to say, but it sounds as if she’s turned psycho on us.”

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“Formergirlfriend.” Lia did not dispute the crazy bit. “And yes, I am asking you.”

Quinn held her gaze, then narrowed her eyes with a little smirk.

“Say please,” she demanded.

“Make me,” Lia grunted, then gasped as she found herself immediately flung onto her back with a warm mouth covering hers. All in the blink of an eye.

Mm... Yes.Of course, she could count on her hot-blooded wife to always respond positively to this sort of challenge. Quinn kept one arm locked loosely around her neck; she slipped under the waistband of her shorts with her free one and proceeded to stroke her in a way that only an exceedingly attentive, adoring, and long-term partner would know how to. Lia held on to her, laughed, and moaned at the same time.

“What are you doing to me?”

Quinn stopped trailing a line of kisses behind her ear long enough to answer.

“Negotiating. Don’t you know it’s a marriage thing?”

“What—Oh!” A precise flick of her finger over her clitoris had Lia gasping again in reaction. She arched her back, seeking more of the same kind of pressure. But Quinn was apparently not willing to grant it to her yet.

“Huh,” she sighed. “This is torture.”



“Do you really think so, Ms. Kennedy?”

“Yes.” Lia tried to capture her mouth and was also denied. “You’re not playing fair.”

“You said ‘make me’.” Quinn yanked her shorts down her quivering thighs. “So, I will. Mm... You smell lovely from the shower.”

“Kiss me,” Lia demanded next and smiled inside when that request was swiftly granted. Gosh, I love you...

She grew slick and aroused under the languorous rhythm Quinn established, accepting the round of ‘negotiations’, as the soothing gift it was meant to be. Lia was upset in more ways than one, and Quinn clearly understood. What on earth could have made Brooke, always such a strong and proud woman in the past, snap like that? But the emails backed up Lia’s original hunch about the writing style, and Quinn was accurate when she said she sounded like a psycho. Brooke apparently just wanted to say hello in her first email. Maybe visit and catch up in person in the next one. And then, the most shocking thing of all... She admitted a bit later on that she wanted to get back together, and wasn’t it a shame Lia was married now? Never mind. According to her, there were ways around these things. She dared to call the most amazing miracle of Lia’s entire life ‘a shame’? Dammit! First, that awful blog. Now, this. It hurt, yes. And so, Quinn would find a way to love her all through it. Knowing this only fueled Lia’s arousal.

“Babe,” she whispered. “I’m so close...”

“I know; I can feel you pulsing in my hand.” When in the mood, Quinn excelled at this kind of talk. And as Lia shivered, she followed up with a gorgeous, wicked smile. “Even so, I am still waiting to hear you say the magic word.”

She took her mouth with another kiss, nicely demanding, loaded with love, passion,

and a hint of teasing. Frustrated and delighted in equal measures at her antics, Lia attempted to roll on top of her and regain control. Quinn just laughed and lay more heavily on top of her, keeping her captive. It was all part of the game.

“Be good,” she instructed and circled a lazy finger around and over her clit.

Lia convulsed.

“Quinn,” she groaned.

“Yes.”

“Come on!”

“Yeah? You got something to tell me?”

Torn between laughter and a fresh moan, as these talented fingers drifted a bit to push gently against her opening, Lia gave a heated chuckle.

“Maybe,” she conceded.

“You’re beautiful when you’re fighting not to give in.”

Lia could feel how hot and swollen she also was as Quinn rode her thigh. Getting there as well, she thought in satisfaction. And fast with it, too. She knew every nuance in her wife’s blue eyes, every alteration in her breathing, every heartbeat. She laid gentle fingers on the back of her neck, eager for another taste of her mouth. Lia fondled her left breast at the same time. Not so gentle with that gesture, but possessive and urgent. She pinched her nipple, felt her flinch, and soothed the burn with a heavy caress. The needy grunt this got out of her wife almost pushed her over the edge.

“Soon, you’ll be the one begging me,” she laughed.

“Not soon enough for you,” Quinn assured and proceeded to make the statement true.

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She rubbed her harder, faster. Made her blood sizzle and sing, and tingles of need radiate from the very core of her being to the tip of her erect nipples. Lia arched under her. Even as she started to lose control of her own breath, she fought to recover and continued to hold, determined to ride this wave of pleasure for as long as she could.

“You’re so fucking hot,” Quinn let out as she ended a torrid kiss.

“Because of you.”

“And you know the best bit?”

“What?” Lia managed to pant.

“You’re my wife. You belong to me. I love you, Lia.”

That did it. Lia was no longer playing or even able to think when she surrendered in a whisper.

“Quinn... I’m yours. Please.”

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They lay in a hot tangle afterward, recovering. Passion and play gave way to a sweet and tender embrace, another favorite part of lovemaking for Lia. Quinn snuggled in the circle of her arms, just as eager for it. She was pretty ruthless about not allowing anyone to witness her less dominant side, and Lia loved the fact that she was so

comfortable asking for cuddles with her, openly enjoying the freedom to express this more vulnerable facet of her character.

“Some negotiation, eh?” she murmured.

“Bet they don’t do that every day at the UN.”

“No.” Amused, Lia chuckled. “I feel very fortunate.”

“Me too. So, I’ll need to tell Wilson about the situation with your ex. Is that okay with you?”

“It’s fine. And I’ll book us a flight to Boston ASAP if that’s alright with you as well.”

“Yes, it is. Thanks, Lia.”

“No problem.”

They looked at each other and smiled.

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Cody could not have said for sure what came first: Kim’s subtle movement as she lay sleeping in her arms or the ringing of her cell phone. Sensitive, you bet...

“Ssh, it’s okay,” she murmured and answered the call the way she always did. “Yes. Miller.”

“Detective Miller, this is Officer Clay with Sector 9. Thought you’d like to know that your suspect was spotted at a bar and grill restaurant close to the airport last night.”

“I do,” Cody confirmed, instantly wide awake. “What else you got?”

“The waitress there saw the police appeal on the news after her evening shift, and it rang a bell. She’s pretty sure the man she served was Jack Winters. He had steak and eggs and did not leave a tip.”

“Is that why she remembers him?”

“Not quite. What made an impression was his aggressive manner and the creepy way he kept staring at her breasts while she served him.”

“Yeah, that’ll do it. Any idea where the guy was headed next?”

“Affirmative. Motel 6 just across from where the restaurant is located.”

“Where are you now, Officer?” Cody prompted.

“Just got to it, Detective. I’m parked on the road, safely out of sight.”

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“Ping me your location, Clay; I’ll be right with you.” She hung up and started to throw on clothes. At the same time, she shared the information with Kim. “Sounds like Winters may be hiding at a motel. Hopefully, we’ll have him nice and tight in custody before he can think of trying to elude us again. Where is my other boot?”

“Here, babe.”

Cody flashed a quick grin as she handed it to her, and her heart swelled at the term. Babe. Nice. She could get used to it. She laced up the boots, hooked on her belt, and reached for her badge and weapon.

“I’ll call you with an update as soon as I can.”

“I’ll be at work and waiting.”

“No problem.”

Cody stopped when she reached the door, suddenly feeling a little shy as she turned to face her. “So, uh... Are you free for dinner tonight?”

Kim’s smile lit up her entire face.

“For you,” she grinned, “absolutely.”

“Cool.” Cody wanted to linger and mentally cursed the fact that she could not. “I have to go.”

“You got backup?”

“Yes. All safe.”

Kim nodded, stared at her for a split second, then grabbed her face and kissed her. Just as hot and passionate as before, except that now the kiss also held an added level of intimacy and a thrilling touch of possessiveness. She ended it with a tiny bite, just hard enough to cause a spark on Cody’s lower lip.

“Come back to me in one piece, Detective.”

“You give me one hell of an incentive.”

“Good,” Kim said with a flash of her sultry eyes.

## chapter 19

Cody tucked the kiss and tender sparkle in a corner of her mind as she ran back to her vehicle. Go-Time now, and she could not afford to be distracted. Deep down, she knew her life had taken another sharp and unexpected turn, only for the better; this time, it was not another tragedy. She thought of the first woman she’d ever loved, gripped the wheel hard in both hands and let out a deep exhale. She felt her presence inside her heart, connected to her on that level.

“Emma...”I will always love you.

A single thought pierced through her emotion, prompting Cody to smile and chuckle. Better steady up and get your head in the game, Detective. It was what Emma would tell her. And Kim, as well.

“Gotcha,” she murmured.



Re-focusing, she placed her phone on the dashboard, input Officer Clay's nav instructions in her GPS, and shot off the curb. The streets were still quiet before the inevitable rush hour, and she made good time. Fifteen minutes later, she was approaching the location when Clay called her again.

"He's on the move. Walking toward a dark-green Chevy."

Shit! Catching sight of the motel on the other side of the road, Cody flicked her grille lights on and swiftly cut across three lanes of traffic. She entered the parking area from the exit lane, and her pulse picked up nicely when she spotted the green truck in the distance. Winters was sliding behind the wheel.

"Get in front of him, Clay," she ordered. "Now."

"Copy," he answered.

He couldn't have been very far, indeed. Only a second later, the police cruiser came screeching around the corner, headed straight for the Chevy. Winters reacted quickly and tried to back out of the way. This was counting without her. Cody surged behind the truck and boxed him in. She came out flying, weapon in hand.

"Winters!" she shouted. "Stop!"

It was him, definitely. But the man barely shot her a glance before he took off running behind a line of parked cars on his way back toward the motel. Cody fell in behind him. He was a big man, but he could move... Consciousness of guilt no doubt gave him wings, but she was equally motivated, leaner, and faster. She caught up with him before he could rush inside the lobby and perhaps grab himself a human shield. She had to assume he was armed and already knew what he was capable of. Cody did not dare to fire her weapon so close to the entrance doors and with people inside. Instead, she lunged. Landed hard on the guy's back, sending them both

crashing to the concrete floor. Thankfully, Winters cushioned her own fall. Cody had a moment to feel satisfaction when she heard all the air whoosh out of his lungs. Before he could move, she pulled a revolver from the back of his jeans and slid it out of reach. In retaliation, he managed to catch the corner of her eye with a hard elbow. Lucky hit, on the frontal bone, and extremely painful. It made her see a bunch of stars. Undeterred, Cody punched him just as enthusiastically in the back of the head. She did her best to keep him from turning over, but it was like doing rodeo on a slippery eel.

“Cuffs!” she yelled.

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Clay had paused to secure the discarded weapon, but now he promptly joined her in the struggle, pushed his own weight on top of the writhing man, who was now screaming as if he had been stabbed, and yanked his left arm back.

“Stop resisting!”

Far from submitting, Winters took this as an invitation to fight harder. He tried to bite, kick, and punch, but in the end, he was no match for two trained cops. Especially as Cody ran out of patience and delivered another punch that left him stunned. You asked for it, you idiot. She stood up as Clay finally managed to cuff the man's wrists behind his back and took a look at his boots. Well, what a coincidence... Winters had on Carhartt work boots in a large size. A thin layer of mud still stuck to the sculpted arches, and Cody knew that the forensics team would be able to analyze its composition. Winters' boots would tell the true story of where he had been recently, even if he refused to cooperate.

“Got zip ties on you, Clay?” she asked.

“Sure.”

Cody secured Winters' ankles; she relieved him of his boots, then went to squat in front of his snarling face.

“Are you awake? Can you hear me?”

“Fuck you,” he hissed.

“I’ll take that as a yes, then. Jack Winters, I am arresting you on suspicion of the first-degree murder of your wife, Cassie. Add to this assault with intent to kill two police officers.”

“You’ll be fucking sorry.”

“Uh-huh. Meanwhile, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand your rights as I explained them to you, sir?”

Cody reflected that if looks could kill, she’d probably be eviscerated on the spot and left to live long enough to experience the pain of being devoured by hungry vultures. Since his rage alone could not touch her, she flashed an easy smile, knowing it would incense him even more, and repeated the question.

“You have no rights!” he spat. “I do not recognize you, your laws, or your authority. I am a sovereign citizen. You can’t touch me!”

Clay stood aside, hands curled around his duty belt.

“Huh,” was his comment. “One of those.”

They carried him, yelling and screaming, to the cruiser and secured him, still bound as an added precaution, into the back. He went on shouting about his rights while Cody dropped his weapon and boots into two separate bags and labeled them as evidence.

“I’ll follow you to the station, Clay.”

“Alright.”

“Awesome job today, by the way,” Cody added. “Textbook surveillance and arrest. I’ll mention it in my report.”

“Thanks, Detective Miller.” He smiled. “I enjoyed it.”

She frowned when he handed her a handkerchief. “What’s that for?”

“You’re bleeding.”

“Ah.” Cody suppressed a wince as she applied the tissue to her eye. “Yeah, he got lucky.”

“His luck’s about to turn.”

“You got that right, Officer.”

In her office, with her suspect in custody, she took a minute to check her eye. A splendid bruise was already developing, but the cut was not deep enough to require stitches. She cleaned it, applied a Steri-Strip over it, and called Kim.

“It’s me. We have him.”

“Oh, thank God! Yes!” Kim let out a fierce cry, loaded with relief. But it also sounded like a sob.

“Are you okay?” Cody prompted.

“Yes. Fine. Oh, man!” Kim exhaled again sharply. “Such a rush, that’s all.”

“I understand.”

“So, what happens now?”

“I’m going to let him stew in his cell for a few hours while I take care of paperwork. Then I’ll go see what I can draw out of him.”

“He’s bound to lawyer up ASAP.”

“From what he said earlier, I think he’s going to play the sovereign citizen card.”

“Really? Huh. Interesting.”

“Yeah.” Cody smiled at her tone of voice, a mix of sarcastic and disparaging. Now Kim sounded like the brilliant lawyer she used to be. “He’s a pretty angry guy. If I play it right, he might lose his temper a bit more, forget to be careful, and incriminate himself.”

“Good.” Again, Kim breathed out. “Good,” she repeated. “I said thank God, but really, I mean thank you, Cody. For every-thing.”

“My pleasure.”

“Hey...”

“Yes?”

“I miss you.”

Warmth spread across Cody’s chest, making her forget her pounding eye. “Already?”

“Yes. Pretty bad. Don’t be smug about it, okay?”

“Hell, no. I miss you too, Kim. Something fierce.”

“How about French tonight?”

“Kisses? Yes, I’m in.”

“I meant restaurant first,” Kim chuckled. “I know a place I think you’ll like. The food is great, and so is the wine. They have fresh flowers and candles on every table.”

“Sounds perfect. Then kisses?” Cody insisted and made her laugh.

“Then, a lot of kisses,” Kim approved in a heated whisper. “And anything else you might want, Detective.”

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Sometimes, Kim reflected, a woman simply had to say ‘Fuck it’ and go shopping. She decided to leave work early, an event rare enough to have her secretary fix her with a touch of concern and ask if she was okay.

“I’m fine,” Kim assured her. Private as she was, she almost left it at that but then thought better of it. “I’m going on a date tonight,” she added and watched Gladys’s green eyes widen in sheer surprise.

Of course, Kim’s reputation for living and breathing work was based on fact. Taking

any sort of time off, let alone going on a date, did not feature at all in her ruthlessly disciplined lifestyle.

“Right,” Gladys nodded slowly. “As in... business date?”

“No, romantic,” Kim allowed.

Now, a soft smile spread across the older woman’s face.

“Ah, well. I am certainly delighted to hear it, Ms. Reed,” she approved.

“Thanks. I need to go hunting for something to wear first, so I should leave now. It’s been a while since I’ve done this sort of thing.” Since I wanted to look good for a woman and did not feel afraid to trust...

Kim did not elaborate, but there was clearly no need. Her secretary was on the same page.



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“Here.” Gladys scribbled something on a Post-it note and handed it to her. “This is a lovely store on Howard Street that my daughter and I often go to for special occasions. Very chic, and the service is excellent.” She grinned. “It’s always an experience. Ask for Janine; tell her I sent you.”

This, coming from her stylish and always impeccably put-together secretary, was a nice tip. It would save her from wandering around looking for an appropriate place, Kim thought, and she thanked her with a smile.

“I could do with an experience, actually.”

“Of course.” Gladys nodded as if she had been waiting a long time for this fact to occur to her finally. “You work hard enough to deserve a little pampering every once in a while. Ms. Reed—Kim,” she corrected. “I hope you have a lovely time at the store and a wonderful evening tonight.”

“Thank you, Gladys, you’re very kind.” On impulse, Kim gave her a quick hug.

She felt lighter as she headed into town, like a kid who had just learned that her teacher was off ill for the day and was granted the freedom to do as she pleased. She went straight to the store and found Janine. As advertised, the shopping assistant was the perfect embodiment of ‘chic’, warmth, and expertise. Kim accepted the glass of wine she offered her and gave the woman free rein to advise on the best choice of outfit. She did spend a small fortune on her new clothes, but the joy she found in the exercise was worth every penny. Kim would not hesitate to describe it, in fact, as a very healing and cathartic experience. In the end, she settled on a body-hugging dress from Dior: white, hitting at mid-thigh, with deep-red rose imprints all over it. She

also opted for a pair of Jimmy Choo with pointed toes, stiletto heels, and a delicate crystal chain around the ankle.

“Exquisite!” Janine declared. “You have such beautifully toned legs; you should definitely wear shoes to highlight them. These were made in Italy, by the way. Limited edition.”

It was a screaming indulgence, Kim decided. Spending \$650 on a pair of shoes struck her as entirely frivolous and decadent. Then again, it was not every day you met the woman of your life, and Kim knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Cody was. Minimal make-up and creole earrings completed the look. When her date arrived, Kim saw that Cody seemed to have dressed up for the occasion too. Tonight she wore black leather trousers fitted to her slender figure, polished ankle boots, and a white linen shirt open to reveal a flash of tantalizing skin underneath. With her blond-hair attractively tousled, giving her a youthful and mischievous vibe, she looked amazing. Judging from the hungry look in her eyes as she slowly took her in, Kim’s choice of outfit was a winner as well. One thing was not right, though, and Kim immediately reached for her.

## chapter 20

“What is this?”

“Uh? Oh, that.” Cody covered her hand with hers as Kim laid it on the side of her face. “Just a little makeup gone wrong.”

She certainly did not need any makeup to highlight her gorgeous lashes, and Kim had a pretty good idea of what must have happened.

“You got hurt this morning. During the arrest?”

“Yes, my face got in the way of a sharp elbow.”

“Did you see a doctor?”

“Nah.” As Cody chuckled, Kim observed an attractive line of heat blossom across her cheeks. “It’s not serious enough for that. I’m just sorry I look a bit like a failed bouncer for our first date.”

“Don’t say that. You look amazing, even with a black eye. Especially as I know this was sustained in the line of duty, taking a killer off the streets. Why are you blushing?”

Kim did not add that she looked deliciously sheepish doing so, and she stepped into her to wrap both arms around her neck. Waited.

“Well,” Cody grinned. “It’s nice that you care.”

“I do care. And worry.”

“You shouldn’t worry, but... yeah.” Cody’s color deepened as she admitted it. “A little bit is okay, I guess. It feels...”

“What?”

“Very nice.”

Heat flashed across her eyes, the raw kind that hinted at long-suppressed feelings and emotional fatigue. Kim recognized some of her own struggles in her gaze.

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” she prompted. Since you let someone care enough to worry a little, since you had that connection, a woman to hold you when it gets

tough. She knew she did not need to say it out loud.

“Yeah.” Cody’s expression confirmed she got it all. “Same for you, right?”

“Same for me.” Kim kissed her deep and slow and ran her fingers through her hair the way Cody told her she liked. It was a thrill to pull back and see that her bright eyes had gone hazy with desire. “Hey, Detective.”

“Hey, Counselor,” Cody grinned.

“Things are developing very fast between us.”

“I’ve noticed, yes.”

“Are you okay with that?”

Kim watched her intently, and Cody did not hesitate.

“Very okay, yes. Surprised,” she admitted. “I really was not looking for a relationship. But when I saw you at the station for the first time... Looking so gorgeous and totally pissed off.” She grinned again. “Temper can be alluring, and it sure was the case with you. Then you told me about your psychic ability... I was intrigued and pretty helplessly attracted to you, Kim.”

“I felt the same way.”

“You hid it extremely well.”

“Mm. Yes. I’m glad I don’t have to hide my feelings for you anymore.”

“Right. And I’m glad I didn’t have to throw you in jail for murder, that’s for sure.”

“Oh yeah.” Kim laughed. “That too.”

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Quinn was both adamant and unyielding this time.

“No, Lia,” she stated. “The café around the corner is too far. I’ll wait for you outside the apartment door. That’s compromise enough.”

“Okay.” Lia sighed. “Okay, fine.”

“Remember what I do for a living? You think of her as Brooke, your ex-fiancée, who may have just gone a bit loopy in the head temporarily. Which is bad enough, given the tone of her emails and blogs. But on top of that, I see a full-on stalker with the potential for a lot worse.”

“I understand.”

“I’m your backup. I’ll stay within shouting distance. Don’t hesitate.”

“Okay, fine,” Lia repeated, and she kissed her. “Thank you, Wife. You excel at this negotiating thing.”

This got a reluctant grin out of Quinn.

“I’ll be watching.” She nodded. “Go on.”

Lia walked down the end of the hallway to Apartment #20, in a luxury building that included 24/7 security, a private gym, a swimming pool, and luscious, deep carpeting throughout. So, it looked like Brooke was still doing very well for herself. Why in the world, then, did she seem to have gone ‘loopy in the head’? Determined to find out the answer to that mystery, Lia knocked on the door. She was, she would confess, a little nervous about doing this. She took a deep breath to steady herself when she heard movement behind the door, then frowned when the voice came through.

“Go away.”

Baffled, Lia frowned at the door, then knocked again.

“Brooke, it’s Lia.”

“Go away, Lia.”

A sideways glance revealed Quinn in the distance, standing tall with both arms crossed over her chest. Eyes bright and alert, attentive. Cop-ready.

“Brooke, I do need to talk to you,” Lia insisted. She knocked again as only silence ensued. “Brooke! I know about the blogs, okay? We need to discuss this. Please, open the door and—”

She stopped abruptly as the door was flung open.

“Lia. Please go away.”

Lia stared in renewed astonishment at the woman she used to know so intimately but now struggled to recognize. Brooke was always on the lanky side with a lithe, androgynous body. She used to be beautiful, full of spark and vibrancy. Only now, she looked more like she had spent the last few months at a Russian gulag. She was so gaunt! Her shoulder-length black hair had lost its luster and hung limp around her pale face. For sure, there was no longer any spark in her once bright grey eyes. Just pain and sorrow, and she was using a cane.

“Brooke.” Lia exhaled. “What—”

“Lia, I am deeply sorry,” her former partner murmured in a ghostly voice. “I apologize for everything. For these awful blogs and... Everything, okay? Don’t worry, it won’t happen again. But you have to go.”

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Lia caught the door as she was trying to shut it, as well as a layer of tears swelling up in her eyes. Brooke held her gaze for a brief instant before giving a shrug.

“Suit yourself.” She shuffled back inside the apartment as if she did not care anymore what happened next.

Christ...Of all the ways Lia thought they might reunite one day, this was never how she imagined it. It made her feel even more grateful for the solid and reassuring presence of her wife in the hallway. The expression on Quinn’s face also left her in no doubt as to how much she disliked having to stay back. Hell, Lia hated it too. She gestured to her.

“What’s going on?” Quinn asked as she immediately joined her and took her hand.

“She’s not well. So, I want you with me.”

“Okay.”

“Not like that,” Lia added when she felt her tense, getting ready for battle. “I mean, she’s physically sick. Something’s not right at all here, Quinn.”

“Gotcha.” Quinn nodded firmly. “Let’s see if we can help her, then.”

She made her heart swell. “I really love you for saying that, babe.”

“No problem. I’m with you, Lia.”



Brooke appeared visibly shaken at the sight of both of them walking in. And especially when her eyes landed on Quinn, and she recognized her.

“It’s okay,” Lia assured. “We’re here to help.”

“I don’t need help. Please, leave me alone.”

“We’re not going to do that, so you may as well stop asking me. Take a seat, Brooke, okay? You look like you’re about to fall down.”

When she did, or dropped her weight onto the couch, more like, Lia sat opposite. Quinn went to the panoramic window and opened the curtains, flooding the apartment in bright sunshine. Lia looked around. Yeah, the place could do with a good tidy-up. Other than that, it still struck her as Brooke’s style. Spacious and artfully minimalistic, with random splashes of color from modern art pieces on the walls and a few rugs on the polished hardwood flooring. She fixed her attention on the woman, one she used to love with all her heart. Her anger melted away at such obvious signs of a significant breakdown.

“How are you doing, Brooke?” she murmured.

Brooke reached for a cigarette with trembling hands. This was new, too; she did not use to smoke. On a nearby table were an empty bottle of white wine, a half-empty flask of whisky, and an open laptop.

“I deleted the blog,” she said in answer. “Everything. I was in the process of writing you an apology.” She looked at Quinn and obviously fought for control as a tear slid down her cheek. “And to you too.”

“Good to hear,” Quinn said impassively.

Witnessing the beaten look in her former partner's eyes tore at Lia's heartstrings.

"For God's sake, what happened to you?" she demanded. "You look half-dead!"

"Hmm." A bitter wince.

"And those emails, the blogs... Do you have any idea of the damage you caused? Or was that your intent all along?"

"No." Brooke said it sharply. "It was never my intent."

"Then why?" Lia almost screamed. "I don't understand."

"It was a psychotic episode. I know that's no excuse, but I lost myself a little bit in recent times."

"A psychotic—" But Brooke was always so mentally strong! "This doesn't make any sense," Lia declared. "You need to fill in the blanks, Brooke. Do it now, please."

"I spent three months in a hospital in Columbia." Brooke patted her left leg. "Car accident. Broken pelvis, broken legs, perforated lung... I almost didn't make it. This was followed by a few weeks of rehab. Still need a cane, as you can see."

It was a shock to find all this out.

"Why didn't you call me then?" Lia asked as Quinn came to sit next to her and gently rubbed a hand over her back. "I would have come to help you!"

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Brooke flashed a sad smile. "I know you would."

"And?"

"I had no right to ask you for help."

"Why the hell not?"

"After the way I let you down before? When your dad was in the last year of his life and you wanted to look after him? No." Brooke gritted her teeth. "I have no right to ask you for help."

"Oh, Brooke..." Lia exhaled in sheer frustration. Even when they were together, the woman was so fiercely independent that it was a source of friction now and then. "I thought you knew we were friends. You used to send me postcards from all corners of the world! I never held a grudge against you."

"I never forgot you," Brooke admitted in a whisper. Again, she looked at Quinn, then away quickly. "I never stopped loving you."

At a loss, Lia exchanged a glance with her wife. Quinn kept a hand on the back of her neck, squeezing gently.

"Which drug was it, Brooke?" she asked in a surprisingly gentle voice. "What did they put you on during your treatment in Columbia?"

Brooke's face was grim as she returned her gaze.

“At first, it was morphine,” she said. “Intravenously and on demand, since the pain was so bad. Then, when I came back to the States, it was a mix of Vicodin and Oxycontin.”

Opioid drugs, Lia thought. Oh, God.

“There were complications with my hip, and I had to have surgery again. So, more drugs. I started drinking.” Brooke shook her head. “Started emailing your old address, Lia. Knowing you wouldn’t reply, so it was safe to do so.”

What it really was, though Lia did not say it, was desperate. Terribly sad and a little bit insane, too.

“After a while, I got confused. Started feeling angry at your lack of reply. I forgot the email address was no longer active. Forgot I didn’t want to ask you for help in the first place. I wrote more stupid shit, posted it on the internet.”

“You researched me,” Quinn said.

“Yes.”

“In great detail.”

“Yes, I did.”

“That took some planning. And a good level of coherence, I’d say.”

Brooke bit hard enough on her bottom lip to make herself flinch.

“I was coming and going. But I am sorry,” she repeated. “I hate what I did. I haven’t been myself in a while.”

“You seem pretty lucid right now,” Quinn insisted.

“I went out the other day. Drunk out of my head. Ended up falling over and passing out. I was in the hospital for two days.” She sneered. “Again. So I’m lucid enough.”

“Where are you going now?” Lia asked when she started to get up.

“Bathroom,” Brooke mumbled. “I need to brush my teeth and splash water on my face. Give me a few minutes to freshen up, okay? I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Of course, no problem.”

“I’m sorry, Lia,” Quinn murmured after she left.

Lia heaved a big sigh. “Do you believe her?”

“Yes. She’s in bad shape and tells a sadly common story about getting hooked on pain meds.”

“She does look like an addict.”

“Yeah.” Quinn squeezed her hand. “How do you feel?”

“Sad. Not guilty,” Lia added, preempting her asking. “I do want to help her. Brooke has no immediate family. No friends either, or just really shitty ones, to let her spiral so far down into this hell.” Her anger flared. “She needs rehab.”

“Oh, that’s for sure.”

“And people who care.”

“Mm.” Quinn flashed a thoughtful smile. “What are you saying, Lia?”

chapter 21

She had to know the answer to the question already, and yet she remained just as calm and open when she asked it. Once again, Lia adored her for her selflessness and generosity.

“I’d like to ask Janet if she can recommend a good place in Lewiston.” She nodded. “If Brooke went to rehab on the West Coast, I could be near her in case she needed me. Would you be okay with that?”

Quinn raised a slow, inquisitive eyebrow. “Are you asking me if I am secure enough in our love and our marriage to allow this to happen?”

“Well.” Looking deep into her blue eyes, catching a hint of fiery impatience there despite her cool demeanor, Lia flashed a tender smile. She liked to see that, too, how fierce and possessive Quinn felt about their relationship. “I am secure in our love, and trust you enough to know I don’t need to ask.”

“That’s right, you really don’t.”

“But I want to.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. You come first, babe. As my wife. Always will.”

Quinn cupped her face in both hands, and she kissed her.

“Thank you. And likewise. So, in principle, I am okay with you getting involved. If Brooke wants to do that.”

“In principle?” Lia prompted.

“She says she never stopped loving you. Don’t you think it will be a problem to have you near?”

“I don’t think she’s in love,” Lia reflected with another sigh. “I believe she started going downhill and tried to hold on to the past as a way of not completely losing her mind. I don’t think she’s quite alright.”

“To say the least.”

“We could try... If it gets to be a problem, we’ll address it when we have to.”

“Okay.” Quinn approved. “Let’s do it, then. She should fly back with us.”

“Thanks, darling. It means a lot.” Lia hugged her tight, then frowned impatiently.

“What’s taking her so long? Hey, Brooke? You okay in there?”

In the silence that ensued, they exchanged a loaded glance. Then Quinn was up, and moving fast. She didn’t knock, did not wait, but punched the bathroom door open.

“Brooke!” Lia shouted.

“Call 911,” Quinn instructed and quickly knelt next to the unconscious woman on the floor. “Got a pulse,” she announced. “Weak, but it’s there. Brooke?” She tapped her cheeks. “Brooke! Open your eyes.”

On the phone, Lia precisely relayed her location and situation to the operator. “Yes, yes, I’ll stay on the line. Ah! She’s starting to come back!”

Brooke opened her eyes and immediately jolted at the sight of Quinn leaning over her.

“No... No!”



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“Take it easy,” Quinn told her. “Lia?”

“Yes.” Still on the phone, Lia knelt beside her. “It’s alright, Brooke. You fainted. Paramedics are on the way.”

“I don’t want them.”

“You need them.”

“I don’t want to end up in the hospital again. I don’t want you here!” Brooke raged even as she cried, and tried to push them away.

“You should stay down,” Quinn advised as she scrambled to her feet.

“Leave me alone. Get out of my apartment.”

“No,” Lia said gently but firmly. “Brooke, listen. We can get you some help. I know it’s horrible right now, and it has been for some time. But it stops here. You go up from here.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can!”

“Lia... I am so sorry.”

“I know. Apology accepted. Now we put that stuff behind us and just focus on getting

you well again. Would you like to come home with us? We can get you the right treatment, and—"

Lia did not get to finish as Quinn suddenly lunged forward. For a wild, destabilizing second, it occurred to her that she had punched Brooke in the face. But as a loaded syringe shattered onto the floor, she realized that Quinn had just knocked it out of her hand.

"She tried to inject herself," Quinn said flatly and promptly caught Brooke in her arms as she fainted again. "Damn, Lia! You like them stubborn and wild, don't you!"

The comment was unexpectedly funny.

"Well," Lia started. "I—"

"Yeah, don't answer that. Rather go get the door, as I think I just heard a knock."

"That'll be the paramedics."

"I certainly hope so. We could do with some help here."

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The following week started off bright and beautiful. Over the weekend, Lia had worked a few miracles. She was able to speak to Janet, on her way home from her Italian vacation, and get her to recommend a state-of-the-art private clinic in Lewiston. One phone call was enough, with the mention of her name, to smooth out the admission process. Lia also had a long conversation with Brooke, one-to-one, and convinced her it would be for the best. She helped her to write a statement recanting every accusation she had made in her blog, which led to Quinn being re-instated on the spot. Her commander also pushed for an official apology from the mayor, which

was swiftly granted.

“I wouldn’t have asked for it,” Quinn reflected as she stood in his office on Monday morning.

“No, I know,” Wilson grunted.

“But thank you for getting me one anyway.”

“Sure thing, Lieutenant.” She saw his lips twitch under his mustache.

He looked amused.

“Something funny about that, sir?” she prompted.

“Well, you might like to know that I was highly motivated. Your Ms. Kennedy made it abundantly clear that she would strip the skin off my butt if I did not push for an official apology for you.”

Quinn blinked in shock and surprise. Oh, God!

“Lia said this...? She talked to you?”

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Wilson's massive shoulders shook as he laughed.

"Well. Atme, would be more accurate to say. She expressed her views about the situation and her displeasure at your unjust suspension. She called the whole thing 'An astonishing clusterfuck of iconic proportions' and ordered me to make it right ASAP. Or else! So, I relayed the message to Everleigh. May have leaned on him a little bit myself."

Quinn winced inside as she imagined the scene; Lia in her captain's office, barking orders at the man like a Drill Instructor in the throes of bootcamp frenzy... But she also struggled not to laugh at the picture. Good for you, babe. Her wife was never afraid to take matters into her own hands when a situation demanded action, as she'd just proved with a problematic former partner. She would hesitate even less, Quinn knew when her career and well-being happened to be on the line. Her smile broke through as she nodded.

"You should know my wife stands up for me, Captain."

"I do now, and she certainly does. You found a good one, Wesley." On that note, Wilson waved her on. "Back to the grind, Lieutenant. Get on with it."

"Yes, sir." Quinn saluted briefly. "With pleasure."

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Cody was also pleased to welcome her lieutenant back to duty with some good news regarding the Winters case.

“I am wrapping it up,” she announced and filled her in.

The man was not talking, other than to continue to claim his innocence or yell abuse at jail officers, but it was clear from the mountain of evidence piling up that he would be convicted and spend the rest of his sorry life in a high-security prison. Cassie Winters’ medical records could be used to demonstrate that he had a habit of beating her up. Traces of mud under his boots were analyzed, and did confirm he had been under the bridge where she was found in recent times. The same brand of heavy-duty plastic bags in which the woman’s body was wrapped were discovered in his truck. And for the cherry on the cake, the final killer blow to any defense he might try to set up: the man had been stupid enough to keep hold of the murder weapon, a claw hammer that matched the ME’s description. Though Winters took great care to clean his tool, the forensics team was able to discover minute particles of his wife’s blood embedded around the base of the metal head. Such had been the violence of the blows. The stark description of ‘Hacking of the skull’ found its way into the final report. It made Cody shiver to read it. No doubt a jury would be able to picture the assault in detail and find it equally appalling. Jack Winters did not stand a chance; for sure, he was going down.

“Hello, partner. Did you miss me?”

Ellie strode in not long after Quinn left.

“Hey, welcome back! Yeah, paperwork needs doing again, can you believe?” Cody grinned as Ellie laughed. “Just kidding; it’s great to see you. How was Italy?”

She could already tell it must have been great. Ellie’s face positively glowed. She radiated sunshine and happiness.

“It was awesome,” she confirmed. “Janet and I had a blast. Here, this is for you from the both of us.”

Cody caught the t-shirt she threw to her over the desk and laughed at the quirky imprint on the front: a traditional gelato ice cream draped in green, white, and red, with the words: LICK ME, I'M ITALIAN.

“That’ll work,” she chuckled. “Thank you.”

Ellie planted a hip on the corner of her desk and eyed the board Cody had just cleared.

“Anything interesting happen when I was gone?”

“I solved a murder case. Juicy one, too.”

“Engaged in a spot of fighting as well, from the looks of it.” Ellie pointed at the bruise now going through shades of yellow and purple around her eye.

“Yeah, some of that.”

“How’s the other guy?”

“In jail,” Cody nodded. “I won.”

“Good to hear, and no surprise. Anything else?”

“Yes.” Cody hesitated only briefly. “I fell in love.”

Used to her partner’s usual ‘loves’, namely leftover pizza or a WNBA game on TV, Ellie answered with a distracted shrug as she moved to her own desk.

“Oh yeah? With what?”

“What do you think? A woman, of course.”

This earned her a solid double-take, Ellie’s mouth dropping open when it must have occurred to her that Cody was serious. She stared like that for a moment, then broke into a wide grin.

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“Wow... No kidding?”

“None whatsoever.”

“I was only gone two weeks... In that time, you managed to solve a murder case and fall in love?”

“Don’t look so surprised. I’m the efficient type.”

“Yeah, but... You’re serious.”

“I am. Totally.”

Ellie appeared stunned and curious in equal measures, torn between hearing about the juicy murder case and her partner’s previously non-existent love life. The personal won.

“What’s her name?”

“Kim Reed. She’s a lawyer in town.”

“Huh. I don’t know that name, but I can’t wait to meet her.”

“You will.” Cody smiled, prompting Ellie to grin again as she scrutinized her face.

“You do look in love,” she decided.



“What do you mean?”

“Mushy.”

“Get out of here.”

“No, really, you do.” Ellie laughed. “I think it’s great. What a difference two weeks can make!”

“To be honest, the falling in love part only took about two minutes.”

And in the days that followed, Cody found all the rest of it equally as natural and easy. It occurred to her, with a touch of delighted wonder, that she had only slept in her own bed once in almost three weeks. And Kim was with her. The rest of the time, they usually spent at her apartment.

“It makes sense to use my place,” Kim declared easily. “It’s bigger and closer to the beach. We have a balcony, and the fully-equipped kitchen is handy since I like to cook. So.”

So...Sweetly, she insisted on feeding her, especially on the weekends when they could both be lazy. Cody started to notice every time she said ‘We’. Every time, it made her heart swell and seemed to bind them a little closer. She left a toothbrush and wash kit, then her running gear and a change of clothes, at her lover’s place. Gradually, her emotional center of gravity shifted along with the more practical stuff. One Friday evening, over homemade pizza enjoyed on the balcony, Kim surprised her by sliding a little ring-size box across the table.

“For you,” she said.

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“Hey, don’t pass out on me, Detective.” Kim teased her gently as Cody stared.  
“You’ve gone pale.”

“Um... It’s okay. I’m fine.”

“Yes, very fine. Now open the box.”

As Cody did, to find the set of keys she’d placed in there, Kim stood up and went around the table. From amused initially, she felt almost anxious all of a sudden. As Cody glanced up, she looked deeply into her eyes.

“Keys to your apartment?” her lover prompted when she remained silent.

“Yes. I thought you may as well be able to come and go as you like.”

“Oh, right. Well, thanks, I—”

“Wait.” Kim pursed her lips, irritated at her own self. There was nothing casual about the gesture. She did not want to make it appear as if it were a business transaction of little importance just because she was afraid of rejection. “Let me be clear. I’d like you to move in with me, Cody. Officially. I know it’s fast, but it feels right. If I read you wrong, and you’d rather not—”

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“Oh, no,” Cody interrupted. “Kim.” She pulled her onto her lap and into a fierce embrace. After a few seconds, she leaned back just enough to meet and hold her gaze. Hers was literally burning now, in sharp contrast to her earlier reaction. “Hey, this is the best gift.”

“Are you sure?”

“Hundred percent! Kim, there’s nothing I want more than to be with you all the time. This feels right to me too.”

“But you went white.”

“Did I?”

“Uh-huh.”

Cody flashed a sweet, open smile.

“Now you’re showing your observant and tenacious lawyer side, Ms. Reed.” She laughed and gave a light shrug. “I don’t know why I paled... Surprise, probably.”

Relaxing, Kim caressed her cheek with a folded knuckle.

“Did you think I was proposing to you?”

“No.” Cody’s blue eyes sparkled. “Maybe.” She flushed. “I don’t know, perhaps on some level, yes... I saw the box, and my mind went blank. You have to admit it

looked a bit suspicious, right?”

“Suspicious, huh?” Kim frowned again, jokingly this time. “What? Like a grenade?”

“Not quite as lethal as that.” Still amused, Cody kissed her on the lips. She traced a soft finger over her mouth. “I mean, you could have just handed me the keys, eh?”

“I could have.” Kim shrugged. “Didn’t.”

“No...” Cody’s expression grew tender, tentative, and eager all at the same time. “Makes me wonder if maybe, on some level, you meant to present them to me as a bit more than just a living arrangement.”

“Now you’re showing your shrewd and clever cop side.” Kim mirrored her earlier words and statement. “What if it were a little bit more?” she prompted. “On some level, maybe? How would it make you feel?”

Cody kept her eyes fixed on her face. She answered easily, pretty much instantly. “It would make me feel great. I love you, Kim. I am in love with you. You know it, right?”

For sure, they had danced around that a lot... But of all the ways she might have told her, for the very first time, this hit the deepest and strongest with Kim. Perhaps because her tone was so calm, quiet, and sure. So undramatic, but also charged with undeniable feeling and truth.

“Don’t cry,” Cody added in a whisper.

“Ah!” Kim blinked back tears. “It’s just... God, Cody!”

She kissed her long and deep, full of the joy she felt. Cody was grinning from ear to

ear when she let go. Happy and a little dazed. Gorgeously so. When she looked up, her eyes were a bit wet as well. Kim cupped her face in both hands.

“I love you too.” She blew air out sharply. “Wow.”

“Yes, it is,” Cody chuckled. “Totally wow.”

“I don’t know what else to say.”

“Then shut up and kiss me again.”

Kim laughed. Yeah, she was right. Anything else, any more words, could well wait. She tasted clean heat on her lips as she resumed the kiss. She felt her emotion in the way Cody kissed her back. And as she held her, so gentle, and even with a touch of reverence, yet firm and self-assured at the same time. Like Kim belonged to her. Cody did not protest when she slid off her lap and offered her a hand, she just nodded once and rose eagerly to follow. Dinner could wait too. Their kisses grew more urgent on their way to the bedroom. Bumping into walls as they shed clothes was fun. There was an audible rip as Cody relieved her of her bra.

“Oops,” she said. “Sorry.”

Kim laughed, and surprised herself at how heated her own voice sounded. It may have made her blush under different circumstances, with a different woman, but now she just felt so free... So safe with Cody! She loved to feel this part of herself finally being re-awakened. A more raw, wild, and shamelessly demanding side, for sure.

“Give me more,” she instructed and fisted both hands into her hair.

A little rough and plenty possessive, she knew Cody liked her to be this way. So, Kim pulled a little harder, eliciting an approving grunt out of her. It sounded needy too.

Like sinful pleasure.

“More, Cody,” she prompted her.

Reading the mood just right, Cody took hold of her wrists, raised them above her head, and pushed her firmly against the wall. Pinned her there for another scorching kiss that made Kim whimper.

“You like this?” Cody whispered.

“Yes!” Kim laughed and moaned at the same time. “Oh, yes, keep going!”

Cody flashed her a sizzling look, approving and hungry in equal measures. Then, with another dazzling smile, proceeded to set fire to every cell in her body. She seemed to know exactly how to touch her. Understood intuitively the degree of intensity required. She was at once beautifully gentle and excitingly commanding. Kim would not remember moving to the bed, so focused was she on the wonderful sensations being unleashed. But then, they were there, and Cody lay on top of her. It was all so intimate and arousing. The reassuring weight of her body, her gifted hands as she went on providing sensual caresses... Kisses behind her ear, on her eyelids, brushing over her lips...

“You are such a treat,” Kim said to her drowsily. “Such an amazing lover.”

“Enjoy,” Cody murmured, and made her sigh as she moved to her breasts.

Her lips were like little flames over her nipples, dispensing fiery tingles and arousing her from the inside out. Kim caressed her slender back and shoulders. She raked her fingers through her hair, gently first, then harder. She made her gasp alluringly with

that, and again when she yanked her close and crushed her mouth over hers. Cody was burning hot, her naked skin like a fever. They moved as one, gliding smoothly to the rhythm of their shared passion. Locked in a tight embrace, fingers roaming freely, limbs entangled. All boundaries erased and forgotten. Under Cody's lead, the kissing turned slow and languorous. No less intense, and actually just the opposite.

"Mine," Kim murmured, melting into her. "Say it."

"I'm yours." Cody breathed against her mouth. "I love you, Kim."

She drifted down lower. Kim arched as the pleasure built. Slow and relentless, wave after wave, until she could no longer stand it.

"Cody," she panted. "I'm there."

"Just a little more," Cody whispered.

She stayed where she was and wrapped her fingers around her breasts. Tweaked her thumbs over rock-hard nipples. Said 'Mm' in the huskiest, most erotic voice ever.

"Jesus." Kim covered her hands with hers. "Yes. Yes! Like that. Please."

In answer to this, Cody did something with her tongue that made her eyes roll back in her head. She squealed, thrashed. The orgasm started deep and powerful, then rolled through her like thunder unleashed over the ocean. Pure, unbound pleasure. Kim heard herself cry out once. She gripped Cody when her partner moved up close. She felt her go off, too, with the same sort of intensity and abandon. Then, there was only silence and bliss. Kim throbbed for a long time, twitching with slowly ebbing swells of sensation. As these faded and her awareness returned, she opened her eyes.

"Hey," Cody said.



Sexy little smirk. Blue eyes still a little hazy from desire. She looked a mix of demolished and supremely satisfied, which was exactly how Kim felt. They stared at each other, then burst out laughing.

“Did you just come from... you know...”

“Licking you?” Cody grinned when she hesitated. “Yes, I did just do that.”

“You’re awesome.”

“Not when just a glance from you turns me on, Kim.”

“Mm, is that so?” Kim chuckled, delighted and amused at the same time.

“Yeah. And now I’m exhausted. Hold me.”

Kim did not have to be asked twice, and she immediately wrapped her in a full-body hug. For a woman to make love to her the way Cody just did, then to be so at ease demanding to be held... Yes, Kim reflected as her heart swelled. She was special in more ways than one. They lay dozing for a while, content in each other’s arms, until Cody’s phone on the nightstand beeped. She flinched, grunted, and muttered a sleepy ‘No’.

“Could be important,” Kim said.

“Nah.” Cody snuggled deeper into her arms. “They’d call if it were important.”

“Want to check?” Kim offered as the phone beeped again.

“I guess I should.”

Kim extended an arm to pick up the phone. In doing so, she caught the two lines of text highlighted on the locked screen.

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‘Hey r u free this wknd? I miss u!!!!

Call me. XOXO from ur best girl’

“Who is your best girl, Cody?” she demanded.

“Hmm?”

“The one who misses you and wants you to call her,” Kim prompted ironically.

Cody read the text, and she laughed.

“Aw, busted.” She then explained about her nine-year-old friend. “Anna likes to text to remind me when she decides we’re due for an outing.”

“Right. You just did it,” Kim declared.

“What?”

“Made me fall a bit more in love with you.”

“Ah.” Cody smiled. “Good. So maybe you won’t mind if we spend a bit of time with her this weekend? She loves going to the beach and getting ice cream.”

“Me too,” Kim remarked. “I’d love to meet her.”

“Great. Just prepare yourself for a proper grilling.”

“I’ll be okay. I’m a lawyer, after all. I’m sure I can handle a kid.”

“I’m sure you can.” Cody chuckled again. “Just be warned: she’s a super-smart girl with an insatiable curiosity and absolutely no filter whatsoever.”

“Sounds like fun,” Kim approved, and she meant it.

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More fun was to be had. Lazy summer parties at Demi’s house, especially, were a long-established tradition. The Lewiston P.D. Chief Administrator’s wife, Carole, worked as a nurse at the local hospital, so guests included not only cops but also other fellow nurses, doctors, and first responders in general. That weekend, a select group of friends were all invited to screen Lia’s finished documentary for the first time. As expected, it was a roaring success. She earned herself a standing ovation, and then a couple of enterprising cops picked her up and threw her fully clothed into the pool. Lia came out laughing, clearly delighted. Quinn looked on in approval.

“We need more supplies,” Demi declared as people spilled out onto the lawn to enjoy the afternoon sunshine. Some took a dip in the pool – in appropriate swim gear. “Quinn, would you mind getting us beer from the pantry, please?”

“Not at all. I’m on it.”

On her way to the kitchen, she happened to bump into Lia coming down the stairs after changing into dry clothes. With a beaming smile, her wife grabbed her around the neck and pulled her aside to deliver a heated kiss.

“Hey, I’m on a mission here,” Quinn protested.

“Can’t help it,” Lia chuckled. “I’m still a little too revved up about the fact that

everyone loved my film!”

“You weren’t really nervous about that, were you?”

“Well...” Lia laughed, attractively sheepish. “Not too much, but a little bit, yeah, for sure. No matter what, there’s always that little pinch of nerves when I put something new out there, you know?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Like, what if I am totally deluded thinking that my work is good, and everybody hates it?”

“Well. Even if I didn’t love you with every last drop of my blood, Lia, I would still think this new documentary is fantastic,” Quinn declared.

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“I mean it,” she added. “Seeing bits and pieces along the way as you were working on it did not take anything away from the final product. You managed to capture the essence of what it’s like to be on the front line, so to speak, in the medical world. The urgency when a life is hanging in the balance, the sheer sense of duty, the fun and comfort of working together as a committed team... Success and loss, the highs and lows. It’s brilliant work, Lia.”

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“Thanks, babe.”

“I have to say as well, that one scene in the chopper, when you were caught in the middle of a lightning storm, made me sweat.”

“Oh yeah! I was so glad it happened when I was onboard!” Lia’s eyes sparkled in satisfaction at the memory. “That’s what I always call perfect ambiance material.”

“Were you scared?”

“No... Sam was so at ease in the cockpit that it never even occurred to me to be frightened.”

“Yeah. Wakefield is ace.”

“She is. I’m glad this comes across too.”

Quinn nodded with a teasing smile. “Plus, your hotshot had to know I’d kick her to the moon and back if she crashed with you onboard.”

“Oh...” Lia dispensed a laughing kiss at that. “Totally.”

“I guess I should book us a room in Salt Lake ahead of the next Sundance Film Festival. With work of this quality, you’re bound to be nominated again for an award.”

“I hope so. We’ll see.” Lia’s smile turned tender. “Hey, do you remember that game

of basketball we had in the back during our first barbecue party here?"

"The one you lost. Yes, I do remember."

"Still refusing to admit the truth, Lieutenant?"

"On the contrary, I recall my win very clearly."

Lia shook her head, amused. "We haven't had that rematch you promised me, so I could beat you again and show you who's boss."

"I guess we found better games."

Saying so, Quinn sneaked a hand under her borrowed shirt to cup a firm breast in her hand and stroke her tight nipple. Lia was so sensitive. Quinn enjoyed her instant stiffening, the way she pressed herself into her. Lia took her mouth again for a long, lazy, but by no means less intense kiss.

"Maybe we should go home," Quinn muttered.

"No." Lia chuckled and pushed her back. "Be good. We're staying. We need to socialize."

"Oh? Do we?"

"Yes. And I also want to bask a little."

"That, you thoroughly deserve. You go, I'll be right back."

Quinn went on to the kitchen, only to discover Cody Miller hovering in front of the pantry. Looking guilty, Quinn decided.

“What’s up, Miller?” she asked her.

“Demi sent me to get more supplies.”

“As she does, yes. I’m on beer duty myself.”

“Cool.” Miller grinned but she remained rooted in place, blocking her access.

Quinn moved a little closer.

“Am I going to have to forcibly remove you from that spot, Detective?” she inquired.

“Um, no, but I wouldn’t go in just yet, Lieutenant, if I were you,” Cody replied with twinkling eyes.



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“Why the hell not?”

“I think my partner and your best friend might be having a little... moment.”

“Jesus Christ,” Quinn grunted in reaction to Cody’s obvious amusement. “Have these two not exhausted themselves on their Italian trip?”

“Apparently not.”

“Yo, Janet!” Quinn banged on the door. “Get out here now.”

There was an audible groan and giggling, then the door opened and out strolled the two women. Janet Foxx, genius neurosurgeon and even more flamboyant in character, with her arm slung over her girlfriend’s shoulders. Detective James, no longer technically a rookie, still managed to blush harder than a juicy beetroot at the sight of her lieutenant standing there. Janet, far from shy or intimidated, simply reached out to pinch her cheek.

“Well, look here.” She smirked. “If this isn’t the rain on my parade. Got a problem, Lieutenant Grumpy?”

“Yeah, get a room.”

“No way, is that a thing?” Janet kissed her partner soundly on the mouth, eliciting more furious blushing. Then she grabbed Quinn’s arm. “I need a word with you, Wesley.”

“Tough, I’m busy,” Quinn groaned.

“You got rank. Delegate.”

“Miller,” Quinn snapped.

“Yes, Lieutenant,” Cody said with a wide grin.

“You and your partner are in charge of beer and cake.”

“Roger that, Boss. I think we can handle it.”

As Quinn allowed her to steer her away, Janet chuckled in amusement.

“You know your detectives get a kick out of watching me boss you around?” she remarked.

“Or trying to. I am aware, yes.”

“You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all. They know you’re a special case.”

“Well.” Janet snorted. “I’m going to choose to take this as a compliment.”

It was, and Quinn gave her an affectionate squeeze. They found a spot to sit together in the shade of a gnarly apple tree by the side of the pool.

“So, how was Italy?”

“Superb!” Janet exclaimed. “Amazing! Splendid!”

“Ah!” Quinn laughed. “Great.”

“Yes, that too. And then some.”

“I’m delighted to hear it.”

“Traveling with Ellie is so easy and wonderful. Being on the road with her like that was an absolute dream come true for me.” Janet beamed, her face glowing in pure joy and pleasure. “You know what I mean?”

“I know the feeling.” Quinn smiled, remembering some of her road trips to Mexico with Lia. “There’s nothing better in my mind than taking off on an adventure with the love of your life.”

“Totally. And even at home, you know, every day with Ellie is better than the previous one. Happier, and a little bit sweeter.”

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She sounded both amazed and truly delighted at the fact, and Quinn nodded again in approval. Indeed, it was great to see her friend, once a relentless serial dater, head over heels in love with her partner and committed to the long term.

“That’s great, Jan,” she said. “I’m happy for you both.”

“Thanks. Now...” Janet leveled her intelligent, inquisitive, dark eyes at her. “Let’s talk about you.”

“Mm. Let’s not. You know, this is Lia’s day.”

“Oh, of course! And I already told her I love the new film. Also, not just because she did a cracking job of relating my side of the story. Your wife is super-talented, darling.”

“Yes.” Quinn grinned as her pride swelled. “That she truly is.”

“And I won’t even ask about the suspension. I understand it was a loaded plate of internal administrative bullshit.”

“Perfect description for it, yeah.”

“We see our share of this kind of thing at the hospital too, of course. Still, it must have rocked you a bit.” Having said she would not ask, Janet still pushed.

“It wasn’t fun,” Quinn admitted. “But it’s over now.”

“Gotcha. You just want to move on.”

“You got it.”

Nodding, Janet continued to fix her quizzically. “How do you feel about the other stuff?”

“What stuff?” Quinn grunted.

“Don’t play dumb or evasive with me, Wesley. Lia’s former partner is back on the scene.”

“No, she’s not,” Quinn stated firmly. “Just in Lewiston for rehab. Only for another week or so, I believe.”

“Right. Then, what?”

“I don’t know. I assume she’ll fly home and work to get her job back. I hope she can.”

“Huh. I’ll say that’s mighty generous of you, babe, since I know she was the one behind all your troubles. And now Lia is helping her?”

“Janet—”

“Quinn,” Janet interrupted before she could say any more, and laid a soothing hand on her shoulder. In contrast, her tone carried a hint of her usual impatience. “I’m not trying to annoy you, okay?”

“No? Coulda fooled me.”

“Haha.” Janet did not smile. “Look, I’m asking you straight because I know how good you are at suffering in silence, my friend. So, don’t shut me out. We are having this conversation, whether you like it or not. Once I know you’re all right, I can get back to enjoying the party.”

Quinn tracked her gaze to where Janet’s number one source of joy was involved in an impromptu game of volleyball with Sam Wakefield and a few others. Ellie looked good in just a pair of shorts and her sports bra, and Janet licked her lips in obvious appreciation. Alright, then. Quinn smirked, relaxing. She knew her friend did not thrive on bad drama and gossip. Janet also famously did not beat around the bush when it came to personal stuff. Especially mine... She could be a merciless tease, often came across as abrasive and demanding to those who only knew her superficially. Typical brain surgeon, Quinn supposed. Janet was indeed recognized as one of the Top Five best in the country. She routinely performed miracles in the OR. Quinn herself owed her life to her amazing skills. Under the relentless swagger and rude questions, Janet cared deeply and was all heart.

“When I first found out who was behind the blogs that got me suspended, I wanted to punch Brooke in the face,” Quinn let her know.

“Understandable.”

“Yeah. Then I realized the actual mess she was in. She went off the rails, big time. Let a bunch of unresolved emotions play havoc on her mental state. Left to her own devices, I am pretty sure she would have OD-ed.”

“Sadly, she wouldn’t be the first. And now, this makes me want to punch her doctors in the face.” Always quick to fire, Janet was even quicker to find compassion. “At the very least, I think the woman should sue the whole lot of them for criminal incompetence.”

“Maybe she will. Anyway. Once I knew what was going on with her, I just wanted to help. So did Lia, of course. Thanks for recommending the clinic you did.”

“Yeah, sure. I also love to help.”

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“And just to be clear,” Quinn added, “I trust my wife. Our marriage is solid. I’m all okay, Jan.”

“Finally!” Janet rolled her eyes, grinned, and punched her playfully on the shoulder. “Thank you! This does answer all my questions.”

“Well, halleluiah.”

“Drop the attitude, Lieutenant; you know you don’t need it with me.”

“Correct. Thank you for making sure I was okay.”

“You’re welcome.” Janet pulled her into a hug, then flashed a mischievous wink. “If you’ll excuse me now, I’ve got to go kiss my sexy girlfriend.”

“Alright.” Quinn laughed. “You’re dismissed.”

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Kim enjoyed meeting her lover’s friends and colleagues. She got a little psychic tingle from some of the people at the party, which she supposed was to be expected. With no other choice, she relaxed and went with the flow. Cody’s lieutenant, a tall, athletic blonde who carried herself with the self-assurance and authority of command, was the first to come and say hello to her. When she shook her hand, a set of ethereal impressions floated across Kim’s brain. Lia. Duty. Grief. In that order.

“I don’t talk shop at summer parties, or Demi tends to get upset with me,” Quinn said



to her in a friendly way. “But thank you for your help with the recent case, Ms. Reed.”

“I won’t say it was a pleasure, Lieutenant, but I am glad I was able to help,” Kim answered her with a smile.

Her gaze was assessing and inquisitive, but the lieutenant was true to her word, and she did not ask any questions about her gift. Kim liked her for it. When she met her friend after that, the dark-haired, good-looking surgeon, there was a flash of sexual heat and the cooling scent of the ocean. Kim was not surprised to hear from Quinn’s wife, the filmmaker, that both she and Janet were members of an open-water swim club.

“And this is my partner, Detective Ellie James.”

The young woman, with jet-black hair and piercing grey eyes, was all smiles as Cody introduced her.

“Hello, Kim. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“You too, Ellie.”

At first glance, the squared-away detective and the notably older, swashbuckling neurosurgeon seemed like an odd pairing. But when Ellie pulled her into a friendly hug, Kim intuitively sensed a lot more bubbling just under the surface: a fierce spirit. Plenty of toughness. Clearly, her youth and apparent sweetness hid a much more solid, resilient core. Kim mentioned it to Cody during a moment alone as they sat on the grass enjoying a beer and a piece of cake.

“I like Ellie as your partner. She’s got plenty of fire.”

“She sure does.” Cody smiled in approval. “Though I didn’t want a partner at first. I was used to working on my own, you know? Especially after... what happened in New York.”

“Yes,” Kim said gently. “But your lieutenant decided to put you together anyway. So Ellie could acquire a little seasoning, and you could get over your reluctance.”

“That’s right. How did you know?”

“Simple observation. You like working with her now.”

“I do, yes. She’s a great kid.”

“And she doesn’t like when you call her that.”

“Oh.” Sheepish, Cody chuckled. “It’s an affectionate term... I’ll stop, though, if she dislikes it that much. She must do if she told you about it, huh?”

“She didn’t,” Kim said softly. “It just came to me when I hugged her.”

## chapter 24

Granted, this sudden surge of sensitive ability was not entirely welcome for Kim. But she put it down to a consequence of her rapidly unfolding relationship with Cody and the significant emotional opening associated with that. She had no intention of fighting it. Looking back on the last few years of her life, she could not dispute the fact that she had totally shut down after the sexual assault. Understandably, of course... She had moved –actually, fled– all the way to Lewiston, buried herself in a different kind of work, and become a wounded recluse. If not outwardly, at least definitely within her own mind. Now, Kim understood that she was being given a chance to move on from this. Her bond with Cody was too rare and precious, too

much of a gift, to resist embracing completely. The connection was also tremendously healing. Given the option to remain as she was, Kim would not want to. Being with Cody was both exciting and reassuring in equal measure. The sex was amazing. Cody was kind and thoughtful, naturally charming, with a romantic streak a mile wide. Simply beautiful. If she happened to be called out on a job in the middle of the night, which occurred often enough, Kim would wake up to discover a little note on the fridge or the kitchen table. Either sending good wishes for whatever sensitive work meeting she may have scheduled later or just reminding her to take time to eat a proper breakfast. Cody enjoyed looking after her. Kim liked to reciprocate. She messaged her at oddtimes during the day just to check in and say hello. Cody sent her flowers at the office. Gladys got a kick out of that. 'I know they are for you, Ms. Reed,' she would chuckle, 'but they brighten the whole office and warm my heart just as much.'

When Cody picked her up for an impromptu lunch in town, when they both could spare the time, she delivered the flowers in person. Kim had met her young friend, Anna; the kid was a delight. They went out for dinner with her and her mom. There was a beach party with the usual gang, and they had Ellie and Janet over for dinner one night. All good personal breaks in between periods of intense work. Kim was used to that. Before meeting Cody, she used to spend seven days a week at the office and did not think anything of it. But now, the two women made sure to take at least one day per week for rest and each other. As Kim continued to come out of her shell, she felt behind her the reassuring weight of a community. She was, as Cody told her, a part of her cop family now. It meant a lot. Kim relaxed into the feeling, and the joy of starting a new life with a woman she was falling more and more in love with everyday. She blossomed. When the nightmares started, they were easy enough to dismiss at first. Sadly, as time went on, not so much... and the joy of starting a new life with a woman she was falling more and more in love with every day

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:23 pm*

Cody came home late, tired, and a little frustrated that night. She was working a new high-profile case with her partner, and not getting anywhere fast with it. Two homeless people had recently been discovered dead at two different remote beach areas on the outskirts of town. Each was missing a different organ. The first one, his heart; the other, his right lung. The used-up, mutilated bodies were tossed into public containers like so much trash. Not surprisingly, it did not take long for the press to get hold of the story and turn it into a sensational piece of news, spreading the idea that a vicious serial killer was at work in the area. Though the theory was sound in principle, the obsessive way it kept being reported in the media, over and over on a crazy loop, only increased public fear and paranoia. The pressure was on to catch the killer, obviously.

“We’re looking at all angles,” Cody shared that evening as she and Kim sat down to eat. It was the first time since breakfast at six A.M. for her, she only realized now. The smell of fresh warm bread almost brought her to her knees. “Did you bake this?” she asked, prompting her lover to laugh.

“I don’t bake on weekdays, darling. Just bought a loaf on my way home and stuck it in the oven.”

“It’s divine.” Cody spoke with her mouth full and promptly reached for another slice. “But of course, it takes time.”

“Baking? Oh, yeah.”

“No, I mean the investigation. Ah...” Cody shook her head, irritated at what struck her to be insensitive. “Sorry, babe. I know you had a full day at work too. The last

thing you must want is to hear me moan about my job, eh!”

“It’s okay.” Kim stood behind her, tipped her head back by running her fingers through her hair, and kissed her softly on the lips. “I always like to hear about your work, so keep going.” Her eyes sparkled as she chuckled. “Besides, making you moan is my job. I’ll take care of it later.”

In a flash, Cody forgot about her empty stomach. Her lover looked like a dream in white, flowing yoga pants, and a simple tank top.

“If you like, we could skip right to that part,” she offered.

“Very tempting, Detective, but no.” Kim laughed, escaping easily when she attempted to pull her onto her lap. “You need to follow your own advice and fuel up properly. Plus, I really do want to hear about this new case of yours.”

“Missing the criminal side of lawyering, are you?” Cody prompted.

“A little bit, yes.” Kim placed a plate of steaming lasagna in front of her and granted another, albeit brief, kiss. “Go on, let’s hear it.”

“Okay. Well, another rumor started to go around that there is a new Dr Frankenstein out there, trying to build a body out of parts he’s stealing.”

“Old tales never go away, do they?”

“That’s right. And this one has a modern twist.”

“You want some extra cheese?”

“Yes, thanks.” Cody grinned as she took it, applied a liberal layer over the already

cheesy lasagna, and passed it back to her. “The manufactured body is supposed to be for an AI.”

“I’m not sure I quite follow you there.”

“The rumors say the body is for an AI brain to become fully alive in it.”

“Oh...” Kim frowned, looking stunned for an instant, then she shook her head and let out an ironic chuckle. “Wow!”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. Some people actually believe this crazy stuff.”

“I guess it’s a sign of the weird and wonderful times we’re living in, isn’t it?”

“That’s for sure.”

“I assume you’re looking at the organ trade?”

“Yes, definitely.” Cody smiled again, this time with pride. Nothing crazy about her lover, for sure. Kim was on the ball, a quick and smart thinker. As far as Cody was concerned, this was beyond sexy. “We have several interesting leads related to that, and following through,” she confirmed. “There’s just not enough hours in the day to get it done all in one go.”

“I know how hard you and Ellie work, though. You’ll get there,” Kim assured confidently. “At the same time, sleep and food are not optional.”

“No, I know.” Cody squeezed her hand. “Hey, thanks for waiting up for me tonight.”

“Of course, darling.”

“And for the lasagna.”

“You’re welcome. Just not sure I like that you’re making me sound like a dutiful housewife from the 50s.”

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“Oh, is this what I’m doing?” Cody chuckled, amused at the little flash of temper. “I’d say domestic goddess, more like.”

“Huh. Better.” Though Kim sounded far from impressed.

“Anyway, it was a compliment, you know?” Cody went on, enjoying teasing her.

“Then leave the word ‘domestic’ out of it. All I did was pull lasagna out of the freezer and stick it in the oven with the bread. No big deal.” Kim shrugged.

“Look at you, all sulky,” Cody laughed.

“Well, just saying. I didn’t do much.”

“Still, the lasagna did not get in the freezer by accident. You have a problem accepting compliments from your girlfriend?”

“No. Does the girlfriend know when to quit?”

“Not yet.” Cody grinned. “You know I’m right.”

With an ironic roll of the eyes, Kim capitulated. “Alright, Officer ‘I-Have-To-Have-The-Last-Word’. I guess I’d be okay being called a goddess from time to time.”

“It’s Detective. And you do look like one to me, Ms. Reed.”

“In this case, and since you were good and ate up all your food...” Kim stood up with



a sultry smile. “You can do your job in the shower.”

Cody followed instantly as if drawn to her by a magnetic string.

“What job?” she asked.

Kim stopped long enough on her way to deliver a scorching glance over her shoulder.

“Worshipping me, of course. As your goddess.”

That look, so unapologetically sexual, the alluring flush of color across her cheeks, and her words certainly sent a flurry of tingles straight down between Cody’s legs. Any fatigue she may have felt after the long day, or frustration at her seeming lack of quicker progress, vanished like a puff of smoke. And she sure got her wish in the shower, as Kim playfully instructed her to get to work.

“Wash me. Just use your hands.”

Cody grabbed the soap and got to work, gliding her hands over hot, smooth, chocolate skin. She took her time and enjoyed eliciting the odd shiver of pleasure, a smile, and an alluring sparkle in her lover’s dark eyes.

“I see you take your work to heart, Detective.”

“Your pleasure is my only focus, my queen.”

Kim chuckled low and deep in her throat. “Mm... Nice.”

She massaged her fingers into her wet hair and dispensed a tender, tantalizing kiss. Cody could feel a slight vibration under her own fingers, Kim’s slow build-up of arousal. So beautiful! She prompted another kiss, swiftly granted, and lost herself in

the sublime sensation of being touched and caressed in return. Kim lingered over her breasts, cupping each one in the palm of her hands, then squeezing gently and rolling her nipples. Her eyes twinkled again with her next gentle command.

“On your knees, darling.”

Jesus Christ! Cody sank between her thighs with a grateful heart. To think she'd come to believe that life without this kind of relationship would be okay... Of course, she had been scared to allow herself to love again. But when Kim walked into her life, she never stood a chance. Love struck again, slicing through the fear as cleanly and easily as a blade through the water. There was never any real choice... And yes, Cody was grateful. Immensely so.

“I want you to kiss me slow.” Kim was not done dispensing instructions. “Right there, yes. Suckle me gently.”

Cody discovered that she enjoyed being told what to do and how to pleasure her partner exactly in the way she preferred. Kim's direct and descriptive manner was a major turn-on, and she was definitely good at it.

“Kiss my clitoris. Use the tip of your tongue. Good girl.”

Cody shocked herself at how the last two words made her clench and shiver. Kim noticed.

“Did you like that?” she purred.

“Yes.”

“Are you wet?”

“Dripping.”

“Mm.” Her lover gripped her hair just hard enough to feel good, prompting her to glance up. Kim’s arousal was obvious in the heat of her eyes and her slow, eager smile. “Good girl,” she repeated, causing Cody to shudder. “Now, keep your focus.”

Cody loved being told. She put her heart and soul into the exercise and was fiercely pleased when Kim eventually stopped being able to utter any words. Her partner leaned against the shower wall, holding on to the sides for balance. Her thighs were tight and shaking. She was pulsing, whimpering, undulating to the sucking rhythm she imposed. Cody was back in charge and saw her through a ripping orgasm.

“Say it again,” she dared to ask once Kim’s breath was back.

“What?” the gorgeous woman teased.

“You know.”

“I think I do...” Kim wrapped her arms around her, brushed her lips tenderly on a particularly sensitive spot behind her ear, and murmured. “Good girl, Cody. My girl.”

Cody lost her own breath just on that. Her legs threatened to give way. Realizing this, Kim took her to bed and treated her to a lazy, sensual massage and a toe-curling

orgasm to finish. Cody melted into sleep on wings of pure pleasure but woke up to a sharp scream in the middle of the night. Shit. Shit! Reaching instinctively for her weapon on the nightstand, she let it go when she realized that her partner was having a nightmare. Bad one, it sounded like.

“Babe. Kim.” She laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder, only for Kim to struggle against her.

“Cody!” she cried at the same time.

“Yes, I’m here. Wake up, you’re dreaming.”

“No, no... Don’t!”

Her eyes were wide open, but she seemed lost in whatever dream she was having. Cody gave her a little shake, gentle but firm.

“Come on now.”

“No...”

“Kim. Wake up!”

“The fire,” Kim mumbled. “Don’t go over there. Please, no, Cody!”

Her eyes shone with vivid fear. Catching desperation in her voice as well, Cody pulled her into her arms and held on tight. She tried to get through to her. “Wake up. It’s a dream. Open your eyes.”

It took a while, longer than it should have, but Kim finally came to with a bad start, a single word on her lips.

“Cody?”

“Right here, darling.”

Breathing hard, her skin hot to the touch, though no longer from desire, Kim cupped her face in both hands. She stared hard and deep, as if not sure she could believe her eyes.

“I’m with you,” Cody repeated gently. “It’s alright.”

“Are you okay?” Kim spoke in a trembling voice.

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“You’re not hurt?”

“No,” Cody insisted, a little concerned now at the intensity of her emotions. “I’m alright. Kim, you just had a bad dream. I’m okay. See?”

chapter 25

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As Cody flicked on the lights, Kim could see that she was fine. She noticed her concern, evident in the way she watched her. Cody's expressive blue eyes never left her face as she took a couple of deep breaths. Grateful for her quiet presence, touched by her reaction, Kim pressed a trembling hand to her cheek.

"Sorry to wake you up like this, babe," she murmured.

"Not a problem," Cody assured. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay now. Thanks."

"I guess discussing murder and mutilated bodies at dinner wasn't such a good idea, huh?"

"No, it's not that," Kim started, only to stop abruptly. Ah, damn...She could not quite suppress another shiver, even as she insisted. "I'm fine."

"You weren't fine a few seconds ago."

"Don't worry about that."

"Ah, come on, Kim." The sweet look on Cody's face turned more inquisitive and sharp. Cop-like, which, of course, was not surprising. "Thanks for trying to reassure me, but I'd rather you were straight with me. This looked like more than just a dream; you really struggled to get out of it. Did you have a vision?"

"No, no..."God, please, let it not be!

“But you still look worried. What’s going on?”

Kim had to make a split-second decision: head or heart? The impulse to withdraw from this conversation, to lie, or to pullback into her shell was there alright and pretty strong. But this was Cody asking. Love won. She would not lie.

“I’ve been having a few nightmares,” she admitted.

“A few?”

“Yes. Not like this, but yeah.”

“About me?”

“No, I... Why would you say that?” Kim stared, astounded and alarmed. “Cody, I love you.”

“I know that, but—Hold on.” Cody kept her close when she started to slide off the bed. “Are you aware that you said my name a few times before waking up?”

“What?” Kim stilled.

“In the dream. You were talking about fire. You said ‘Don’t go there’. And my name. You looked terrified and kept asking me if I was okay. That’s why I’m wondering if I was in the dream.”

“I don’t remember. What else did I say?”

“That’s it. There was a fire?”

“I... I don’t know. Give me a minute.”

“Of course.”

Kim closed her eyes and emptied her mind to try to bring it back. Deep down, she felt it was important. But all she sensed was a vague feeling of unease, fast disappearing.

“It’s gone now.” She sighed. “What time is it?”

“Almost five A.M.”

“I need coffee. Cold shower and a brew.”

“You’re on your own with the cold shower, but I’ll get coffee started,” Cody offered.

“Thanks.”



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Kim did not let herself debate or hesitate. Though she hated cold showers with a vengeance, she forced herself to stand under the jet of freezing water for a full minute. Enduring. Re-focusing. She kept her breathing under control as the cold penetrated deep into her bones and jolted her back into her body. Forcing her to be present. Here, now, physically. Not lost in her imagination, a dream, or spirit. Once done with that, she dressed quickly and joined her partner in the kitchen. The scent of good, rich coffee and fresh toast was in the air. She inhaled. Let it out nice and slow. Okay... Okay, fine.

“Feeling better?” Cody prompted.

She stood next to the window in running shorts and a black Lewiston P.D. sweatshirt. Her blue eyes shone brightly in her slender face, and her tousled blond hair was illuminated by a ray of early-morning sunshine. She looked strong and grounded. Also, just like an angel again, Kim reflected.

“I’m good.” She walked to her, took her face in both hands and kissed her. Slow and firm, anchoring herself a bit more into solid reality. “Even better now.”

“Good to hear.” Cody lingered, studying her face. “So. Tell me about the nightmares?”

“Ah. Yeah, sure.” Kim picked up her cup of coffee. Leaning a hip against the kitchen counter, she considered. “There’s not really much to tell, to be honest. It’s all very vague. Just feelings. Emotions. Layers and impressions. Not actual events I could describe.”

“How long has it been going on?”

“A week and a bit.”

“Mm.” The frown on Cody’s face said she should have told her earlier.

“It’s nothing,” Kim assured her again. “Usually, I just wake myself up, realize a dream has been going on, turn over, and go right back to sleep.”

“Usually. But today, you woke up screaming.”

“Yes... Sorry about that.” Without thinking, Kim raised a single shoulder, both in reluctance and a touch of involuntary dismissal as well.

She stared into her steaming coffee. Wondered. Could this be a prelude to another vision? About Cody? My God. I hope not! Looking up, she noticed the corner of Cody’s mouth twitch as if she were trying to suppress a smile.

“What?” she prompted.

“Nothing,” came the teasing, if slightly defiant, answer.

Okay. I probably deserve that. Though Cody was smiling, Kim was not so sure herself. She was not amused, and her heart also tightened at the notion of what her lover may be thinking. Kim knew for sure that she would hate it if the roles were reversed

“Look, Cody, I’m not holding back on you, okay?” she told her intently. “Please, believe me.”

“I believe you. No question.”

“Okay. Then... What? You’re looking at me funny.”

“Am I? “Well. I don’t think you realize the effect you have on me,” Cody answered with a soft chuckle. Again, she looked a little sheepish as she went on. “Sometimes, I look at you in the middle of a conversation, and it just makes me want to smile. Even with a serious topic, like right now, I take one look at you, and boom...” Her eyes flashed with emotion. “I am in love with you, Kim. Helplessly, you might say. So I get a little lost in the feeling sometimes.”

Kim bit on her lip. Okay. Wow. She had not unexpected this. The admission was so beautifully honest and loaded with gorgeous vulnerability. For a moment, it left her totally speechless, and her mind blank. Then she stepped forward and pulled her lover into a tight embrace.

“I love your soul. Cody... I don’t deserve you.”

“Now that’s bullshit.” Cody answered fiercely and held her just the same. “Listen, Kim; you need to stop apologizing about this stuff as if I’m not supposed to be involved. I want to be! Don’t you get it?”

“Okay...” Kim chuckled, deeply touched. “Okay. Yes.”

“I don’t care if you wake me up in the middle of the night. Don’t care if it’s because of a dream, a vision, some craving for McDonalds, or whatever. I’m here for you. If you’re not okay, I want to know.”

“Well, I’m okay, I just—”

“Babe.” Cody shifted to meet her eyes. Hers held a definite warning. “Stop.”

Her barriers well and truly demolished, Kim gave a small sigh. Then, as Cody

enfolded her even more tightly, she stopped fighting and allowed herself to rest in her arms. Love, support, and total acceptance. This is what she was being offered here. It had to be the greatest gift... And in return, she would give her full honesty.

“The last few weeks have been intense,” she admitted. “You know, with... The case.”

“Yes.” Cody nodded, understanding perfectly that she did not want to say Cassie Winters’ name out loud. “It’s been rough on you.”

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“In contrast, the rest was amazing. Falling in love with you, moving in together, meeting your friends... It was—~~I~~Samazing. I am thankful for every minute with you, Cody.”

“But,” her lover said gently, patiently.

“It’s a lot,” Kim admitted. “And my sense is... activated, you could say.”

“You’re feeling overwhelmed.”

“I guess a tiny bit, yes.”

“I’m sorry. It’s my fault.” Cody was quick to apologize and put on a brave face, but Kim still caught it; that look in her eyes betrayed her true feelings: wounded, crushed. She hated to be the cause of it.

“Cody—”

“We went too fast, didn’t we?” Her lover interrupted before she could explain. “It’s okay, we’ll slow it down. Do you want me to move out of here for a bit and—”

“No!” Startled and alarmed, Kim grabbed her by the shoulders. “That’s really not what I want. Unless...” She studied her face and hesitated. “Do you?”

“Hell, no.” Cody was firm on that. “Absolutely not. I just told you, didn’t I? I want to be involved. But I’ll go at whatever pace is good for you.”

“This is fine, then. I want you in my life, baby.” Kim was no less firm as she said this, though she spoke in a gentle voice she felt was required. “I want you with me, Cody. All the time. I’m just being honest because you asked me to, and that’s the way I want our relationship to be. Open, clear, true.”

“Me too,” Cody murmured. “Yes. In all the ways.”

“Right. I was not able to control my ability with... Cassie.” Kim exhaled. “It took me over completely. So, of course, I don’t want that to happen again.”

“Of course not.”

“I guess I’m a little nervous at being able to sense so much, all of a sudden.”

“I understand.”

“I think the fear is playing out in my dreams. You are so precious to me... I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Nothing will.” Cody frowned, once again looking a bit confused. “What are you saying?”

“I don’t even know. Don’t worry.” Kim wrapped her arms back around her neck. Damn! She hated this kind of drama, especially when she was the source of it. Time to get a grip, and change the subject. “I meant to tell you something else.”

“Mm,” Cody grunted and tightened her hold. “What?”

“It’s about last night.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. I really enjoyed being in charge. Telling you what to do... having you on your knees in the shower...” Kim smiled at the happy, muffled chuckle that this provoked. Much better. She could almost feel her lover blushing. “How about you, darling?” she prompted.

“Don’t do this.”

“What?”

“This!” Cody laughed. “Rev me up just before I go on duty and can’t do anything about it. It’s not fair.”

She was, indeed, blushing. Kim nodded, relaxing.

“Do I really have this much power?” she teased.

“You know you do, so be careful with me.”

“Alright, Detective. You have to go?”

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“Sadly, yes. And you too. Text me when you arrive at the office, okay?”

“I will.”

Kim watched her pick up her badge and secure her weapon on her hip. Cody paused at the door to flash her one last smile. “I love you, Kim.”

“Likewise. Look after yourself out there, okay?”

“Sure thing.” Cody’s eyes sparkled. “Hey, by the way...”

“Yes?”

“Don’t tell anyone, but I love you in charge as well.”

Delighted, Kim laughed.

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Two weeks later, Quinn observed her detectives grill the man they brought in for interrogation in the case of the stolen body parts killings. Sadly, they were not able to prevent a third victim from losing their life... but recovered CCTV video of the area where the body was found yielded a number of useful clues as to where the actual murder may have taken place. They found the scene, more pointers. Then, painstaking investigative work, determination, and a good dose of talent eventually led Miller and Ellie to their target. The killer proved not to be active in the illegal organ trade, after all, just a man who acted alone for his own sick pleasure. He was forty-three years



old, lean and wiry, the kind who might prove deceptively strong and nasty in a fight. A former funeral home worker, sacked in recent months after it came to light that he was taking pictures of his deceased 'patients' to sell on the internet, he fixed everyone with feral eyes in his fully tattooed face.

"Stare all you want, buddy," Miller let him know. "It won't change a damn thing."

He snarled at her and rattled the chain that kept him tethered to the table.

"Yeah, you're cooked," Ellie added dispassionately.

Quinn nodded in approval from behind the one-way glass mirror. Yep. A search of the man's apartment had not revealed anything incriminating, but a storage unit he rented under a false name certainly yielded plenty of interest in the case. Ellie reported finding a collection of expensive Japanese knives and scalpels; some of them still bloody. Inside a chest freezer, David Dark, as appropriately was his name, kept animal parts, a couple of dismembered squirrels, and, crucially, the eyes of his latest human victim. DNA recovered on the body was identified as his. Miller called it a slam dunk for the prosecution. Quinn agreed. At this point, a full confession was not even required to ensure future conviction for this guy. Still, it would be good practice for Ellie, who rose to the challenge in style. Quinn appreciated the way she was able to get under the suspect's skin and provoke him to reveal things that would invalidate an insanity defense claim.

"Excellent work, Detectives," Quinn told them both after the interview. "And nicely done, Ellie."

"Not such a rookie now, am I?" the young cop grinned.

"Not until you said that," her partner chuckled ironically.

Quinn was in a good mood as she headed to her office, but she came to an abrupt halt when she discovered an unexpected visitor waiting for her there. Ah, man... Now what?

## chapter 26

She had a new haircut. A short bob, possibly layered to highlight her slender neck and dramatic jawline. Even if not intentional, the style also emphasized a lean and boldly sculpted face. Her clothes looked new. Wide-legged trousers; a white, fitted linen shirt with half sleeves; and brown sling-back leather sandals to accommodate the weather. Classy. Smooth. Nice legs, too, Quinn noted. She was too thin, though one might take her for a broody model instead of a woman fresh out of rehab. Brooke certainly had the looks. Quinn observed her as she lingered in front of a photo of her and Lia, taken the day after their secret wedding in Mexico. Quinn could never look at it without smiling, and that's why she kept it on her desk; to remind herself of the important things in life. In the photo, she was in board shorts and a sports bra. Lia wore cut-off jeans and a bikini top. Both tanned and grinning at the camera on a sun-drenched, white-sand beach. Lia had one arm slung casually around her neck but holding her close all the same. 'Gotcha!' the loving gesture seemed to say. And not letting you go. Quinn reflected they should take another trip. For now, she'd have to deal with Lia's ex, apparently.

"Hello, Brooke," she said as she walked in.

She spoke quietly, but the woman still jumped a little at the sound of her voice and swiftly moved away from the desk.

"Hello, Lieutenant." She attempted a smile but did not quite pull it off. "Quinn, if I may..."

Quinn sat in her chair and leaned back to watch her.

“Lieutenant will do.” She nodded once. “So. Detox over? How are you doing?”

Brooke fixed her for a moment as if to gauge the true level of warmth and concern in her expression. Or lack of it, for that matter. Quinn held her gaze silently in return, nice and neutral. Not giving her much, because why should she? She was curious and appropriately wary as to why the woman might come and see her.

“Rehab ended yesterday,” Brooke answered. She remained standing. “I feel much better, yes.”

“So, what can I do for you?”

“Nothing. Well, sorry; yes,” Brooke conceded when Quinn raised a stormy eyebrow. “If you would hear me out, please... I came to apologize to you, first of all. I also want to thank you for your intervention at my apartment.”

“Coming to you in Boston was Lia’s idea; I just went along for the ride.”

“Okay, fair enough.”

“As for your apology, I’d like to know why you wrote that stuff about me to begin with.” Quinn would not make it easy for her. “Some of it... Hell. Allof it was downright vicious, Brooke.” She used her name when she did not allow her to do the same. Her office, her rules. “I know you spent some time in Iraq as a reporter. Embedded with army troops. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“You must have realized the strong bond between soldiers. You were there to see first-hand how traumatic it was for those who witnessed their friends and colleagues be ripped apart by IEDs and bullets in the field – I mean, literally torn to shreds. How could you not recognize the true measure of their sacrifice? Some gave their life; others were psychologically and physically scarred for life.”

“I saw it,” Brooke murmured. “I understood.”

“So you claim,” Quinn said coolly. She kept her eyes on her, forcing Brooke to hold her gaze. “Didn’t stop you digging into my army records, did it? You accused me of leading my soldiers to their deaths when you knew full well that it wasn’t true. The journalist with us at the time was a writer, just like you. Her name was Evan Alvarez. Of course, you knew that. She died in my arms, Brooke.”

“I’m sorry. I am so sorry.”

Quinn ignored her reply, and she just pushed.

“You know what it’s like to have a wounded woman bleed to death as you hold her, knowing there is nothing you can do to save her?”

“No.” Brooke swallowed. “I don’t know.”

“Hopefully, you’ll never find out.” Quinn got up and went to stand in front of her. Nicely in her face. “She was in pain, and afraid, asking me for reassurance during her last few minutes of life. I told her she could close her eyes. That when she woke up, we’d all be back at camp and everything would be okay. Evan trusted me to keep her safe.”

Quinn did not choose to revisit the memories and emotions of that day very often. She had been convinced that she would die too; that it was only a matter of time before they came for her. Her vehicle had landed on its roof, a smoldering heap of junk, destroyed by a concealed roadside bomb. Two of the men riding in the lead with her, soldiers she thought of as brothers, were already dead. Small-arms fire could be heard all around as some of her team fought back. Not enough of them to do so. She was injured, nearly out of ammo, and enemy forces were closing in. Prior to this day, all Intel had claimed that the road she chose to travel on was clear of IEDs. Even though this turned out notto be the case, there was no one really to blame. This was just the grim reality of war. Sometimes, you run out of luck and straight into lethal trouble. Even knowing this, it had taken Quinn a long time to recover from the events of the day. Her physical injuries were severe. Psychologically, it was worse, and she struggled to come to terms with the death of the people she was responsible for. Survivor’s guilt was a real, nasty thing. Brooke had found an old wound and applied pressure for maximum damage.

“Go ahead if you want,” the woman said in a resigned, flat voice. “I would.”

“What?”

“Hit me. I deserve it.”

Quinn relaxed the fists she had unconsciously clenched in the heat of the moment. Hitting people when they were down, defenseless, and remorseful was not her style. And she could see all this in Brooke’s gaze now. Her regret seemed deep and genuine.

“You deserve a good punch, but you look beaten enough,” she stated joylessly and stepped back. “You need a shrink; you know that?”

“Yes.” Brooke sighed. “I saw one during rehab. Every day, one-to-one sessions.”

“I wouldn’t stop there if I were you.”

“Why do you care?”

Because there was no animosity in the question, just the sort of sadness and emotional exhaustion that Quinn had been no stranger to, once upon a time, she answered.

“Lia would be hurt if anything happened to you.”

Brooke’s large grey eyes, speckled with a little green at this precise moment, glistened with a layer of tears.

“I really am sorry, Lieutenant. I know it’s no excuse, but the drugs I was taking really obliterated my mind. The blogs... The horrible stuff I wrote about you...” She winced. “It’s not like me. I realize you don’t know that; you don’t know me at all. But it’s not... I would never—”

Catching tiny droplets of sweat on her forehead as she tried to find her words, and

noting her sudden pallor, Quinn guided her into a chair.

“Breathe.” She passed her a bottle of water and watched Brooke take it and drink as if she had just crossed a desert.

“I’m still a little weak,” she said. “Physically.”

“That’s okay.” Quinn found it hard to stay angry with the woman. First of all, it was not in her nature to hold a grudge. Secondly, she had to give it to her: coming in to talk openly like this took guts. “Look, I get it,” she nodded. “You experienced a severe mental breakdown. Opioid drugs are nasty.”

“I know that now. Never again, I tell you.”

“Good to hear. As for the rest, well, no one died, and I was reinstated. I will not press charges. I accept your apology. Let’s put this thing behind us, okay?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:23 pm*

“Okay. Thank you, Lieutenant.” Relief brought color back into Brooke’s face. “Would it be okay if I called Lia? I would like to apologize to her as well. Face to face.”

“Don’t ask me. My wife doesn’t need permission to see and talk to anyone she likes.”

“Yes, of course. I just don’t want you to worry.”

“I’m not worried in the least, Brooke,” Quinn assured her in a silky tone which only emphasized the seriousness of what she said next. “Just know that if you hurt her again, I will put you down. No questions asked.”

She spoke with lethal calm and the appropriate amount of threat. Brooke clearly registered the warning. In the next instant, it also drew an unexpected grin out of her, and her eyes flickered with a flash of humor. Quinn assumed this must be a glimpse of the old Brooke, a woman Lia told her was always bright and vivacious.

“I hear you loud and clear,” she confirmed.

“Are you still in love with her?” Quinn prompted.

“Well, it was my choice to end the relationship.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“No... No, it’s not love anymore. But appreciation, yes.” Brooke reflected. “I’m older now, and I see things differently. It was not meant to be with Lia. I fully accept



that. I just hope it's not too late to maybe one day experience with someone else the kind of connection that you two seem to have."

It was an honest answer, which made Quinn think of Janet. Her friend had been a little despondent at one point. Then she met Ellie and fell madly in love.

"You know, I hear it's never too late," she declared.

Again came that attractive and youthful smile just tinged with a touch of sadness.

"Thanks for saying that," Brooke nodded. "Well..."

Quinn took the hand that she held out to her and shook. "Thanks for coming to talk. Take care of yourself."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Quinn."

"Thank you, Quinn." Brooke smiled in sheer relief.

It was Friday afternoon, her schedule was clear, and Quinn did not linger long at work after this. When she arrived home, and told her wife of the visit, Lia suggested going for a walk on the beach to catch up.

"Might this involve a burger along the way?"

"If you like," Lia approved. "Good idea."

"Let's do it, then. I'm starving."

Annoyingly, Quinn's work phone went off just as they were going out the door.

"Ah, sorry..."

"No, you go ahead," Lia assured.

"It's Ellie," Quinn noted. "Yes, Detective."

"Lieutenant." Ellie sounded uncharacteristically stressed on the line, and the reason was immediately obvious as she went on. "I just received a panicked call from Kim Reed. She said she had another vision. It's about Cody, and she can't reach her on the phone."

"Where is your partner?" Quinn asked immediately.

"On her way home, as far as I know. She let me take our unit to the garage for a check as we seem to have an oil leak. She was going to take the subway. Lieutenant, I've tried to call her too, but she's not answering."

Ellie sounded slightly out of breath, worried and frustrated. Shit, Quinn thought. She signaled to Lia to wait.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:23 pm*

“What did Kim say, Ellie?” she prompted.

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The nightmares had stopped. As the quality of her sleep slowly improved, Kim rationalized that the dreams must have been linked to the recent changes in her life, as she told Cody. Also, this was her first time dating a cop. Her first time falling in love with a woman who carried a weapon on her hip as comfortably as others might a tube of lipstick in their handbag, a police detective who might be called to put her life on the line at any time in order to protect others. Kim trusted that Cody knew what she was doing and that she could handle herself out there on the streets. At the same time, she was acutely aware of the risks involved in her career. No doubt her unconscious mind had a tough time settling with this. When it finally did, and her extra-sensory sense calmed down, she relaxed. Alright, then. It would be fine. Kim had two other reasons to feel good at the start of the weekend. She had spent her Friday morning at a local school, talking to kids about available careers in the field of law and justice. Good stuff. She was also looking forward to a new position with the District Attorney's office. Tom Lewis, the DA for Lewiston, said he was impressed by her previous results as a defense lawyer, and excited to have her join his team on the prosecution side. It occurred to Kim that she was not just ready but hungry for this kind of work. She headed home, keen to tell Cody that she had decided to take the job; her partner was all for it. On the way, she booked a table at their favorite restaurant. Cody had just closed her latest case, so she could do with a treat as well. The vision occurred as Kim walked into their apartment. The sensation was unlike any other: a sudden feeling of floating, and also like a portion of her brain was detaching, sliding off. She only had a milli-second to realize what was happening before she felt herself go. Then it was pretty much like being yanked backward into a

vortex at tremendous speed.Cody. Heat. Danger.A series of vivid images and sensations assaulted her mind.Fire. Flames.Trapped.Other details imprinted on her consciousness.Ocean Street. 17.The vision must have lasted all of three seconds, but it sure packed a punch. By the time she regained her senses, Kim was on the floor, on her knees, sucking in air. With trembling hands, she immediately grabbed her phone and dialed #1 for Cody.

“Pick up... Pick up. Come on!”

She already knew her lover might not answer. As her fear was confirmed, her heart threatened to punch a hole through her chest. Kim ordered herself to keep it together. She called Cody’s partner.

“Hello?”

As Ellie came on, Kim told her quick and precise.

“Subway station 17 on Ocean Street. Something is going to happen there. No, no, I don’t know what! Just that Cody’s there, and... Something bad, okay? I saw flames. I have to go. Please, Ellie, get help!”

chapter 27

The pregnant woman on the subway shot her a fearful look as Cody boarded the train. Catching the direction of her gaze, Cody moved the side of her shirt back over her weapon and discreetly flashed her badge.

“It’s okay. I’m a cop.”

“Oh, sorry.” The woman grinned, then added in a whisper, “I’m not used to armed police.”

“Ah.” Cody moved aside to allow a cyclist with his bike to squeeze by, then asked the expected question. “Where are you from?”

“England. I’m getting married here next week.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks!”

The woman went on babbling happily about how her fiancé would have been okay to make the move to England if she had wanted him to, but she was much happier doing it the other way around. Guns aside, obviously, being in Lewiston was the better option; mainly, she declared, because the so-called ‘Great’ British weather sucked far and wide.

“I just spoke to my mum back home in Yorkshire. She said it’s sixteen deg—oops, pardon me! I mean sixty Fahrenheit, and bucketing down. But here?” She beamed. “I’m on my way to the beach to meet my equally hot guy!”

“Good for you.” Cody nodded distractedly.

She observed another man: this one wearing black pants, a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a suit jacket casually slung over his shoulder, board the train at the next stop. She noticed his tie, loose around the collar of his open shirt, the large leather briefcase he carried, and the newspaper folded under his arm. Blond hair, crew cut, and wire-rimmed glasses. The train was packed with office workers clocking off early on this lovely Friday afternoon, and he looked like any of them. Or at least at first glance. Because then, Cody noticed a small tattoo visible behind his ear. It looked like a swastika and drew her attention. She knew that the symbol was both holy and auspicious in the Hindu culture. She had learned this a few years back in New York while working a case involving the murder of a Hari Krishna follower.

But this blond guy did not strike her as a Krishna devotee, especially when she caught the furious glare he shot at a young kid who stood in his way. Granted, it was just a look, but something buzzed for Cody in that instant. Her cop sense told her to stay alert. Leaving behind her new British acquaintance, as the woman began to share the pros and cons of various baby names she and her fiancé were considering, Cody started to follow the man. No easy task. The train was full to capacity, smelling like a hard-earned Friday. She did her best to keep up, as her target moved through a mass of bodies, headed toward the other end of the carriage. Cody briefly lost sight of him when they arrived at the next station. The doors opened. People got off. There was an influx of new passengers. Cody was stuck behind a woman a head shorter than she was but three times as large. She had a bad feeling, and a shiver ran down her spine when she heard someone shout:

“Hey! Hey, man! You forgot your briefcase!”

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The station was just across and a bit further down the street from her apartment building, so Kim ran to it. She sprinted across the entrance lobby, elbowed a couple of people who were not moving fast enough, and forced her way through a turnstile. This set off an alarm. Never mind; she ignored it and kept going. Or would have, if someone had not grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her back. Goddammit! Furious at not being able to twist free of that iron grip, ready to strike in retaliation, Kim spun around and found herself staring right into the steady eyes of Quinn Wesley.

“Let go,” she hissed.

“No,” came the firm answer. “Talk to me first.”

“For God’s sake!” Kim glanced aside as her lover’s partner suddenly materialized next to her. “I told you all I could, there is no time for discussion! I know it sounds

insane, but you have to trust me! Something is going to happen—”

A loud voice on the Tannoy made her stop and listen.

‘ATTENTION PLEASE, ALL SUBWAY TRAVELERS. DUE TO A REPORTED EMERGENCY, THIS STATION IS BEING EVACUATED. PLEASE LEAVE THE STATION IMMEDIATELY. ATTENTION PLEASE...’

The announcement was followed by the sound of several sirens in the distance. Still breathless but no longer so wary, Kim looked at Quinn, who fiercely returned her gaze.

“Fire trucks are getting here,” she confirmed. “I’ve ordered the entire section between platforms 16 and 18 to be shut down. Just in case.”

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Okay...Kim nodded. Well.Shit!The lieutenant was taking a hell of a gamble, evacuating the entire zone just on the strength of her vision, and her belief in her.

“Thank you,” Kim told her in a voice raw with emotion.

“Yeah, well,” Quinn said grimly. ”I figure we’ll be sorrier if you’re correct, and we do nothing, than the other way around. So, what else can you tell me?”

“That’s it. I don’t—Oh...”

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Ellie grabbed hold of Kim as a bit more color leached out of her already pale face, and she swayed. For a moment there, as she looked into her deep amber eyes, it was like gazing through a pane of clear glass; a little weird and spooky. Ellie glanced at her lieutenant to see what she made of it. Quinn’s frown seemed to be approaching critical levels of displeasure. Her jaw was set to near breaking point. And no wonder, actually. If Kim’s warning of impending doom proved inaccurate, Quinn would pay dearly for triggering a full-scale emergency response, and no doubt even more so when people found out she had done it on the word of a so-called psychic. Then again, as Quinn stated to her when she made the decision to shut down the station;‘She was spot-on once before. We can’t risk it.’

“Kim,” she grunted now. “Help me out here.”

The woman shuddered. Blinked. Bit on her lip.



“He wants to kill,” she murmured. “It’s heavy. Dark. I feel it. Hatred. Wrath.”

“Who is he?” Quinn prompted. “Can you describe him?”

Breathing hard, almost panting, Kim stared at the throngs of people coming out of the lower levels.

“I don’t know.” She spoke through clenched teeth, her tone loaded with frustration. “All I see is fire and people screaming. I see Cody in the middle of it...”

Ellie squeezed her hand in support when her voice broke, and also to keep her from rushing off. Kim’s fingers were like ice despite the air temperature around eighty. She was also shaking with a huge amount of tension in her body. It was like holding onto a live wire. Quinn stopped her questions long enough to bark at the closest subway official.

“Why are so many people still coming through the gates? I told you to shut down all traffic down there!”

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It would all come down to a matter of seconds. The guy with the swastika gave no sign he even heard the call about his suitcase. Cody pinned him with a suspicious stare as the doors closed again and the train rumbled to move on. As their eyes met and held for a moment when he realized that she was watching him, a mix of dark pleasure and malevolence glinted across his face. The man raised his fists, opened his hands wide, and mouthed the word:BOOM!

For only the second time in her life, time slowed down for Cody. The first occurrence had been on that New York street as she raced to her fallen partner. Hoping it was not too late, only to find that Emma was gone. Now, as in then, extra-sharp focus also

accompanied the experience. She saw it all clearly. A train carriage full of people. The guy towards the back end of it, still holding the case with a baffled look on his face as to why its owner seemed so unbothered. He had yet to realize what he was in for, obviously. Cody assessed him. Tall, about six-two, with a jovial face, blue eyes, and short reddish-brown hair. In a pair of paint-stained trousers, heavy-duty work boots, and a black t-shirt, he looked like a construction worker. Behind him was a teenager with two younger kids in tow, an older man in a wheelchair, and more office workers... Everyone frozen in slow motion. Cody could hear her own breathing, in and out, and the rapid pounding of her heart. Don't just stand there. Do something! The thought snapped her back to reality at the same time as the train stopped again just off the end of the platform. The doors re-opened, allowing a gap between the carriage and the tunnel wall through which two people might just be able to squeeze at a time.

**'ATTENTION PLEASE, ALL SUBWAY TRAVELERS. DUE TO A REPORTED EMERGENCY, THIS STATION IS BEING EVACUATED. PLEASE LEAVE THE STATION IMMEDIATELY. ATTENTION PLEASE...'**

As people immediately started to grumble, Cody whipped out her badge and held it up for everyone to see.

"I'm a detective with Lewiston P.D. Please remain calm as you exit the carriage and make your way out. You!" She locked eyes with the man holding the briefcase. "Don't move. Give me the case."

Perhaps because she had announced herself as a detective instead of a bomb squad specialist, he seemed amused at first.

"What's in it?" he chuckled. "A million dollars in cash?"

"Just pass it to me and go."

As the evacuation message was repeated, his smile slowly faded.

“Ah, come on. You don’t mean—”

“Give it to me. Slowly.”

Now as Cody reached him, the man could not fail to get her drift. She noted sweat rolling down his face, no longer just from the heat in the carriage. He did hand her the briefcase. Carefully. One hand around the handle, the other supporting the bottom. He looked a little green.

“Good man.” Cody nodded as their eyes met. “Now, make your way out. Help the others.”

But of course, she could not avoid her previous instructions being overheard, and the same kind of conclusion reached as the man had. The low-level grumble of disapproval at what seemed like a standard subway malfunction, a mild annoyance at the start of the weekend, turned into a panicked whisper. Like wildfire, it rippled through the carriage.

It’s a bomb—it’s a bomb—it’s a bomb—

“IT’S A BOMB!” A woman screamed it.

“Everybody stay calm,” Cody countered immediately.

It was too late, her voice was lost in the chaos. Everyone suddenly rushed for the doors in a mad scramble. While some kept enough of a cool head to do the right thing and assist less able people, others just gave in to panic. It turned into a massive free-for-all.

“Bloomin’ heck!” a woman yelled louder than all the rest. “Will you lot bloody calm down?”

British accent; clearly pissed off. Cody glanced over to catch the pregnant woman holding two men back to allow a couple of kids to squeeze through the doors. Good. She exchanged a look with the passenger in the wheelchair, who seemed resigned to the fact that he might be the last to leave the train. Or not at all, for that matter.

“It’s okay. I won’t leave you behind,” Cody promised.

First, though, she walked to the far end of the carriage and slowly, with the utmost care, slid the briefcase under one of the seats. Best she could do. She considered firing a bullet through the laminated safety glass and hurling the case out onto the tracks as far as she could. But another carriage was in front, and on the side, a solid brick wall. So she just focused her efforts on what she could control, and helping people out. All the kids were gone now, she noted, as well as the pregnant woman. Others were frantically shoving and pushing to get through. Fists flew between two

men who really should know better. She grabbed the closest one to her by the collar of his shirt and shoved him back.

“You fucking—”

“Knock it off!” Cody snapped when he turned on her in a rage.

Passengers went on squeezing through the narrow opening. Twenty... Fifteen...Not fast enough.

“Go, go,” she encouraged.

Cody also reflected that they were lucky the train had stopped where it did, not further into the dark tunnel, and that the doors were not blocked.

“I’m Jim, by the way.” The construction worker had stayed behind to help.

“Cody,” she nodded tightly.

“It’s a bomb?” he muttered. “Really?”

“Don’t know for certain. Let’s just get out of here, eh?”

“You bet!”

This may turn out to be nothing. Maybe just a prank from Swastika man, and a stupid gesture to go with it. But this, Cody knew, was probably wishful thinking on her part. Someone must know something in order to trigger a full emergency evacuation. She clenched her teeth as she recalled her partner’s nightmares. Meanwhile, Jim slid one arm under the disabled man’s legs to lift him up. His eyes shone with resolve and determination.

“Let’s getcha out, man.”

“Thank you... Thank you,” the white-haired man said in a trembling voice.

“No problem. Detective, clear the way for us, will you?”

## chapter 28

Fire trucks and the bomb disposal team had just arrived on the scene when the explosion occurred. It was clearly heard. The ground shook, and a cloud of thick black smoke immediately billowed out of the open stairway. People still kept coming up from the lower levels, at a run now. Kim cast a quick glance in Wesley’s direction. The lieutenant was delivering instructions to the fire captain and the leader of the bomb squad. Ellie stood with them, listening, ready to spring into action. Both were no longer paying attention to her... which was good, Kim reflected, because she did not want to be held back again at this point. Cody was down there, so there was no question in her mind that it was where she would be headed too. She moved quickly toward the stairs, hiding behind other people. But then it was like a giant hand landing on the back of her neck, squeezing, forcing her to stop. And take a look. Blond guy; glasses; dark. There was blackness around him, and not from any kind of smoke. Without pausing to think or doubt herself, Kim hurried back to grab Ellie by the arm.

“Him,” she hissed, pointing at the man.

“What?”

“Stop him.”

Ellie, bless her, hesitated less than a micro-second before launching into action.

“Sir?”

Kim held her breath as she watched her walk after the guy, fingers around the butt of her weapon but not drawing it yet.

“Sir!” Ellie repeated louder. “Hold it.”

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He glanced at her over his shoulder, pointed a finger at his chest in a perfect, innocent, ‘Who? Me?’ gesture, then broke into a run. Ellie seemed to have anticipated this. She was already flying before he could take three steps. With one expert swipe, she kicked his legs out from under him, landed on his back, and neutralized him. Two officers in uniform promptly assisted in the arrest. Kim watched all this happen with her heart beating in her chest, then spun around and headed for the stairs. Another hand, this time warm and real, landed on her shoulder. Quinn, again. Oh, come on!

“I’m going to find Cody,” Kim snapped. “Get out of my way or—”

“Or what?” Quinn grunted, but she did not pursue that line. “Tell me; you think this guy is involved?”

“Yes.”

“Based on?”

Kim shook her head and let out a sharp exhale. The lawyer part of her perfectly understood Quinn’s reluctance... but how to say this without sounding insane? Just tell her the truth. After all, her intuition had proved accurate once again. Not enough to stop a bomb from going off, but at least in time to stop the trains and start the evacuation process. Hopefully, this may have saved some lives.

“Kim,” Quinn prompted urgently.

“Something about him,” Kim nodded in reply. “Dark and malevolent. Like a... an evil vibe. I’m sorry, I know it’s not proof or evidence, but that’s all I can tell you at



the moment.”

“That’s good enough,” Quinn declared.

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Cody was the last one to make it out of the carriage. Though far from an orderly evacuation, it still happened quickly. As soon as the ‘B’ word was uttered, no lack of urgency was felt on the part of any passenger. If there was, indeed, a bomb in that briefcase, when was it set to blow? Was it on a timer? How long would Swastika man have given himself to make his escape? There was no way to know this, and Cody did not waste her focus on speculation. As soon as it was her turn to exit, she scrambled out of there pretty much like her own skin was on fire. Slide out of the carriage and hurry down the side of the track. Move it! She had just reached the platform when her world turned upside down. The boom was deafening. Almost at the same moment, she felt the hot blast of air. It was like a giant fist punching her in the stomach. She lost her breath and could not get it back. There was a big whoosh with the booming sound, and all the air seemed to be sucked out of the space. The energy released by the explosion threw her all the way across the platform and slammed her into the opposite wall. Hard. On the verge of blacking out, Cody still had the presence of mind to throw her arms over her face to protect her eyes as a shower of debris, pieces of the carriage, burning metal, and lots of glass rained down on top of her. Everything went very dark and quiet. She lay on the floor, stunned by the violence of the impact. Not quite unconscious, but not fully alert either. Several seconds passed. Then, a firm slap brought her back.

“Hey. Hey! Wake up!”

She opened her eyes to find Jim, the construction worker, leaning over her. His face was covered in a layer of blood, dirt, and whatever else. She caught a giant wall of flames over his left shoulder.

“Fuck!” It brought her back, for sure.

“Yeah, we gotta go,” Jim replied and pulled her up.

“Where’s the old man?”

“Wheelchair guy. He got out with some others.”

“Okay,” Cody approved.

Everything hurt as if she had been pummeled by an MMA fighter. Thick black smoke filled the air, the kind that made her wonder how long they would have before collapsing from CO2 inhalation. It made it hard to see, too...

“Which way?” she gasped. “Where are the stairs?”

“Dunno.”

She followed him as Jim went left on a hunch, but after a few steps, they hit another wall. Shit! Cody dragged him with her, lower down so it would be easier to breathe. Well, at least in theory. Turning around, they stumbled over a body. The man’s right leg had been torn off at the hip. He was dead, lying in a large pool of his own blood. Feeling faint from the discovery, the smell of fresh blood, and smoke pouring into her lungs, Cody still managed to stay on her feet when a fit of coughing brought Jim down.

“No, come on!” she hissed. “Don’t give up!”

On his knees, retching, he crawled forward. This time, they hit the side of the platform. Realizing their position, Cody turned around and stared at another wall of flames. The exit had to be through there... The smoke felt thicker and more

unforgiving. Eyes burning, her lungs screaming for air, she blinked to clear her vision as it started to narrow. Black spots danced in front of her eyes. For the first time, the thought crossed her mind that they might not make it out of there.

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Many of the people staggering up the stairs had blackened faces, singed hair, and a thousand-yard stare. Kim was only looking for one woman... and not finding her. The firefighters had declared the lower level off-limits, and already announced that there were casualties. Kim went down regardless. There, the whole scene reminded her of an apocalypse movie. Some people cried. Others moaned in pain as they were being carried out on stretchers. Cody. Where the hell are you? Kim's heart leaped in her chest when she spotted her..., but as the woman turned, she realized it was someone else. Just a woman with blond hair and the same sort of build. Fuck! Angry now, Kim called on her gift. Show me Cody! Where is she? But her mind was blank. Empty. Refusing to think of what this might mean, Kim stared at two firefighters carrying a victim in a black body bag up the stairs. Ellie was lending a hand to a busy team of medics on the other side. She hurried over, looking hopeful.

"Any sign of her?"

"No." Kim struggled to say the word.

"Not yet," Ellie corrected firmly. "Don't worry too much, Kim. You know Cody, right?"

"Yes, but—"

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“Just yes. I’m sure she’ll be—” Ellie stopped, narrowed her eyes, and flashed a bright smile. “Here. She’s here, look!”

As she pointed over her shoulder, Ellie spun around to catch sight of her partner slowly making her way toward them. Relief at seeing her only partly alleviated her concern. Oh, Jesus! Cody looked like she had been run over by a truck. Her clothes were burnt and torn in places, her hair grey from dust and debris, and her bottom lip was not the only part of her bleeding. Kim spotted a large cut on the side of her forehead. Scratches and dark bruises covered her face. A breathing mask dangled from around her neck, and she seemed to be favoring her right leg. In spite of all this, she was smiling. Looking straight at her, and smiling.

“Cody.” Kim rushed forward to catch her in her arms. “Oh my God. Babe!”

“It’s okay.” Cody held her tight. “It’s over.”

“Are you alright? I mean, I see you’re not, but... Talk to me, please.”

“Yeah. I’m... all good.”

“You look like someone beat the crap out of you, partner,” Ellie stated. “But man, it’s good to see you on your feet!”

Cody flashed them both another exhausted but, at least as far as Kim was concerned, totally sexy smile.

“A bomb did kick my ass some, yeah. But I’ll live.”

“Yes.” Kim pulled her back into her embrace. “You will.”

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Cody experienced an instant of pure magic when she closed her arms around her, rested a protective hand on the back of her head, and gently massaged her hair. Even better than pure oxygen, she decided. She exhaled, closed her eyes, and allowed herself to be held. Quinn put an abrupt end to this moment of relaxation.

“Miller.”

Cody snapped her eyes open. Quinn’s blue gaze glinted in a mix of relief, concern, and sheer authority.

“Still in one piece?” she prompted.

“Just about, Lieutenant.”

“You okay?”

“Yes, fine.”

“She needs a doctor,” Kim declared.

“Status,” Quinn demanded as if she had not heard.

“I saw the bomber. Blond hair, blue eyes. Swastika tattoo on the side of his neck. He wears glasses—”

“In custody,” Ellie announced.

“Really? Wow.” Cody blinked in surprise. “You do kick ass, kid.”

“Don’t call me kid,” Ellie grinned. “Also, Kim gets credit for this one. She’s the one who identified him.”

“How did—” Cody started to ask, then realized. She looked into her partner’s eyes. “Oh. You had a vision?”

“Yeah, sort of. I’ll tell you all about it but for now, we need to get you to a hospital.”

“Are you okay?” Cody insisted.

“Yes, surprisingly fine, actually.” Kim laid a soothing hand on her cheek. “Don’t worry about me, babe. You look like you’re about to crash; we need to get you seen, okay?”

“Was the bomber on his own?” Quinn inquired, undeterred and urgent.

Of course, it was a crucial question.

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“I think so.” Cody forced herself to focus despite an already splendid headache getting worse, and the feeling that very fine needles were being fired at her eyeballs. “The explosive charge was in a briefcase he abandoned on the carriage. He made a sign to me to signal that it would blow. He looked happy about it. Nasty.”

“Alright, good feedback.”

“You got him, you sure?”

“I noticed the tattoo on his neck,” Ellie nodded. “It’s just as you described.”

“Okay, great.”

“Miller, what did—”

“Enough!” Kim rounded on Quinn with enough intensity to make her take a step back. “Cody’s injured and bleeding,” she snapped in exasperation. “I am taking her to the hospital now. You can talk to her when she’s been cleared.”

It was a moment, alright. From the corner of her eye, Cody noticed Ellie bite on her lip. The look on her face was nothing short of fascinated as she observed the two women. Had Cody not been so thrashed, hurt, and bleeding, yes, she would have laughed out loud. No one dared to bark at Lieutenant Wesley like this in the department. The fact that Kim so easily stood up to her authority was alluring in a way Cody could not really have explained, especially right now... but she felt it in the way her legs suddenly weakened. As Kim tightened her hold around her waist, Ellie stepped on the other side to support her as well.

“Alright.” The lieutenant nodded. “You’re in good hands, Miller. Take care of yourself. Report when you can.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Quinn glanced at Kim and gave her a small salute as she walked off, her expression at once amused and approving. They made their way through the station, and plenty of people, perhaps not so badly injured that they required a trip to the hospital, being cared for by medics on the ground.

“I’ve got you,” Kim murmured when they walked outside in the bright sunshine, and Cody flinched as her battered brain reacted to the light.

“I can drive if you want,” Ellie offered.

Cody opened her mouth to answer before realizing that the question was not directed at her.

“Thanks,” Kim replied. “We’ll sit in the back.”

Though Ellie was extra careful on the road to avoid speed bumps, potholes, and the like, the drive was still a nightmare for Cody. She kept her eyes closed for most of the way and was grateful for her lover’s soothing presence and gentle hold. Ellie got on the phone to warn Janet, who said she would meet them in the ER as soon as they arrived.

“I don’t need a neurosurgeon,” Cody groaned.

“Yes, darling, you do,” Kim countered. “You’re obviously concussed, and your ears have been bleeding.”



“It was a hard blast...”

Kim held her more tightly against her as another bump in the road made her whimper in spite of herself. She brushed an infinitely gentle kiss over her mouth and delivered a smile that was just as tender.

“I don’t want to start your lip bleeding again, but I needed this.”

“S’okay...” Cody sighed and sank a little deeper in her arms. “I needed it too.”

## chapter 29

She drifted off for a bit, thankfully, then came to just as Ellie was pulling up in front of the ER doors. Everything felt a little too bright and a little too loud. Could be a lot worse, though, Cody knew.

“I’ll let you out here and go park the car,” Ellie announced. Then, obviously spotted her partner because her eyes took on the usual dreamy shine. “Hello, Doc.”

“Hello, sexy.”

The famous neurosurgeon, in maroon scrubs with a line of dancing brains around the collar, a pair of black silicon-framed glasses, and a stethoscope dangling from her neck, flashed her a megawatt smile in return. Then she turned to Cody.

“Hi, Detective.”

“Hi,” Cody acknowledged.

Leaning in, Janet laced her fingers around her wrist to check her pulse, and she eyed her critically at the same time.

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“What’s that I hear about you hugging dynamite?”

“Ha.” Cody grunted, the best she could do.

“How’s the headache?”

“Getting a bit worse.”

“A bit, you say? Like going nuclear?”

“Yeah,” Cody admitted.

“Feeling a bit sick too?”

“A lot.”

“Aw,” Janet said in commiseration and pinched her lightly on the cheek. She then turned to Kim and proceeded to speak to her as if Cody were not there. “She’s definitely concussed.”

“Yes, I thought so.”

“We’ll take care of the cuts and bruises, check for additional wounds, and internal blast injuries. I do not anticipate any complication, but we’ll still keep her overnight—”

“No,” Cody said as firmly as she could manage.

“Overruled,” Janet declared and once again spoke only to Kim. “Don’t worry, okay? I’ll fix her up as good as new.”

“Thanks, Janet,” Kim nodded. “She was a little quirky when I got her, but I like her like that just the same.”

“Bet you do,” Janet laughed.

“Still here, you two. Still awake and hearing every word,” Cody groaned.

Ellie flashed her a sympathetic smile from the front seat but also did nothing to intervene. Cody resigned herself to being prodded and analyzed over the next however long this would take. She hoped it would include a few perks.

“Be great if I could have something for the headache,” she told Janet as she helped her out of the car.

“I’ll give you the good stuff, Detective, as soon as we get you admitted. Now, sit down for me.”

Appalled, Cody squinted hard at the wheelchair on offer.

“I can walk,” she assured, only to pitch forward when Janet briefly let go of her.

“I beg to differ,” the surgeon stated ironically. “Sit down. Don’t argue with me or make me force you.”

Oh, hell...Cody dropped into the chair with a little flare of temper for show and immediately regretted it when it made her eyeballs throb even more. She unconsciously shot out a hand to the side. Kim took it and squeezed.

“I’m here. I’m coming with you,” she promised.

“Chop, chop, ladies,” Janet instructed. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

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Her bedside manner bordered on rude, but Kim played along with it because she realized it was intentional. Their antics made Cody laugh in spite of her injuries, so it was fine. It also became clear that with Janet in charge, waiting times were annihilated, paperwork expedited, and the best care expertly delivered.

“You’re very welcome.” Janet grinned as Kim thanked her, then added with a dramatic and wistful sigh; “It’s a shame she doesn’t need brain surgery; that’s really where I’m at my best.”

Fortunately, indeed, Cody only required light treatment for smoke inhalation and a line of three stitches on her forehead. Janet placed a clear mask over her face while she put them in.

“Shut up and breathe deeply in and out,” she advised when Cody looked like she might protest. “We need to re-oxygenate your lungs. This’ll do it.”

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Finally, Janet sorted out a private room for her. She stood at the side of the bed, arms crossed, and laid down the law.

“You’re in until tomorrow; that’s an order, not a suggestion. Also, just so you know, cops have been known to try to escape before, but they never get very far under my watch.”

“Cops?” Cody frowned.

“Your lieutenant. Your partner.” Janet snorted. “Ungrateful, the both of them. I expect better from you, Detective.”

“I’m grateful,” Cody said. “But—”

“Great!” Janet cut her sharply. “We’re done then. I assume you want to stay with her, Kim?”

“Yes, I’m staying.”

“No sex. Got it?”

“Got it,” Kim chuckled. “We’ll behave, I promise.”

“Right.” Janet checked her watch. “If you’ll excuse me then, I have to go slice into a brain. See you both later.”

With a final warning glance at Cody, she left the room. Still smiling, Kim sat on the

bed and took her lover's hand.

"She's awesome, isn't she?"

"Hmm..."

"How are you feeling, babe?"

"Smashed," Cody admitted. "But the drugs are nice."

"Good." Kim gently caressed her hair. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Cody convinced her to help with a shower and to wash her hair too, without getting the stitches wet. Then, Kim walked her back to the bed, kissed her softly on the lips, and replaced the mask over her face.

"Better keep this one on."

"I need another favor," Cody murmured.

"Babe. Don't ask me to help you escape, okay?"

"No, not that. But can you come in with me?"

Kim did not see how this would hurt and also wanted to. She slipped into bed with her partner, passed one arm carefully around her shoulders, and pulled her close. Cody curled into her side with a contented sigh.

"Okay now," she said. "So, how are you doing? Really?"

"Me? I'm okay... Why?"

“It sounds like you went through hard stuff as well.”

“Yes, but I’m fine now I’ve got you back.”

“Good. Me too. What happened exactly?”

Kim told her about the vision, her frantic call to Quinn, and rushing to the subway station.

“The lieutenant give you any trouble?”

“No, she was great,” Kim reflected. “Took me at my word, no question. I dread to think of the trouble she would be in for bringing the entire subway system to a stop if the threat turned out not to be real...”

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“Yeah, but Wesley wouldn’t care about that. She didn’t rise through the ranks by putting herself first and avoiding taking necessary risks when she had to. Also, she knew you came true on the Winters case.”

“Yes. I do hope this latest vision was... helpful,” Kim stated with a light shrug. “Even though the bomb still went off.”

In her arms, Cody shifted to meet her gaze. Even wounded and loaded with painkillers, her eyes still shone bright and fierce in her pale face.

“It was vital, actually,” she declared. “The train had just left the station when it stopped again, with enough space between the tunnel wall and the carriage to evacuate everyone quickly. Three casualties are still three too many, but if we’d been on the move when the bomb went off, trapped inside, a hundred and fifty people would have been blown to pieces.”

Kim shivered violently at the thought of how close she had come to losing her. She understood now, with absolute clarity, how Cody must have felt when her partner was shot and killed in New York. What she probably endured in the aftermath.

“Ultimately, I am grateful for my gift,” she decided with a surge of energy. “I will get back in touch with the intuitive I worked with in Texas. I used to meditate twice a day without fail, but I got out of the habit. I’ll start doing it again.”

“Good idea,” Cody approved.

“I’m glad I could sense the bomber, otherwise he would have walked straight past us



and out the door. Too bad I won't be able to make him my first case as a prosecutor."

"Why not?"

"Conflict of interest."

"Oh, yeah. Of course. Sorry, I'm a little fuzzy in the head."

"Then sleep, darling. You'll feel better in the morning."

"I'd rather stay awake and talk with you."

"You need to rest. Don't make me go and get Janet."

Cody chuckled at the light-hearted threat, then slayed her with her next look; still a little fierce but plenty vulnerable and needy, too.

"Will you stay with me?"

Kim pulled the mask aside to rest a gentle kiss on her lips.

"Absolutely. I'm not going anywhere. Close your eyes."

Cody did and dropped asleep within seconds. Kim rested for a while with her eyes closed as well. The feeling of having the woman she loved back with her and in her arms, safe and sound, was indescribable. A quiet knock on the door a bit later made her look up. Ellie popped her head in.

"Hey, Kim. Can I come in?"

"Hi. Yes, of course."

Ellie carried a flat box in one hand and a bunch of flowers in the other.

“All knocked out, eh?” She grinned in approval after a look at her sleeping partner.

“Yes, she finally stopped fighting it.”

“Well, I won’t bother you too long—”

“You’re no bother at all, Ellie,” Kim assured her.

“Okay, cool. I just wanted to check on you both.”

“That’s very sweet of you. Um... Is that pizza?”

“Yes, it is. Cody’s favorite from her favorite place across from the station is pepperoni and black olives. I thought it might be too late for this now, but it can turn into a breakfast thing... She likes leftover pizza best.”

“I know she does, yes.” It was, Kim reflected, one of these endearing little quirks she adored about her lover. It made her smile. The smell of that thing was pretty divine too. “May I have a slice now?”

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“Sure!” Ellie chuckled and passed her the box. Cody did not even stir. “She does sleep like someone knocked her out.”

“Or a load of TNT gave her a hard slap, as she said.”

“Totally. Forty pounds of Semtex will have that effect.” Ellie lingered with her eyes on her instead of Cody this time, looking both thoughtful and admiring.

“What?” Kim prompted.

“I hope you won’t mind me saying so, but it’s one hell of a superpower you’ve got.”

Kim considered herself surprised to feel so at ease at the mention of her unusual ability. It was a first for her, and there was no longer any denying it.

“I don’t mind you saying. You’re right; it’s a hell of a good thing, especially today. Thank you, Ellie.”

“No, thank you.” Ellie briefly rested a hand over her own heart. “There is a guy in the next room; his name’s Jim. He asked me to tell Cody that he was okay and that he wanted to share a beer with her at some point. He helped her with the evac.”

“I’ll pass on the message.”

“Cool.”

Janet walked in, looking fresh from a shower and dressed in regular clothes now. She

immediately sniffed the air and narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“I smell illegals in here.”

“Just pizza, amore mio,” Ellie advised.

“Not allowed.” But the good-looking neurosurgeon nodded to Kim. “Hear that? What can I do when she speaks love to me in Italian? That’s how she gets away with things.”

Ellie flashed a goofy grin, prompting an amused smile from her lover, which held plenty of heat. Meanwhile, Cody did not wake up despite the sounds of conversation around her. Janet checked her pulse, listened to her breathing, and nodded in satisfaction.

“Out cold, but she’s doing well. Lungs sound good. I gave her an extra shot of drugs so she should sleep well the rest of the night. Are you okay, Kim? Anything you need while I’m here? Don’t say drugs.”

“No, it’s alright.” Kim smiled and inclined her head toward her sleeping partner. “I’ve got all I need right here.”

“Excellent. I’ll be back at six A.M. to check on you both. For now...” Janet shot her partner another loaded glance, the kind that must be illegal in some parts of the world. “Take me home, mia cara.”

More cops trickled in from Cody’s team, bringing flowers and well wishes. Demi came by accompanied by her wife, who had just started her shift. Carole promised to be on hand if they needed anything during the night. Though her partner remained asleep, Kim was touched at this show of care and support. Not surprised, as she had witnessed the tightness of the community before and knew that Cody was well-loved

and appreciated, but touched, yes. Definitely. Quinn Wesley showed up at nine P.M. in the same clothes she was wearing before. Obviously, she was working late after the events of the day.

“It’s starting to look like a jungle in here,” she remarked.

The no-nonsense lieutenant did not come bearing flowers, but a practical wash kit which included two toothbrushes. Now this, Kim decided, was extra thoughtful. She offered her a slice of pizza, which Quinn promptly accepted.

“Miller saved a bunch of lives today, so I put in for a special commendation,” she announced in between hungry bites. “For bravery. She deserves it.”

“I agree totally, but I don’t think she’ll like it,” Kim quietly remarked.

“No, I know. I’m getting one for you too, Ms. Reed.” Quinn laughed when Kim stared in disbelief. “You don’t like it either, do you?”

“For me, it’s really unnecess—”

“I disagree,” the lieutenant said, still smiling but in the kind of tone that said arguing would be futile. “Looks like the two of you will have to suck it up, won’t you?”

## EPILOGUE

It occurred to Kim that receiving the commendation held at least one definite advantage: getting to see her partner in her dress blues for the first time. Cody looked alluringly sharp and commanding in official gear, complete with a crisp white shirt and knotted tie.

“You got a thing for women in uniform, Counselor?” Cody chuckled when she

caught her staring in the mirror of the police station female locker room.

“A thing,” Kim smirked in reply. “Yeah, you could say that. When the woman in question is you, definitely. You look good enough to...”

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“Eat?” her lover prompted, fiddling with the tie.

“Mm. Yes, I suppose...”

“What were you going to say?”

“If I tell you, you’ll accuse me of winding you up when we have no time to make good on it.”

“That’s okay,” Cody laughed. “I can take it.”

“It’s the tie that does it for me,” Kim mused as she stepped up to do it right for her. “I’m getting hot visions of you on your knees between my legs, being a good girl in nothing but the tie and that sexy smile of yours.”

She was rewarded to see this exact same grin, and a lovely flush across Cody’s cheeks.

“That could be arranged,” she said.

Cody had healed well and quickly from her injuries. Two weeks later, only a little scar remained on her forehead as a reminder of the event. She looked tough most of the time, not a cop to be messed with, and in her uniform, especially; but every smile she aimed at her betrayed her tender spirit and playful attitude. Kim liked it. A lot. She finished tying the knot and stepped back to check it.

“Perfect,” she approved.

“Come here.” Cody reached to pull her back and laced her arms around her waist. “You look so glam and sexy.”

Without a uniform of her own to wear for the occasion, Kim had opted for a combination of sober and chic. She wore a black Armani suit, a fuchsia silk shirt under the fitted jacket, and heels of the same color. Her hair was tied back.

“I was hoping for a kick-ass lawyer look, more like.”

“Yes, you achieved it. But I see the alluring woman under the clothes.”

“This one comes out only for you, you know?”

“I do.” Cody flashed a quick grin. “I’m lucky.”

Kim loved to catch a trace of heat across her eyes. She ran her fingers deeply and possessively through her hair, smoothing back the thick blond strands, and held there for a full-on, slow kiss.

“Hey, Cody—Oops!” Ellie, also looking dapper in uniform, came swinging through the door. “Sorry, ladies. The lieutenant sent me to tell you to move your butts. Her words. Everything’s in place, and the mayor’s about to start his address.”

“Wouldn’t want to miss that, would we?”

“Behave yourself, Detective.” Kim chuckled at her lover’s ironic tone and took her hand. “Come on. The sooner we finish this ceremony, the quicker we can do the tie thing.”

Wisely, Ellie did not ask.



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Despite the fact that she did not like pomp and was against this commendation being awarded to her for just doing her job in the first place, Cody felt the emotion of the event when she stepped on stage with Kim. A firefighter who had risked his life to save a litter of puppies from a burning building was also up for commendation, as was Jim Olson, the construction worker from the train. Mayor Everleigh, trailing in re-election polls by a significant margin, obviously tried to use the event to boost his campaign. Cody tuned him out as he droned on about the importance of keeping the good people of Lewiston safe and how much he valued the guys (and girls, he added almost as an afterthought) in uniform who made sure that this happened. After how he had recently treated Quinn, Cody did not believe a word of what he said was sincere. But she did feel a spike of emotion when she saw her colleagues assembled there, looking proud. Her lieutenant, her partner, the rest of her team... Janet, Demi, Carole. Even Anna and her mom were there. Cody winked at the girl and made her grin. It was good to see her surrounded by her dad's friends. Armed with a professional camera, Lia Kennedy took photographs of the event for the Lewiston P.D. website and social media page.

"As cops, we take an oath to protect and to serve," Quinn said in a brief but loaded speech of her own. "But it does take a special breed of courage, when put on the spot, to look death in the face and still do the right thing."

For sure, she would know, Cody reflected.

"Detective Miller, today we honor you for putting the safety of others above your own and living up to the highest standards of our institution."

Cody nodded in acknowledgment as Quinn met her eyes and held intensely for a second.

“Some do it even without the oath,” the lieutenant went on, “just because they are an outstanding human being. Mr. Olson, this goes to you.” Last but not least, she smiled at Kim. “And yet others surrender to a higher power in order for lives to be saved, a total sacrifice which I know comes at great personal cost. So, we thank you all for your selfless contributions. You are a credit to this community.”

She could not have said it better, and Cody felt her partner relax imperceptibly as she stood by her side. Kim had been even more reluctant to accept the commendation than she was, but Cody could tell that Quinn’s inspired words also hit the spot with her. Great. They received a standing ovation, and then the official part was over and done with, thankfully. Demi leaped on stage to grab the mike.

“Those of you not on duty, we are going to the beach for drinks and burgers,” she reminded. “Lose the uniforms, people; now’s time to celebrate!”

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“So, she came,” Quinn said, spotting Brooke on the beach a split second before Lia did.

“Yeah.” Lia eyed her former partner, dressed in flowy white linen pants and a tank top, barefoot, who sat on her own a short distance away. “I wasn’t sure she would when I invited her, but I’m glad she did.”

A couple of cops from the station walked past Brooke. One of them almost gave himself whiplash glancing back, then forgot his original destination in favor of going for a chat. Lia could tell from the body language, coming through loud and clear, that he was flirting with her.

“Barking up the wrong tree,” Quinn snorted.

Lia looked at her. Quinn always looked amazing in her uniform, but even better now, she decided, in her usual beach attire of board shorts, Nike swim top, and Oakley sunglasses. She looked drop-dead gorgeous with her sculpted physique, surfer-blond hair, and traces of salt on her tanned skin from an earlier dip in the ocean.

“I’ll go talk to her, okay?”

“Sure. Take your time.”

“Thanks for letting me do this.”

“Of course.” Quinn shrugged. “You’re a free woman.”

“I love you, baby.” Lia punctuated this with the kind of kiss that made her wife, always so strong and emotionally reserved in public, shiver and grin like a mesmerized rookie.

“Don’t be too long,” Quinn advised.

“Be right back,” Lia promised.

She joined her former fiancée, who drank Perrier in the hot sun.

“Hey there.”

“Hi, Lia.”

“You’re looking well.”

Brooke had caught a bit of sun since the last time Lia had seen her at the rehab center. She was still a little too thin, but she looked more like herself.

“Thanks,” Brooke nodded. “Thank you for inviting me here today.”

“It’s okay. You said you wanted to talk.”

“I wanted to apologize to you face to face.”

“I have a few things to say to you as well.”

“Okay.” Brooke visibly steeled herself in anticipation of a hard time. “You go first.”

Lia did not hesitate. She looked her in the eye and spoke clear and sharp as a blade.

“You went after my wife, Brooke. Quinn was hurt because of you. This, I find extremely hard to forgive.”

“I understand. All I can say is I’m sorry, Lia. Truly sorry for hurting you both.”

Though this came in a hushed tone, the words did not feel any less heartfelt when Brooke uttered them. Lia noted genuine regret in her grey eyes and the sort of humility Brooke did not display very often in the past. When Lia first met Quinn, she had been struck by the difference between them. Though the two women were close in age, Quinn had felt much older, wiser, and more grounded at the time. A lot more mature. It was obvious that she had gone through the fire. Now it sounded as if Brooke had also fought and survived her own painful battles.

“I love Quinn more than life,” Lia said.

“Understood.”

“I hope you do.”

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“Yes. I see your bond, Lia,” Brooke said. “I will never, ever do anything to hurt you or your wife again. If you can’t find it in you to forgive me, at least I hope you can believe that.”

Once again, Lia looked at her and saw how much she meant it. Oh, hell! Brooke had paid enough, had she not? Who was she to make it harder on her after all she had already gone through? Without another word, Lia reached for her and pulled her into a hard, emotional hug.

“It’s over now. I don’t want to fight with you, Brooke.”

“I don’t either. I never wanted to.”

You still mean a lot to me.”

“You too.”

“So let’s be friends again, okay?”

“Oh God, Lia, there’s really nothing I want more!” Brooke exclaimed. She held her tight for a second longer. Her brilliant eyes shone with a layer of tears when she pulled back, but her smile made her look ten years younger. “Friends.”

“Definitely.”

“Thank you so much. Really. It means the world.”

“It’s okay. No more tears now,” Lia instructed. She stood up, smiled as well, and offered Brooke a hand up. “Come on, let me introduce you to the rest of my people.”

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Kim looked around as she relaxed beside her partner with a cool drink. Ellie and Janet sat nearby with their arms around each other, in easy conversation with Demi, Carole, and Brooke. Lia and Quinn had picked a spot on their own a few feet apart. The serious lieutenant lay relaxed in her wife’s arms, laughing at something Lia was saying. Not for the first time, Kim noticed the loving and easy vibe between the two of them.

“I really like your friends,” she declared.

Now at ease in denim shorts and a Lewiston P.D. tank top, Cody looked at her long and deep. “They are like family. So are you, Kim.”

Kim returned her glance, just as intense.

“I love you, Cody,” she said fiercely.

“You mean that?”

“You need to ask?”

“No, I’m pretty sure.” Cody laughed, and then her expression softened and grew tender. She looked at her the exact same way Quinn Wesley looked at her wife. “I love you too, Kim. It’s going to be okay, you know? With the psychic stuff.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And I’ll be here for you, no matter what.”

“You mean that?”

“You need to ask?” Cody grinned.

“No...” Smiling, too, feeling deeply happy, Kim leaned over to brush a hot kiss on her lips. “I’m pretty sure.”

THE END