



Manner of Death

Author: *Cari Z, L.A. Witt*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Detective Sawyer Villeray has his hands full. He's got a mercurial partner whose personal life is deteriorating, a semi-estranged family whose drama he can never fully escape... and now a series of murders whose only connection is their sheer weirdness.

A serious crush on the county medical examiner doesn't exactly simplify things, but at least it's fun.

Or, well, it would be if said M.E. didn't adamantly refuse to date cops. Or if his assistant wasn't quite so hostile to anyone who looked his way.

Dr. Bashir Ramin would very much like to catch a break. A date that isn't interrupted by death. A fellow pathologist who isn't a cranky jerk. A forensic assistant who doesn't gnash her teeth any time Bashir is interested in someone. And maybe, if he's lucky, an autopsy that isn't such a baffling puzzle, it leaves him wondering if he's as good at his job as he thought he was.

At this point, the annoying but cute detective is the one good thing in his world. Too bad Bashir doesn't date cops. Right?

But there's no time for romance. As the bizarre murders keep piling up, Sawyer and Bashir need to work together to stop a killer.

Ideally before one of them becomes the next target.

Total Pages (Source): 26

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

Just once, Bashir wanted to get through a first date or even a hookup without somebody dying.

It didn't seem like too much to ask. It really didn't. Yeah, fine, in a city of just under a hundred thousand people, an average of three or four deaths per day wasn't all that out of the ordinary. But a lot of those were the kind that didn't necessitate a call to—never mind a visit from—the county medical examiner.

Yet here he was, disappointment curdling the exceptionally good artichoke dip he and Max had shared as an appetizer. And he wasn't going to get to eat that chicken marsala he'd ordered, was he? This place had some of the best chicken marsala he'd ever had, and he'd been looking forward to it all week. Ever since he and Max had agreed to meet in person.

Bashir sighed apologetically. "I'm sorry. I, um..." He grimaced as he gestured at the phone. "I have to go."

On the bright side, at least this was going to prevent him from wasting any more time with Max. The guy had been nice enough when they'd chatted, and the flirtation had seemed promising. So far, the chemistry had been good in person, too. Max was funny and smart, and he had a nice smile.

But the annoyance in his expression now—the tsk and the roll of his eyes as he reached for his wine—told Bashir this was not a good match after all.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I'll, uh... I'll pick up the bill on my way out. Text me?"

Max's smile was sour and his shrug was non-committal.

No, this was not going to work in the long run or even the short term. Shame, because much like he'd been looking forward to the chicken marsala, Bashir had been eagerly anticipating everything else they'd both alluded to during their flirtation via phone and text.

As he left the restaurant, it occurred to him that it was just as well they'd decided on an actual date instead of going straight to a hookup. If Max was this put out over Bashir bailing in the middle of dinner, he'd have been thrilled to be left with an unexpected case of blue balls.

Well. Back to the drawing board.

Tomorrow, anyway. Tonight, Bashir had other priorities.

Those priorities took him to a farm just outside of town. He was given little more information than the location and the number of bodies; his predecessor taught him not to ask for or even accept any further details, as there was too much potential to cloud his judgment. The deceased—and indeed any possible suspects—deserved his objective and unbiased conclusions about what had taken place. Much of that came down to the CSI techs, the detectives, and the district attorney, of course. Nevertheless, many a suspect had walked because, despite everyone else painting a clear picture of homicide, an M.E. testified that the manner of death was an accident, a suicide, or undetermined .

No pressure or anything.

The responding officer had duly cordoned off the entire property as well as the long driveway and a hundred-foot stretch of road in either direction with yellow police tape. Just outside the cordon was a patrol car as well as the black CSI van. Beside the

vehicles, a cop spoke with Carlos Huerta, a CSI tech Bashir knew well. The officer was twitchy and agitated; maybe because he was young, or maybe because the scene was especially grisly. Given the extra-wide cordon, it was probably both. The new guys often took “make the scene as big as you can because you can always shrink it later” to heart. Some of the older officers ribbed them for it, but Bashir appreciated it, earnestness and all. The older guys might’ve laughed and the younger ones might’ve felt sheepish, but it only took one instance of a critical piece of evidence being found—untouched and uncontaminated—six inches inside a scene’s too-big perimeter for them all to shut their pieholes.

Leaning against the side of the van, arms crossed and a loosely-laced combat boot resting on a running board, Huerta looked about as nonplussed as he ever did. Bashir wondered sometimes if anything affected him, or if he—like most of the crime scene techs, even in their mid-twenties like him—had just seen it all.

Bashir got out of his car, left his suit jacket in the front seat, and changed into the pair of weathered sneakers he always kept in his trunk. He also stuffed a few pairs of shoe covers and gloves into his pocket, then headed over to the van and patrol car.

Huerta flashed him a smile. “Hey, Doc.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Homeowner’s waiting inside.”

From the way the officer turned a little green, Bashir didn’t have to ask if the homeowner was the decedent. Huerta was respectful of the dead and of crime scenes, but he wasn’t the greatest at reading social cues, and on top of that, he sometimes couldn’t help trolling the younger cops who were still squeamish.

Bashir nodded. “Still waiting on a warrant?”

Huerta rolled his eyes. No shock there; the homicide detective was likely hammering the judge at that very moment to get a signature on the warrant, but it took time.

Bashir, however, did not need a warrant. The body was all the warrant he needed.

He signed into the crime scene log and gave it back to the officer—Officer Doran, it turned out, who was indeed quite young if the nonexistent stubble on his boyishly soft jaw was any indication.

Bashir raised his eyebrows. “First time at a scene like this?”

Doran swallowed as if he were struggling to keep his esophagus on a southbound trajectory. “Yeah.”

Bashir offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “Well, lucky for you, you’re on gatekeeping detail.” He pointed at the clipboard in the officer’s hand. “This place is going to be crawling with people as soon as word gets out. You know how to manage traffic?”

Now it was nerves more than horror on Doran’s face, but he nodded again. “Yes, sir. I, uh... I already marked a path inside. I...” He furrowed his brow. “Should I have waited? Until we got a warrant? God, did I fuck this up already and—”

“You’re good,” Bashir said gently. “You’re protecting and preserving evidence. Don’t need a warrant for that part. Especially if, uh...” He gestured at the house. “No one’s home. ”

Doran was white already—far paler than Huerta or Bashir—and he lost even more color.

“How about you have a seat, kid?” Bashir nodded at the bumper of the patrol car. “Let’s not have you pass out and bust your head open.”

“Aww, why not?” Huerta grinned. “You can stitch him up, can’t you?”

“Yes, I can,” Bashir said. “But I can never remember which set of tools I last used on the living or the—”

“Jesus Christ,” Doran mumbled, and he wisely sat down on the bumper, putting his head between his knees.

Bashir chuckled and gave the kid a pat on the shoulder. “You’ll be fine. Just breathe. And this is your scene, okay? No one enters the house unless they absolutely need to, including the captain or the lieutenant.”

Doran made a choked, panicked noise. Yeah, nothing intimidated a rookie like having to tell the brass no.

“The detectives will be here soon,” Bashir reassured him. “They can take over and assign a scene commander.”

“Thank God,” Doran muttered.

Bashir gave a little nod. Then he turned to Huerta and indicated the cop. “Keep an eye on him, will you?”

Huerta nodded. Wasn’t like he’d be doing much of anything until that warrant came through.

Bashir took his kit from his car and walked up to the house. The front door was ajar with no signs of forced entry. He didn’t have to ask if Huerta had already photographed that area; the tech was very good at his job, and one of the first things he always did was document every single exterior detail in and around the designated path for investigators. Without the warrant, he couldn’t go inside, but he could absolutely take note of anything in plain sight— footprints, blood spatter or smears, items that seemed unusual or out of place... and signs of forced entry.

Confident Huerta had done a thorough job as always, Bashir paused on the porch to pull on his shoe covers and gloves, double-bagging both. He also put on a mask; there was always the possibility of airborne pathogens, and... well, death scenes could be messy. Bashir had literal nightmares about moving a body and having some fluid fly up and land in his mouth or nose. His stomach was strong, but it wasn't that strong.

Once his hands, face, and feet were covered, he nudged the door open with the corner of his kit, touching as little as possible to avoid ruining any latent fingerprints. Then he used the flashlight on his cell phone to skim over the hardwood floor for blood or shoe impressions. While crime scene details weren't part of his job, he was careful to watch for potential evidence and, at the very least, not disturb or destroy it.

As soon as he crossed the threshold into the house, that familiar taste of copper settled onto Bashir's tongue. It was thick and intense; not just blood—a lot of blood. Bashir could guess why Officer Doran had been green around the gills, especially if this was his first time walking into a gruesome death scene.

Fortunately, despite being so affected by what he'd found inside, Doran had done a great job protecting the scene. Not only had he set up a wide perimeter outside, he'd established a clear path through the entryway and living room to the kitchen, carefully lining it with tape. The pathway zigzagged a bit through the living room, and it didn't take but two seconds to figure out why: a smear of blood on the floor, a partial footprint, and a gouge in the hardwood that was probably preexisting but may not have been (well done, Officer Doran, not taking for granted that it was old).

Nevertheless, Bashir shined his flashlight on the wood as he walked, and he took the path slowly, just in case Doran had overlooked something.

When he reached the end of the path, he was at the kitchen doorway. There, he stopped to take in the scene.

Given the heavy presence of blood on the air, Bashir had guessed this was most likely a murder or a suicide. Maybe natural causes if someone had had a catastrophic medical event and bled out—wouldn't be the first time he'd attended such a scene. Animal was always a possibility, however minute. He had to keep an open mind, of course, and it was prudent to not make any assumptions or jump to any conclusions so early in the game. Even mentally running through theories wasn't a good idea. The curious and analytical mind was what it was, though, and it was human nature to start considering how pieces might ultimately snap together.

But as he looked over the scene, it was like watching a long shot horse surge past the sure things in a race—the odds went out the window, and in this case, the horse named Accidental Death was leaving the others in the dust.

In what was once a kitchen decorated with country kitsch like hat-wearing chickens and deceptively friendly geese with bows around their necks, the man Bashir's colleagues had indicated was the homeowner lay sprawled in a pool of congealing blood. There was blood smeared, pooled, or splattered over every surface from floor to ceiling, turning those chickens and geese into witnesses of something straight out of a horror film, with red streaks, droplets, and the odd chunk of the decedent sticking to their painted faces. Amidst the carnage were leaves and splinters of wood from the giant tree branch that had crashed in through the kitchen window.

Bashir's best guess? The homeowner had been attempting to break the branch into manageable pieces so he could remove them before cleaning up his kitchen. Somewhere in the process, the chainsaw had ceased to be cutting through wood and instead divested the man of several organs and a substantial amount of blood.

Unless there was a killer in town who'd taken to sabotaging power tools and heaving tree-sized branches through windows, the odds were tipping very, very heavily in favor of this being an extremely unfortunate freak accident.

That is, until Bashir looked closer.

As he'd begun his routine process, which started with photographing the body, he'd considered telling Doran there was no need for the warrant or for homicide to get involved after all. The kid was probably a rookie and had jumped the gun, thinking such a horrifying scene had to be a murder. Some young cops were like that; they still believed in a just universe where if someone met a terrible end, someone else could always be blamed and punished. If there was a lot of blood and destruction, then there had to have been a crime.

Fact was, though, accidents happened. Horrible, unimaginable accidents that ended lives and traumatized witnesses forever. Accepting that was part of working in law enforcement, whether in Bashir's role, Officer Doran's, or Huerta's.

He was just about to call the homicide detectives and tell them to nix the warrant, then gently explain to Officer Doran that this was just an accident, when something caught his eye, and the world... the scene... everything...

Shifted .

Though Bashir's focus was on the body itself, corpses didn't exist in a vacuum, and he also wanted to maintain a good working relationship with the CSIs. So he observed, recorded, photographed, and protected any evidence he found so Huerta could collect it. And this time, as he did so, his gaze landed on a shard of glass.

A shard of glass lying on top of the pool of blood around the unfortunate homeowner.

Once he saw that, other details came into focus.

More glass... on top of blood.

Pieces of wood and bark... on top of blood.

Bashir stood back and looked around the scene, suddenly feeling like he was in a slasher film, the geese and chickens staring at him without the ability to tell him what they'd witnessed.

And as he took it all in, he remembered the gouge in the hardwood, the blood on the floor, and the partial shoe impression Doran had cordoned off.

Then he turned his head and peered at the chainsaw. It, like everything in the kitchen, was covered in blood, glass, and tree detritus.

Beside a chunk of viscera, stuck in the blood on the blade, was a leaf. Its surface? Clean.

Perhaps most telling was when Bashir turned that scrutiny on the deceased. There again—shattered wood and glass sprinkled on wounds that should have happened after the tree had broken the window.

Bashir exhaled hard behind his mask. There was no way this wasn't a homicide.

He finished his preliminary exam, mostly to stay ahead of—and document—the blowflies already making themselves at home. Based on their infestation and current life cycle stage, the man had been dead for a handful of hours at most. When Bashir's assistant Tami arrived, they could bag the body and take it back to the morgue for an autopsy.

In the meantime, Bashir stepped out of the kitchen, stripped off the first layer of shoe covers, and slipped them into a sealed bag. Then he went outside, took off the second layer, and strode toward the cars.

Officer Doran had regained a little color, and he rose as Bashir came toward him.

“Question for you, officer.” Bashir halted, studying the young man and gesturing over his shoulder at the house. “What made you set this up as a crime scene rather than an accidental death scene?”

Doran’s pallor made the sudden blush appear even more intense, and he shifted nervously as he stammered, “I, uh... Um...”

“I’m not putting you on the spot,” Bashir said evenly. “You were right to call it. Because that”—he pointed at the house again—“is absolutely a crime scene.”

“It is?” Huerta appeared beside Bashir. “I thought the guy just fell on his chainsaw or something.”

Bashir shook his head. CSIs were supposed to go in with no preconceived notions as well, but this was an unusual scene. One that really did seem like an accidental death, only revealing itself as something more sinister upon much closer inspection. Huerta was good at his job—thorough and objective—but any investigator could sometimes take their foot off the gas a little when it seemed like a clear-cut accident. Bashir wanted everyone involved erring on the side of caution with this one, because he had a feeling someone was trying to make this look like an accident.

“It’s not an accident,” he told Huerta and Doran. “Which is why I’m curious what tipped you off.”

Doran shifted from foot to foot. He glanced over his shoulder, and when Bashir looked, a burgundy sedan was approaching. Homicide detectives, most likely. Suddenly even more nervous, Doran said to Bashir, “I don’t know, honestly. Something about it... It just didn’t seem right.” He cringed as if expecting Bashir to read him the riot act for relying on intuition over evidence.

“Nice job,” Bashir said with a nod. “Trust your gut—it’ll serve you well.”

Doran exhaled. Bashir suspected that was the first relief the kid had felt since he’d come to this scene. “Thank you, sir.”

Bashir chuckled. “Just Bashir is fine. I’m not in your chain of command.”

Whatever he was going to say next was cut off by a pair of car doors closing, and all three of them turned as the pair of detectives ducked under the police tape and headed down the driveway toward them.

Bashir had known Detective McKay for a long time. Typical grizzled veteran detective who’d seen it all and, though he was good at his job, was kind of a dick. No doubt he’d have ribbed Officer Doran even harder than Huerta and Bashir had.

His partner... oh, Detective Villeray was not someone Bashir needed to be around tonight. Not after he’d had his date—but not his lengthy dry spell—interrupted. Definitely not while he was concentrating on a horrific crime scene that was meant to be mistaken for an accident. Not the time or the place to notice gray eyes, full lips, or dark hair that pulled off the artfully mussed thing so well, it made Bashir want to know how it looked when it was mussed for real.

Not. The time. Or the place.

Not even if the distraction was a welcome breather from the horror show inside the unassuming farmhouse behind him.

He cleared his throat as the detectives approached, and by the time he was shaking their hands, he had his game face on. Hopefully.

“We got a warrant?” Huerta sounded antsy. Bashir didn’t blame him—the sooner he

got started, the more evidence he could preserve and collect before every cop in town found a reason to be here and tromp through the crime scene.

McKay scowled. Sliding his gaze toward Officer Doran, who was in full-on embarrassed little boy mode, the detective said, “Judge Ruffino isn’t going to forgive us any time soon for interrupting her dinner, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

Bashir rolled his eyes. At least the judge probably hadn’t had to leave her dinner, but okay.

McKay sighed. “We’ve got the warrant, but I want to have a look inside the house before we turn you loose on it.” He shot Doran a pointed look. “Make sure we’re not wasting police resources processing an accident scene as a homicide. Especially since I have to agree with the judge that an entire criminal investigation contingent might be, if you’ll pardon the expression, overkill.”

Before Doran could speak, Bashir said, “Uh, actually, I do think we’re looking at a homicide here.” He needed to stay as unbiased as possible, but he still had to be realistic, and the sooner a scene was investigated as a homicide, the less critical evidence would be damaged or overlooked. And in this case, with at least one of the detectives already preemptively ready to dismiss the death as accidental, he wasn’t about to take chances .

McKay eyed him with annoyance. Villeray’s expression held nothing but interest.

Bashir motioned toward the house. “I thought it was an accident, too, but the evidence is telling a different story.”

McKay raised an eyebrow. “What story? That the killer tossed a tree through a window while the homeowner was carving a turkey with a chainsaw?”

Huerta was clearly trying to bite back a laugh. So was Villeray. Truthfully, Bashir might've too; it wasn't that he was irreverent or disrespectful, but a dark sense of humor was part of what kept a lot of people sane in this line of work. You grabbed whatever you could find to anchor you on this side of the abyss.

The only reason Bashir wasn't laughing this time was that McKay's joke was at Doran's expense as well as Bashir's own. Bashir could take it. The kid needed to know he could trust his gut, and catching hell from the veterans when he did would make him doubt his intuition.

Bashir narrowed his eyes. "Tell you what, detective." He again gestured at the house. "Why don't you and your partner go inside and have a look. See if anything seems..." he paused for effect, pursing his lips as if he really needed to consider his choice of words. "...out of place. And if you come back out here and tell me that looks like an accident—one you're willing to put your signature on—then we'll call it what it is." He showed his palms in mock surrender. "I mean, unless the autopsy gives up anything that says it's a crime, and then you'll have to find your suspect without a proper crime scene investigation, and—"

"All right, all right. We'll have a look." McKay rolled his eyes and yanked some shoe covers and gloves out of the box Huerta had put out. "Come on, Sawyer. Let's go see what the Dr. StrangeDeath found. "

Villeray again suppressed a laugh, and he offered Bashir a look and a shrug that were equal parts apology by proxy and dark amusement.

Then he followed his partner.

As the detectives disappeared into the house, Officer Doran timidly asked, "Do you think they'll call it an accident?"

“If they do,” Bashir said, watching the house, “they don’t deserve their badges.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

Going into the house felt like stepping on stage. Sawyer had never done much theater—his parents had always been more focused on getting him into movies—but the little he'd done had left a lasting impression, one that followed him all the way into his late thirties and a whole new career.

The detective gravely steps through the open door. It feels somehow like he's stepping inside of a corpse, not a home. He looks down at his feet—no blood yet, but a long sniff confirms that there is a very badly mutilated body in here somewhere.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ,” Kurt muttered, waving at a fly buzzing close to his face as they made their way to the kitchen. They both stopped at the door and stared in silence for a long moment at the body...and the scattered parts of body. “No wonder the newbie freaked out and decided this was a homicide.”

“We don’t know that it wasn’t.” Sawyer breathed through his mouth as he took in the scene. The décor was...interesting. Unusual, he might go so far as to say, for a single man in his fifties. If Sawyer had seen a set dressed like this, he’d have presumed the house belonged to a grandmotherly character. The blood and viscera, juxtaposed with the ceramic waterfowls and 1970s-era linoleum countertops, seemed like the perfect set-up for a horror film.

“Look out for clowns carrying balloons,” he murmured under his breath.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” Sawyer took another step into the kitchen, looking for whatever it was that had convinced Dr. Ramin that this was a murder. The only sign of forced entry

he could see was the one the tree made through the window, but...huh.

He bent down to inspect the chainsaw itself. It was a corded electric one, not gas-powered, and lay a few feet away from the body. Something about the angle of it...Sawyer followed the cord back to where it was plugged into the wall.

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re taking the doc seriously,” his partner said with a groan. “God, this place is giving me a headache and we just got here. We should—”

“Yeah, it’s definitely a murder.”

Kurt heaved a sigh. “Wanna tell me why you think that?”

“Look at the end of the cord.” He stepped carefully to the left and pointed to where the chainsaw was plugged in. “See the droplet here, on the bottom of the plug?”

“Just cast-off from the body.”

“No. Look at the counter beneath it.” Sawyer waited for Kurt to make the connection between the blood spatter on the countertop—complete with a strange, skinny void—and the smear on the plug.

“Oh, damn it.”

Sawyer nodded. “The chainsaw got unplugged at one point, and the cord fell into blood that was already on the counter. Then it was plugged back in by whoever did this.”

Kurt moved to rub his hand over his face, then seemed to think better of it. “Guess we’re lucky that Officer Doran is a twitchy little shit, huh?”

“I guess we are,” Sawyer said as mildly as he could. Kurt still saw through it.

“Don’t, okay? Just don’t. The last thing I need after the day I had is you getting on my back about this too.” He slouched with exhaustion. “Damn, we’re going to be here for hours. I’ll be lucky if I see Molly at all before I have to take her to the doctor tomorrow.”

“Actually...” Sawyer was way more likely to get the chance at a real conversation with Dr. Ramin if Kurt wasn’t around. It hadn’t taken more than a single meeting for him to see that the animosity between the two men was long-standing. “You already did the dirty work getting the warrant signed.” Good thing, too—Kurt had a way better relationship with Judge Ruffino, and Sawyer wasn’t sure he could’ve persuaded her to sign that warrant. He still marveled that Kurt had persisted when the judge had tried to insist it sounded like an accident, but he’d take it. “Why don’t you go ahead and take off? I’ll stay here and babysit things.”

Kurt raised one bushy, greying eyebrow. “Don’t know if you remember this, kid, but I’m your ride back to the station.”

I’m not a kid. “I can get an Uber.”

“At ass o’ clock in the morning when you wrap this scene?”

“Then I’ll catch a ride with someone else.” Sawyer waited to see if his partner was actually going to make him spell out the fact that he was trying to do him a damn favor .

“Well...” Kurt shrugged. “If you’d rather hang out with the Body Baggers on your own, I guess it’s your funeral.”

Sawyer rolled his eyes. “‘Body Baggers’? Are you twelve?”

“Hey, coulda said tea baggers.”

“And then I could have reported you for harassment.”

“Lighten up.” Kurt punched his shoulder in that genial, casually violent way some men had. It had taken Sawyer a long time to learn to differentiate between all the various kinds of violence he’d been exposed to throughout his life, and this kind had been one of the hardest to come to grips with. I like you, therefore I’m going to hit you hard enough to bruise so that you know it. “At least I’m not calling you one of ‘em, even though you...y’know...you’re...”

“Bisexual.”

“Yeah, that.”

“Sexually attracted to people of more than one gender.”

“Yeah.”

“Interested in fucking guys as well as—”

“Christ, will you stop it?” Kurt made a face as he gestured toward the body. “You really think this is the place to be talkin’ about your...preferences?”

“Definitely not,” Sawyer agreed, keeping his face blank. He knew the fact he could hide his emotions bothered his partner fiercely, but he also knew that hiding them was far better than weathering the arguments that being honest brought on. “Go home, Kurt. Tell Molly hi for me.”

“God, you’re such a bossy little asshole,” Kurt sighed, but he turned and left the kitchen. Sawyer stayed for another moment, taking in his surroundings—not just the

murder scene, but everything else he could see from within the taped-off section of the house.

There were doilies on top of every flat surface in the living room. A bowl of hard candies sat on the table next to the recliner, which had a remote attached to the arm. He'd only seen recliners like that in retirement housing, when a resident needed assistance getting upright. Sawyer glanced back at the body. Mid-fifties at the oldest. No sign of assistive mobility devices anywhere.

Definitely someone else's house, or at least it had been until very recently.

"Detective Villeray?"

Sawyer turned to Dr. Ramin, a smile coming to his face. Probably should do something about that. This isn't exactly smiling territory. It was hard to prevent it, though. There was something about the other man that made Sawyer want to...well, to smile, even when the medical examiner looked as undeniably annoyed as he did right then. "Yes, doctor?"

"Your partner is turning CSI loose on the scene. Apparently he was convinced this was a homicide after all."

"Kurt knows his stuff."

Dr. Ramin tilted his head slightly— incredulous would be the look a director had asked for here, and the good doctor delivered beautifully. "He said you're the one who made the call, not him."

"Yes, but he believed me."

"Ah." He relaxed a bit. "You noticed the discrepancy with the leaf litter."

“Among other things.” As much as Sawyer would love to sit down with Dr. Ramin and share all the telltales that had alerted them both to the fact that this was a murder—preferably over dinner—he also noted the camera in the other man’s hand and the somewhat impatient expression. This was likely his subtle way of telling Sawyer to get the hell out of the house. “I should let you work.”

“I would appreciate it.” He sounded appreciative, too, and slightly surprised. Sawyer knew there was no love lost between the doctor and Kurt, but he was determined not to get lumped in with his partner.

“Not a problem.” Sawyer stepped out of the kitchen. “Kurt’s going to take off. Would it be possible for me to get a ride home from you? I believe we live fairly close to each other.” Dice thrown...

“I’m afraid not,” Dr. Ramin said briskly. “I’ll be leaving with the body once it’s ready to be moved. I’m sure you’ll need to stay after that.”

Damn. Came up snake eyes.

Sawyer didn’t let his disappointment show. “Of course. Maybe next time.”

“Next time we meet at a crime scene?” You weirdo , the undercurrent said, but there was a little hint of humor there as well. Sawyer would take it.

“Better than an interrupted dinner,” Sawyer replied.

Dr. Ramin blinked.

“How did you...”

“You’re wearing cologne. Something really nice.” Sawyer shook his head. “Nobody

wears a cologne like that if they aren't trying to impress someone."

"Good nose, detective."

Not good enough to impress, apparently. Or maybe he just didn't like being interpreted. Or maybe Sawyer was wasting his time right now and needed to finish getting the hell out of the way so the M.E. could get on with it.

"Call me if you need anything," he said, then left the house.

Exit: pursued by a bear.

Dr. Ramin left with the body a while later. He didn't spare Sawyer so much as a glance as he did so, clearly tired after what had probably been a long day followed by an interrupted night out. Carlos was inside the house with another CSI, which left Sawyer to handle the trail of curious neighbors, curious cops, and other assorted looky-loos who seemed to come out of the woodwork once the clock tipped past midnight.

You should all be in bed.

So should Officer Doran; his adrenaline had turned into fatigue once the good doctor had left, but he was still on duty, so Sawyer asked him to help with looking up information on the man who'd been killed.

"Gilroy Upworth," Officer Doran read from his computer. "No parking tickets, no speeding tickets, no DUIs, no—oh, there was one charge of animal cruelty for dyeing his chickens blue back in the early oughts, but other than that I'm not finding anything."

"Interesting. Anything on his family?"

“No, uh...unmarried—or divorced, I guess, around the same time as the chicken thing.” He glanced at Sawyer. “Do you think they divorced because they argued over dyeing their chickens?”

“People have gotten divorced for stranger reasons,” Sawyer said. “No kids?”

“No, no kids, and nothing on his ex after 2010...the only other Upworth in town is Edith Upworth, eighty-seven. She lives at Pine Lodge Retirement Community.”

“She probably hasn’t lived there for long,” Sawyer said. “I’d be willing to bet that this house was hers before her family member moved in.”

“Oh.” Officer Doran closed his eyes for a second. “Oh, of course. The victim is probably her son. ”

“Or a nephew,” Sawyer agreed. “The Lodge is a memory care facility, right?”

Officer Doran nodded.

“Good. Hopefully Mrs. Upworth has advanced dementia.”

“Wha—why would you hope for that?”

Come on now, Officer. Consider the emotional relevance of this plot point.

“Because otherwise I have to tell a little old lady that either her child or nephew has been murdered in the home she just recently moved out of,” Sawyer said.

“Oh shit, yeah. That would be terrible.” The younger man shifted uncomfortably on his feet. “Do, um...should we talk to the neighbors?”

“We already have,” Sawyer pointed out. “There are only two close enough to have noticed anything, and members of both households have already stopped by. I’ll go again when it’s light, to make sure I get everyone and that nothing was left out, but there’s not a lot to do there.”

“Then...what do you do next?”

At least he was trying to learn. “Check the nursing home to see if talking to Edith is necessary. Check in with an employer, if he has one. See what I can dig up about him. Right now, it’s looking pretty thin.”

“What do you do when it looks thin?”

Sawyer sighed. “You look harder. There’s always a motive for murder.”

Officer Doran shook his head.

“You don’t think so?”

“I wish I did, but...sometimes people do awful things just because they can.”

Interesting. Sawyer might have to do some looking into Officer Doran’s history, find out what gave him this less-than-standard perspective. Sawyer, for his part, always believed in the existence of motive. It was one of the few places where the silver screen and real life overlapped. “I think, given the lengths that whoever killed Mr. Upworth went to to make it look like an accident, that whoever it was had a solid reason for doing so.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“You did a really good job here tonight,” Sawyer added, glancing at his phone. “And

I believe you're officially off the clock now."

"I am?" The young man looked extremely relieved. "That's great!"

"I'll cover things until the scene is wrapped up."

After Officer Doran handed over responsibility for the house to another officer—the one Sawyer had assigned to be scene commander—the kid left. Sawyer put on his don't-fucking-disturb-me face and, in between making calls and looking for evidence, helped the scene commander handle another four hours of comings, goings, random interruptions, and one very cheeky raccoon who wandered right into the front yard, up to the stairs, and stood on his hind legs with his nose in the air, sniffing.

"Sorry," Sawyer told the critter. "You don't have clearance to go in there."

The raccoon gave him a glare, shit in the middle of the walkway, then turned and waddled off insultingly slowly.

Finally, finally, at ten in the morning, CSI was done with the house. "For now," Huerta added as he slapped another layer of CRIME SCENE DO NOT ENTER tape over the front door. "We've got a lot of work to do, still, but all in all I think we got a lot of great evidence!"

"Great, huh?"

"Oh yeah! Hair samples, questionable blood stains—"

"'Questionable'?"

"I think there's a fifty percent chance that at least some of the spatters I photographed on the countertop were actually marinara sauce," Huerta said, not at all abashed as he

stripped out of his gear and shoved it into a hazardous materials bag, “but better safe than sorry, right? And Jesus, I’ve seen bloody crime scenes, but this one?” He whistled. “This was almost a record for me when it comes to swabs! I used up an entire pack of two hundred all on my own, and I was one of three techs on the scene!”

Wow. “That’s a lot.”

“Right?” Huerta beamed at him as he carried the bag over to the van he’d come in and deposited it in a larger receptacle there. “We were so thorough! You’re going to get more leads than you know what to do with—but don’t quote me on that. I get in trouble when I tell people things that can’t yet be corroborated by the evidence, and I don’t want to get Doc in trouble because I couldn’t stop running my mouth.”

“That’s thoughtful of you.” Sawyer liked the thought of people going out of their way to make life a little easier on Dr Ramin. He looked like the kind of guy who was used to fending for himself.

“I learned it the hard way,” Huerta confessed. “Who knew that telling a reporter about the brand of lipstick you saw on a nightstand could be construed as leaking important information about a case?”

Sawyer blinked. “Was it actually important?”

“It turned out to be, yeah! The guy who was killed didn’t wear lipstick, and at first the killer was assumed to be his wife, but then the lipstick ended up belonging to his mistress! But that was a detail they didn’t want getting into the press because only the killer would know it, and it caused a big mess.” Huerta wrung his hands for a second. “Good thing the detectives had some more aces up their sleeves. Doc was actually a big help on that one, too.”

Sawyer saw his chance. “Mr. Huerta…”

“Oh, call me Carlos.”

“Carlos, then.” He smiled his charming everything-is-fine-I’m-fantastic-look-at-how-pretty-I-am smile. “Would you mind giving me a ride back to my place? I’m afraid I don’t have a car of my own here.”

“Oh, yeah, for sure!” Carlos motioned to the passenger side of the van. “Let’s go! Hey, you want to grab a coffee on the way? There shouldn’t be more than two cars ahead of us in line at this time of the morning.”

Sawyer got into the van and fastened his seat belt. “You must get a lot of drive-through coffee,” he commented.

“I mean, I do, but once I decided to figure it out I sat in the coffee shop all day just so I could compile a spreadsheet. I averaged drive-through visits down to every quarter-hour from when they opened to when they closed, then verified my initial findings with random visits for the rest of the month. I’m ninety-two percent sure there will only be two cars ahead of us.”

Sawyer let his smile fade into something more natural. “You really pay attention to a lot of things, don’t you?”

“I do! A lot of people find it really annoying,” Carlos replied. “Not Doc, of course. He says it’s what makes me a good CSI.”

He wasn’t going to get a better segue. “Speaking of Dr. Ramin…”

“Oh, it’s okay,” Carlos assured him. “I know you’re interested in him, but I won’t tell.”

Not that Sawyer had been trying to hide his interest, but it was still a little

disconcerting to be seen through by someone he'd barely met. "How did you know?"

"The length of time you made eye contact, the way you sniffed the air when he passed—that's his date cologne, it's Tom Ford, it makes approximately twenty-eight percent of people who smell it try to get closer so they can—"

"Got it," Sawyer said. Well. As long as he was hanging out with someone who had an apparently encyclopedic knowledge of everything he encountered... "So on that topic, what's his favorite restaurant?"

"Oh, I know that! He's got two, actually..." Sawyer settled back to listen to the younger man give him the keys to Dr. Ramin's heart—or at least his stomach—with a feeling of satisfaction. He could work with this. No one turned away free food, not when it was something they liked.

Yeah, he could work with this.

And...scene.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

“So he figured out you’d been on a date?” Tami Glen, Bashir’s forensic autopsy tech, looked up from her keyboard. “Just by your cologne?” She made a face. “Does that mean it was a new death scene? Or did you put on so much it was recognizable over the decomp?”

“Oh, listen to who’s funny.” Bashir rolled his eyes. “The guy hadn’t been dead long. But there was a lot of blood, so...” He hesitated. “Fuck. Maybe I was wearing too much.”

Tami snorted. “You are way too easy to troll, Bash.”

He shot her a glare. He hated that nickname, and she knew it. That was exactly why she used it. Sighing, he picked up the file he’d started when he’d brought in the decedent last night, and he perused it while he drank his high-octane coffee. At least he hadn’t had to stay at the scene quite as long as everyone else.

Everyone... such as Detective Villeray and his fragrance-detecting abilities. And his beautiful eyes. And—

Okay. Enough. Clearly Bashir had just been frustrated last night because his date had gone to shit, and yes, his entire brain had absolutely been set to find-hot-man-and-have-sex-with-him. So, yeah, he’d been distracted as hell after he’d left. In fact, he’d been so damn distracted he’d nearly made several embarrassing clerical errors last night.

Professionalism and muscle memory had saved him, fortunately, and he hadn’t done anything that might jeopardize his reputation or the case. And if he wanted to

continue on that trajectory, he needed to stop thinking about Detective Villeray and focus on one Gilroy Upworth, who was lying on the table in front of him. He'd gleaned all the information he could get from the exterior of the body. Now it was time to go exploring.

Bashir had just finished photographing, disrobing, cleaning, and photographing the body again when the morgue's main entrance opened. A fast, determined gait clomped in through the vestibule and drove a few colorful Farsi words from his lips that his mother would've slapped his face for, and a second later—

Dr. Andy Boyce strode into the room. At her computer, Tami fidgeted uncomfortably and became very interested in what was on the screen. Bashir kept his expression and posture neutral because that was his best bet for fending off a confrontation. Not a sure thing, though; if Boyce was in a mood—and Christ, this man was always in a fucking mood—a confrontation was unavoidable.

Boyce peered at the body, and his lips twisted in disgust. Not the disgust of someone horrified by a mangled corpse, but that of someone who was fucking annoyed with the whole damned world. Bashir could only imagine how that was the victim's fault, but he was probably about to find out.

“Ah, okay. Now I see why I'm doing four autopsies this morning.” Boyce flailed a hand at the body. “Don't want the expert to be indisposed for this one.” He folded his arms and cocked his head, smirking at Bashir. “Let me guess— accidental death? Massive blood loss?” He slapped his own forehead. “Good thing you got the call.”

Tami's chair squeaked, giving away more fidgeting.

Bashir kept his gaze fixed on his colleague. He tried to think of him that way, too—Boyce was his subordinate, which grated on the man immensely, and asserting that authority and telling him to watch himself was just asking for a battle. The last

thing he needed was Boyce picking today to remind everyone he had more than enough money to retire and walking out with his middle fingers held high. As long as there were more bodies in the cooler than Bashir could properly autopsy in a single day, he had to play nice with Boyce. Even when Boyce was butthurt— again—that the more high-profile and “interesting” cases always went to Bashir. Since Bashir was, you know, the goddamned county medical examiner.

He took a deep breath and kept his voice measured. “Tell you what, Andy.” He rested his palms on the table, the stainless steel cool through his gloves. “I’ll handle those.” He nodded toward the cooler drawers. “Then you can take this guy”—he tipped his head toward the man laid out in front of him—“and spend the whole morning separating tiny chunks of shredded tissue and figuring out which piece came from which organ.” He snatched a pair of small tweezers off the tray and held them up, hoping his eyes gave away that he was grinning behind his mask. “Sound like a fair trade?”

Boyce scowled, and it wasn’t just his resting bitch scowl. Bashir kept grinning; he wouldn’t remind Boyce of their places in the morgue’s hierarchy, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be a sarcastic asshole. He was all about matching people’s energy, after all.

“It’s your call,” he pressed. “I’d be happy to do the post- mortem on the ninety-eight-year-old nursing home resident who—”

“Fine, fine. You can do that one.” Boyce stomped out of the room, shrugging off his jacket as he did. “I need to put on my scrubs.”

Before Bashir had even had a chance to roll his eyes and toss the tweezers back in the tray, Tami exhaled audibly. He turned to her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She avoided his gaze as her cheeks turned red, and she stared pointedly at

her screen. “Just... hate it when he’s in a mood.”

Bashir grunted in agreement. He wasn’t fond of the guy anyway. When he was in a mood? Ugh. Shame there weren’t any other qualified pathologists looking for work in this town, and the city was still salty about the expense of bringing Bashir in from Canada.

“You find us a qualified local applicant,” one of the bean counters on high had told him, “and we can talk about hiring someone.”

Maybe Bashir needed to see if he’d received any new résumés.

For now, though, he had the victim of a very bizarre murder lying in front of him. He’d just have to deal with Boyce and his attitude a little longer. Fortunately, Boyce always put on headphones while he was working, so at least he’d be off in his own little world, leaving Bashir and Tami to do their jobs.

Bashir picked up the scalpel and got to work.

By the time he’d disassembled the decedent, he had a few answers, but a hell of a lot more questions.

The biggest question blaring in his mind was... what the fuck happened to this guy?

Because the obvious answer wasn’t the correct one. He’d had a hunch about that at the scene. Too many things hadn’t added up. Now he had confirmation—the chainsaw hadn’t killed Upworth.

On first inspection of both the scene and the body, Upworth appeared to have fallen on the chainsaw blade, then thrashed around, flinging blood and viscera everywhere before succumbing to his injuries. One of his hands was mutilated, suggesting he’d

attempted to grab the blade at some point.

But those wounds...

There was catastrophic damage to his midsection and upper pelvic area. The liver and spleen were nicked enough to cause severe bleeding, and the chainsaw had lacerated his abdominal aorta and made mincemeat of his femoral artery. Opening up either of those blood vessels would be lethal... if the injuries had occurred premortem.

Bashir rested his gloved hands on the edge of the table and stared at the dissected midsection laid out in front of him. Something wasn't adding up.

From where she perched on a stool taking notes for him, Tami said, "What's wrong? You look confused."

"I am." He shook his head slowly, still skimming his gaze over the mess of lacerations in front of him. The longer he took it all in, the more the picture came together, not that it answered that blaring question. When he peeled off his gloves and pulled open a folder containing photos he'd taken at the scene... same problem.

"It is amazing to watch your mind work." Tami sounded almost giddy. "Seriously, it's like you see things that no one else does."

Bashir huffed a dry laugh behind his mask. She'd said as much before; it was why she never needed to be asked twice to come jot notes for him. He had to admit her enthusiasm broke up the macabre monotony sometimes.

But this time, he wasn't so sure his mind was enough to figure out this puzzle. It was just... weird.

The longer he compared what he knew about the body to what the crime scene photos

showed, the less he understood what the fuck had happened to this man. He'd need to advise the detectives to consult with a blood spatter expert, but Bashir knew enough about the subject to read what he was seeing.

Or rather, what he wasn't seeing—arterial spray.

He stared at the picture, and slowly...

The smear across the cabinet. The sliding handprint from the cupboard above the sink to the counter. More smears on the floor.

On top of those were bigger spatters and chunks of gore. And leaves. And glass.

The blood on the branch was all wrong, too. There was a void beyond it where the branch had stopped flying blood; a macabre “shadow” of the branch while blood and tissue clung to the bark and twigs. But on the counter and sink under the branch, there were smears.

The branch hadn't been there when those smears happened.

And one by one, other pieces—metaphorical pieces—fell into place.

The chainsaw was a popular brand that Bashir knew for a fact would stop when someone released the trigger. If there was resistance against the chain—be it wood or human tissue—it would stop instantly. Still plenty of potential to for serious injury, but unless the chainsaw had been sabotaged or possessed by demons, no one was falling on top of the blade and being chewed up to the extent this man had been. That, and between the vibration of the motor and the spinning of the blade, the tool would've likely fallen away from the man unless it was being held in place.

With the chainsaw details rattling around in his mind, Bashir shifted gears to

something else that hadn't sat right with him. During the autopsy, he'd found a significant amount of blood in Upworth's abdomen. That in and of itself hadn't been a surprise, given the massive wounds, but the more he thought about where and how it had pooled, and the volume of pooled blood...

He switched to the photos he'd taken of the body turned on his side as well as on his back from both the left and right. Livor mortis had turned Upworth's skin a deep purple wherever blood had pooled. Though he'd been found on his back, there were blanched areas on his left hip as well as one on the left side of his ribs that matched the shape and size of his arm. His upper arm was also white. In the picture with his back to the camera, there was significantly more purple on the left side of his back and down into his left leg.

The postmortem staining didn't lie: this was not a man who'd died on his back. He'd expired on his left side, stayed there for at least half an hour—enough time to let Livor Mortis set in—before someone had moved him onto his back.

Not only that, but if Bashir was right—if he was piecing together the pooled blood and the postmortem staining as correctly as he thought he was—Gilroy Upworth had died from internal bleeding.

Good thing Bashir hadn't sewn him up yet, because this autopsy definitely wasn't over.

He glanced over his shoulder. Boyce was, as predicted, off in his own world—headphones on and music loud enough that the faint, tinny sound was audible from two tables over. He'd already completed two of his postmortems, and now he was working on his third, oblivious to Bashir's conundrum and not offering up any snark or commentary. Miracles never ceased.

Bashir put the photos aside, and as he pulled on a fresh pair of gloves, he turned to

Tami. “Call Detective Villeray. Tell him I need to see him and his partner right now .”

Her eyes widened. “You... You really don’t think this was an accident?”

Bashir leaned over the body and peered into the open chest cavity. “No, I do not.”

By the time Detectives McKay and Villeray arrived, Bashir was alone in the morgue; Boyce was gone and Tami had stepped out to chase down some paperwork. Bashir had sewn up the body and returned it to the morgue drawer, and as it turned out, his fishing expedition to follow his hunch had indeed turned up some more answers.

Unfortunately for the detectives, those answers would only mean more questions for them.

As the pair strolled into the morgue McKay didn’t seem pleased to be there. Annoyed and deeply inconvenienced, rather. Villeray, though, seemed curious and earnest. Bashir supposed that was to be expected. McKay had been doing this long enough to know what kinds of freak accidents could kill human beings, and he needed some serious probable cause to think such incidents were worth investigating. Villeray had been on the job longer than the poor kid who’d found Upworth, but he was still new enough that he wasn’t as cynical and desensitized as his partner. He’d obviously picked up that something was amiss last night, and his interest in this case was still piqued.

And damn him, Villeray gave Bashir a charming smile, and holy hell, this was neither the time nor the place to be thinking about how attractive this man was. Didn’t matter how desperate Bashir was getting these days—he had a job to do.

So he cleared his throat and plastered on a professional expression. “Thanks for coming down here, detectives.”

“Yeah. Well. We’re here.” McKay slid his hands into his jacket pockets and cocked his head in that impatient I’m-humoring-you-but-don’t-test-me way of his. “Let me guess—our deceased died as a result of being violently stirred by a chainsaw.”

Villeray scowled, cutting his eyes toward his partner, but he said nothing.

Bashir offered a bland smile. “Actually, no.” He held out a file folder. “I’m labeling Gilroy Upworth’s manner of death as, unequivocally, homicide.”

McKay released a long-suffering sigh as he took the folder from Bashir. “We already agreed on that last night, didn’t we?”

“We did,” Bashir said. “But I’d say it’s more than a theory now. And the chainsaw wasn’t the murder weapon.”

McKay shook his head with disbelief.

Villeray was watching Bashir, too, but he seemed more intrigued and confused than anything else. Deep crevices formed between his dark eyebrows as he asked, “What did you find?”

Bashir took a deep breath and explained everything he’d determined regarding the chainsaw. That was supposed to be their territory—his job was just to glean what he could from the body—but with a bizarre case like this and a clearly skeptical detective? Well, some toes had to be stomped on. He explained how after taking a closer look at Upworth’s chainsaw-chewed hands, he’d found what appeared to be defensive wounds on his knuckles.

McKay didn’t seem to quite buy that they were defensive wounds. They were obviously so, but he was still fixated on the chainsaw being the cause of all the damage.

When Bashir got into the Livor Mortis, though, he definitely had both cops' attention. And when he explained the actual cause of death...

"Internal bleeding?" McKay asked with cautious interest. "And that couldn't have been from the chainsaw?"

"Uh, Kurt?" Villeray cleared his throat. "If it was caused by the chainsaw, I don't think it would be, uh... internal?"

McKay looked at Bashir for confirmation.

Bashir shrugged. "He's not wrong."

The detective scowled, if not as angrily as Boyce often did. And Bashir thought he saw a little blush on Villeray's cheeks, but he refused to confirm it.

McKay exhaled. "All right, so internal bleeding prior to evisceration—any idea what caused it?"

"As a matter of fact—yes." Bashir picked up a small vial off a tray beside the vacant and cleaned autopsy table. "I found this lodged in his T7 vertebra."

The detectives both stared slack-jawed at the mushroomed .22 caliber bullet inside the vial.

"I couldn't tell you where it went in." Bashir handed the vial to Villeray. "I suspect the entry wound was destroyed. There's also too much damage to the ribs and other bones for me to tell you where the bullet ricocheted on its way through the body. But when I took a closer look at his heart, there was a series of holes that match the round." He furrowed his brow as he watched the men inspecting the bullet in question. "I suspect he took at least two hits. I couldn't tell you where the first was,

though.”

McKay’s skepticism returned.

Villeray’s curiosity, however, intensified. “Two? How do you figure?”

“Because the damage done to the heart would’ve resulted in, at the very least, near instantaneous loss of consciousness. If you take another look at the blood at the crime scene, you’ll find there was substantial blood left at the scene before the branch came through the window.” Shaking his head, he said, “There’s no way he moved around that much and made that much of a mess after the shot to his heart. Most likely, he was dead in seconds, with the blood pooling in his abdominal cavity rather than being ejected through his wounds by his heart or his movements.”

McKay didn’t seem to be buying it, but Villeray jumped in. “He’s right.” Turning to his partner, he added, “And there were leaves and broken glass on top of the blood.”

The older detective blinked. Then he looked down at the vial in his hand. After a moment, he faced Bashir. “So... are you telling me someone shot Upworth, fought with him, shot him again , and then staged an accidental death by chainsaw?”

Bashir nodded. “Looks like it, yes. My guess is that if you revisit the scene, you’ll find at least one bullet of the same caliber. A bullet hole , if not the round itself.”

McKay pushed out a breath. “Why in the hell would someone do all that?”

“Well, detective.” Bashir smiled. “I do believe that’s your job to figure out.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

“What a load of shit.”

Sawyer just managed to hold back his eyeroll as the two of them walked out of the morgue, copies of the preliminary autopsy report in hand. Or, in this case, rolled up tight and being smacked into Kurt’s palm like if he hit the papers hard enough, the words on them would change.

“So it’s a homicide,” Sawyer said. “We as good as knew that already.”

“Suspecting it is one thing, having it confirmed by the goddamn M.E....” Kurt shook his head. “And this is after you already dug into Upworth and found a lot of nothing, goddamn nothing. This guy was as boring as the dirt he farmed.”

Sawyer shrugged. “I might have missed something.”

“You haven’t yet.”

It was nice to get what amounted to a round of applause from his partner, but Sawyer would have preferred one from Dr. Ramin. Speaking of... Sawyer stopped and shook his head. “Damn it.”

“What? ”

“I forgot my phone in the morgue.”

Kurt looked at him incredulously. “Forgot your...what the fuck did you have your phone out for?” His expression darkened. “You weren’t taking pictures, were you?”

‘Cause sharing photos of the deceased would do more than get us canned, it would get us sent to fucking jail. And get your phone seized as evidence. If you put one damn pic up on Tock Tick or whatever the hell it is, I will—”

“Kurt.” Sawyer put a calming hand on the other man’s shoulder and tried not to take the attack personally. He’s going through a lot. That didn’t mean he had to be such a dick, though. “I was just using it to check the time.”

“That’s what you wear a damn watch for!”

This time, Sawyer gave in to rolling his eyes as he pulled back his sleeves. “Do you see a watch on my wrists?”

Kurt sighed. “Goddamn kids these days...”

“I’m thirty-seven.”

“ Kids .” He shook his finger at Sawyer. “You need a watch.”

“And you need another cup of coffee.” Sawyer pointed him toward the lobby’s coffee machine, which he’d oh-so-conveniently stopped beside as he “remembered” his lost phone. “Grab one to go and I’ll be back in a minute. Less than a minute.”

“You’d better be,” Kurt said, but he was already turning toward the coffee pot. “We’ve got a metric ton of shit to shovel through today, and we’re not going to get through any of it sitting around in the Corpse Café.”

Honestly, it was a miracle that Detective McKay had lasted three decades in a public-facing job given how little he thought of, well, pretty much everyone and everything. Sawyer half wished he was still producing shows, just so he could have his partner written into a screenplay. “You’re so rude.”

“I’m old . I’m entitled to be rude.” Kurt took a sip of the coffee he’d just poured and made a face. “Go, go, I’ll be doctoring this into something drinkable until you get back.”

Sawyer took the out he’d gone to the trouble of setting up and headed back down the hall toward the morgue where they’d left the unfortunate Mr. Upworth and the handsome Dr. Bashir Ramin.

As soon as he stepped through the morgue’s double doors, the chill of the room hit Sawyer.

Dr. Ramin appeared, poking his head into the vestibule. “Was there something else, detective?”

Sawyer smiled. It was a smile he’d worked hard on, charming yet serious with a soupcon of flirtation around the edges. “I’m afraid I left my phone. Do you mind if I...”

“Of course not.” Dr. Ramin stepped aside and motioned for Sawyer to come all the way into the morgue.

Sawyer walked over to the table where he’d left his phone partially hidden behind a kidney-shaped metal bowl, picked it up, then turned back to the medical examiner. “Dr. Ramin—actually, do you mind if I call you Bashir?”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t. It’s not very professional.” Dr. Ramin leaned against a desk and crossed his arms. Oof, body language was starting to shift into something negative; it was time to take his chance before the other man was completely closed off.

“I was wondering if you’d care to get dinner with me tonight.”

Sawyer was treated to the sight of Dr. Ramin's very attractive mouth dropping open. His body language went from I'm-not-inclined-to-be-patient to what-was-that?, which was an improvement. "I'm sorry? "

"I'd like to take you to dinner." Sawyer let his smile shift into something more genuine. "Tonight. If, uh, if there's enough of a lull in the action that we can both get away. Maybe at Misoni if you like fusion food?" That was the place Huerta had mentioned, and if the upward flick of the doctor's eyebrow was any indication, his interest was piqued.

"To discuss the case?" Dr. Ramin asked.

"I don't think there's much about the case that requires further discussion between us for the moment. No, I'd like to take you to dinner because I want to get to know you better."

It took another few seconds before Dr. Ramin shook his head. "Ah, then no. I'm sorry, it's not..." He looked at Sawyer for a moment, eyes lingering on his chest before shifting back up to his face. "It's not personal. I just make it a point not to date people I work with."

"We don't work together," Sawyer pointed out.

"We do right now."

"I don't think that's quite the same."

Dr. Ramin sighed. "I'll be more clear. I don't date cops."

Well, that was...disheartening. "Not ever?"

“No.” Dr. Ramin’s body language was closing off again. Damn it. Pushing right now would only result in escalation, which was the last thing Sawyer wanted. He wanted Dr. Ramin to be relaxed around him—to welcome his presence and to look forward to his company.

Clearly that was going to take some time, but the man’s refusal to date cops notwithstanding, Sawyer was hopeful that it wasn’t a completely lost cause yet. Dr. Ramin was just the third person who had ever interested him enough to make a move, and the first to catch his eye since he’d come to this city.

Patience, grasshopper.

“I understand.” Sawyer ducked his chin for a second, enough to break the intense eye contact, before glancing up again. “I’m sorry for making you uncomfortable.”

“Oh, I wasn’t—you didn’t make me uncomfortable.” Dr. Ramin shook his head. “I’m just not...interested.”

Sawyer wasn’t willing to bet on that fact. However, he’d already lost this hand—it was better to fold now and save some of the doctor’s goodwill for another day. “No, I get it. Thanks for letting me down gently.” He nodded toward the door. “I’d better get out to Kurt before he decides to drive off without me.”

“Right. Um, goodbye.”

“Bye.” Sawyer left the morgue but almost ran right into a woman he recognized as one of Dr. Ramin’s associates. The short blonde bob and dark eyeliner were definitely familiar.

“Ooh, Detective Cologne!” she said with a knowing grin. “You are the cologne guy, right? The one who hit on Bash at the scene?”

Is that how he described it?

“Am I?” Sawyer asked in a monotone.

Her bubblineess popped. “I assume so, if you were cornering him in his workplace like that.”

“I didn’t corner him.” There had been five feet between him and Dr. Ramin, and the exit was on the doctor’s side.

“Look.” She leaned in close. “Take this as a bit of friendly advice—don’t go there. Bash already has trouble finding nice guys, and the last thing he needs is to end up with an ex at work. You guys give him enough trouble as it is.”

Sawyer smiled at her. It was an different kind of smile than the one he’d given Dr. Ramin. This was a cold, distant sort of smile; a smile bearing more resemblance to the sharp glint of a knife than the muted shine of teeth. He had just been rejected by the man himself—he didn’t need the message to be repeated by his techs. “Got it.” He slid around her, careful not to touch, and headed for the lobby.

“No need to be a bitch about it,” he heard her mutter—possibly to herself, but potentially at him. Whatever. He’d been called worse things by better people.

“Finally,” Kurt grouched when he saw Sawyer. He threw a nearly full cup of coffee into the closest trash can. “Let’s get out of here before I do something regrettable, like drinking any more of this slop.”

“Let’s.” Sawyer followed his partner out into the midday sunshine and loosened his tie. His neck felt itchy, his throat a little tight.

That’s the joy of rejection for you.

“You okay?” Kurt asked in an uncommon show of concern as he started the car.

“Fine,” Sawyer replied. “Just a little tired.”

“Yeah, you and me both.” That got his partner to launch into a familiar catalogue of woes that would give Sawyer approximately seven and a half minutes of peace on the ride back to the station. He wouldn’t have to do more than “mm” or “huh” for at least that long, which meant he could think about how he might be able to change Dr. Ramin’s mind about dating cops.

What was wrong with dating a cop? Sure, for your average person, dating someone who worked a stressful job with chaotic hours might be a negative, but Sawyer was pretty sure Dr. Ramin’s hours were no better. Couple that with the challenges of finding someone to talk to when your work was handling dead bodies, and a cop seemed like the ideal partner .

They still had two minutes to go on Kurt’s fuck-my-life diatribe when dispatch contacted their car. Kurt groaned, but replied, “Go ahead.”

“We’ve got a bystander report of a drowning on Parson’s Creek Road.”

Sawyer froze for a moment. A drowning where ?

His partner seemed to think that was as weird as he did. “Dispatch, repeat that please.”

“A bystander came across a body on Parson’s Creek Road that they believe shows signs of being drowned. You’re the closest car to check it out.”

“How the hell could someone drown all the way up there?” Kurt barked into the radio. Parson’s Creek Road, despite the name, was on top of a hill, and dry as a bone.

“Did he go swimming in a damn mud puddle?”

“I don’t know,” the dispatcher said with exaggerated patience. “That’s why you need to check it out. You’ll probably be the first police on scene.”

Oof, the clock was ticking to get to the body before it became seriously contaminated, then. Sawyer waited for Kurt to sign off, then said, “Think you can make it in ten minutes?”

Kurt scoffed. “Are you kiddin’ me? This time of day with the sirens on?” He flipped a switch on their refurbished patrol car and it started to blare. “I can make it in five. Hold on, kid.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

“What is up with that cop?” Tami demanded as she stomped into the morgue. “Does he not know how to take no for an answer or what?”

Bashir looked at her over the file he’d been reading. “Sorry, what?”

She huffed with even more annoyance than she usually did, which honestly spoke volumes. “He just seems so...” She flailed a hand in the direction Detective Villeray had gone. “Persistent.”

“He does?” Bashir lowered the file and pulled off his reading glasses, studying the flustered technician. “What makes you say that?”

She peered at him. “You don’t see it? Ugh, he had desperation radiating off him.”

Bashir blinked. “I, um... No, I hadn’t noticed?” He shrugged. “He asked me if I wanted to go to dinner, and when I said no, he left. I wouldn’t call that particularly persistent.”

She rolled her eyes and dropped into her desk chair but said nothing more .

Bashir watched her for a moment, then shook his head, pulled on his glasses again, and went back to the report he’d been reading. Not that he could concentrate. The conversation with Detective Villeray had already left him somewhat off-balance, and now there was Tami’s prickly attitude toward the detective. That was seriously weird. Though...

Okay, no, it really wasn’t. Because while Tami was very good at her job, she had

some issues with personal boundaries. In particular, it was no secret that she had a thing for Bashir or that it had ended her engagement. When Tami had come into work last year with red eyes and no ring the Monday after her now-ex-fiancé had confronted Bashir, Bashir had sat her down and made it clear in no uncertain terms where the lines were.

“I’m gay,” he’d told her. “And even if I wasn’t, I don’t date coworkers, especially not subordinates. We’re colleagues, and maybe friends, but that’s it.”

He didn’t know if her heartbroken expression had been because he’d rejected her or, well, because she’d just had her heart broken by the man she’d been planning to marry. Either way, they’d come to an understanding that had allowed them to continue working together.

Sometimes he wondered if that part—continuing to work together—had been a wise decision. Today was one of those times.

Well, it was what it was. If nothing else, he supposed her attitude would make the detective think twice about trying again.

That thought gave him pause. Usually, he’d be all over a buffer between him and someone whose advances he wanted to reject. Especially when the guy was absolutely off-limits thanks to minor details like “he’s a goddamned cop.”

But this time...

Bashir suppressed a groan, took off his glasses again, and rubbed his eyes. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, he almost regretted turning down Detective Villeray. Almost. The man was anything but unattractive, and Bashir had to give him credit for being ballsy enough to ask, even if he hadn’t been as slick about it as he’d probably intended. Suuure, he’d “accidentally” left his phone in the morgue. Because that was

a normal thing to do. Most people outside the death business were way too squeamish to put a personal effect on any surface in a morgue, never mind forget it, never mind voluntarily walk back into the morgue to retrieve it. Even the most grizzled cops who'd seen everything under the sun—like the ones who routinely attended autopsies, which many of the detectives did—weren't fond of this place. They sure as shit wouldn't relish the idea of carrying around an object that had spent time here. The one other time someone had left a phone in the morgue, Tami had called their desk to let them know, and they'd said, "You know, I really need to upgrade anyway and everything's stored on the cloud. Just, uh... get rid of it, I guess."

It was a nice phone, too, but whatever.

And yet Detective Villeray...

Hell. Maybe I should give him a chance.

No. No. Fuck, no. He was a cop. Bashir was done dating cops. He wouldn't even date someone who worked with cops. Like that seriously hot diver they sometimes called in to recover bodies? Nope. Not gonna happen.

But he's hot. And he's into me. And—

And clearly Bashir was just frustrated because he still had blue balls from last night.

Ah. That was it. This wasn't mutual attraction. It was a nasty case of *datus interruptus*.

Maybe Max would be game for a hookup. They obviously weren't compatible for a relationship if Max couldn't handle Bashir getting dragged away in the middle of dinner, but some guys would still be down with a roll in the hay with no strings attached.

Of course, Bashir's phone was almost guaranteed go off at the most inopportune moment. Always fucking did. Like that time last fall when Bashir had been plowing a gorgeous bartender over the back of a couch, and right when things were getting good—

His shrill ringtone startled him so bad, he dropped the report he'd been reading.

Then he swore under his breath and snatched up the phone. The caller ID had more curses tumbling from his mouth in all the languages he spoke.

Dispatch. Because of course it was.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he accepted the call. "Dr. Ramin."

Another death scene. Because of course it was.

By the time Bashir arrived at the scene, he was in an exceptionally foul mood. Not that death scenes brought him any particular joy, but there were a lot of people trying his patience today, and he was at that point where he would've sworn he was hangry, except he'd eaten. No hangry, then—just bitchy.

Most of it had come from his cranky colleague. Boyce had already been none too pleased about taking on a couple of "boring" autopsies that had been on Bashir's schedule this morning. For a while, it seemed like he'd gotten over his bullshit from this morning. Then he'd gone to lunch, where he'd apparently spent an hour getting himself all worked up again. Right about the time Bashir was getting ready to come to this scene, Boyce had stomped back into the morgue in a pissy mood.

"You can't just pawn everyone off on me!" Boyce had declared. "I've got a full schedule too!"

“And I have an emergency call,” Bashir had responded. “I’m the only one who can go, so—”

That had been a mistake. Boyce ranted, loudly and at length, while Bashir tried to tune him out. This was exactly why he tried not to bring up the morgue’s hierarchy. Few things grated on Boyce more than reminders that Bashir was both the county medical examiner and a forensic pathologist. While Boyce was a pathologist himself, he’d chosen not to pursue the forensic pathologist designation, which was why he’d been passed over for the role of M.E. and Bashir was hired instead. Sometimes that meant he was stuck taking on Bashir’s workload when something demanded the M.E.’s presence.

The thing was, Boyce wanted to be the one going to death scenes and being involved in the cases he thought were “exciting.” He resented—he fucking hated —being Bashir’s backup. And in fact, it would’ve made everyone’s life easier if he could’ve taken some of the more complicated cases that Bashir did, but no, that wasn’t how this shit worked.

Whatever. They’d both made their choices, and Bashir wasn’t here for pissing contests or temper tantrums.

“I’m sorry, okay?” he’d said on his way out. “I’ll put out a memo for people to stop getting murdered so I don’t have to dump my caseload on you.”

Boyce hadn’t been happy with that, and it admittedly hadn’t been Bashir’s most professional moment, but there it was. Between flirty cops, prickly technicians, and bitchy pathologists, he was a hundred percent done with the living, and it was barely noon .

The scene was clear out on Parson’s Creek Road, and the drive would usually give him time to cool off, but it didn’t help today. He doubted anything would unless it

involved alcohol, orgasms, or both.

And wasn't that Detective McKay's car?

Bashir indulged in a frustrated sigh as he shut off the engine. He was about to bang his forehead on the steering wheel in hopes of the sweet relief of blunt force trauma, but a uniformed officer was striding toward him with a clipboard under her arm.

Time to be an adult. He'd knuckled through worse. And the alcohol and orgasms at the other end of this shitshow would be worth it.

"They fucking better be," he muttered to himself as he stepped out of the van. By the time he'd shut the door, he had on his professional face, which consisted of a smile that made him approachable without giving the appearance of over-the-top cheerfulness. Nothing unsettled people quite like the M.E. waltzing onto a death scene with a bright realtor smile.

Not that he was in any danger of appearing too happy today.

The scene commander met him at the edge of the perimeter, clipboard tucked under her arm. "Dr. Ramin." She extended her hand. "I'm Officer Lane."

He shook her hand. She quickly logged him in on her clipboard, then lifted the crime scene tape for him to duck under. After he'd put on his gloves, mask, and booties, Officer Lane led him down the marked path toward the middle of the scene. Much like Officer Doran had yesterday, she'd wisely cordoned off a wide perimeter around the scene and laid down tape and cones to indicate a path. Two CSI techs were already working their way through the scene—one crouching beside some ferns a few yards off the road, the other standing near the middle and, Bashir guessed, making a sketch.

About two yards away from the one making the sketch, sprawled at the feet of Detectives McKay and goddamned Villeray, was the reason Bashir had been called out here.

Caucasian male. Mid-twenties, most likely. Maybe early thirties. Dressed in nothing but a pair of blue swim trunks. No visible signs of trauma. He had no idea why someone thought this person had drowned other than the swim trunks. And... did he smell chlorine? That could've been bleach, though.

Blowflies were gathering, as was to be expected, and rigor mortis had set in. The victim probably hadn't been here more than a few hours.

The dirt surrounding him was barely disturbed. There were tire tracks in the clay, but no footprints near the body. The footprints Bashir could see were likely from whoever had discovered the body, the CSI techs, the officers, and the detectives, all of whom had carefully stayed back several feet from the body.

Bashir's best guess at this stage? The deceased had died elsewhere and then been left here. Probably dumped from a vehicle—possibly a moving one—given the position of limbs and the lack of shoe impressions nearby.

He met Detective Villeray's gaze. The detective's cheeks darkened, and he glanced away for a second, but then he cleared his throat and reclaimed eye contact. "The, uh... The person who called this in thought he drowned. "

Bashir cocked a brow. "In what? Student debt?" He gestured around them. "There's no water up here."

Villeray pressed his lips together as if trying to stifle a laugh. "Yeah, we... can't figure that one out either."

Officer Lane cleared her throat. “Well, the scene is dry, but the deceased was soaking wet when we got here.” She turned to Bashir. “And there’s the chlorine smell.”

Bashir nodded. “Good call.” He looked over the body again with the smell in mind. Chlorine from a pool? Or bleach? The deceased’s lungs would tell him a clearer story, hopefully. And now that he looked, the guy’s hair did look like it had been wet recently. On closer inspection, so had the clay near the body. Maybe he had been in a pool or something.

He needed to put drowning out of his mind and focus on the body and whatever story the autopsy told. Conclusions would come from those rather than evidence backing up the assumptions in his brain.

Observe and analyze, he reminded himself. Don’t assume and overlook something because it doesn’t fit the assumption.

“Well,” he said to the cops, “if he drowned, he didn’t do it here. We’ll just have to see what the evidence says.”

With that, he got to work, and the cops left him to it. Villeray hesitated as the other two walked away, and Bashir was hit with the overwhelming horror that the detective was going to hang back and make things worse between them. Like apologize for making things awkward, which would only succeed in making things more awkward. Or try to start chatting in hopes of buttering up Bashir to reconsider his rejection.

Mercifully, about the time Bashir was considering striking up a conversation about what the blowfly larvae would be doing to the body’s eyeballs once they hatched, Villeray left to catch up with his partner.

Thank fuck.

Bashir glanced at the detective's back, and admittedly, he felt bad. Villeray was a nice enough guy—for a cop—and he wasn't hard on the eyes at all. He hadn't deserved Tami's attitude earlier. Hell, maybe Bashir should apologize for that.

That could wait, though. John Doe of Parson's Creek Road could not.

With the help of Officer Lane, Bashir put up a small canopy to protect the body and this portion of the crime scene from the elements. A sheet strategically draped over two sides would protect the dignity and privacy of the deceased if looky-loos showed up. Not that there would be many at a remote crime scene like this, but especially with the advent of drones, one couldn't be too careful.

Bashir had just finished photographing every visible inch of the body and the ground immediately surrounding him when a commotion turned his head. He'd been vaguely aware of a car engine approaching, but he hadn't paid it much mind because it was hardly out of the ordinary. People came and went at crime scenes.

The scream of, "Let me see him!" however, was... irregular.

Not unheard of, but not an everyday thing. Bashir swore under his breath, schooled his expression to something placid and professional, and peered around the curtain toward the sounds. Unsurprisingly, there was a woman trying to shove past police and onto the crime scene. She was probably in her sixties or so, and a man of about the same age was trying to hold her back. Her husband, Bashir guessed, especially since he looked distraught himself even as he tried to calm her down.

The woman was having none of it. She alternately sobbed and raged, demanding to see her son. Bashir felt for her. She wasn't the first mother to come to a crime scene, overwhelmed with every stage of grief simultaneously, and she sadly would not be the last. Today was about to be the worst day of her life, and the ones that came after wouldn't be much better.

Bashir sighed and got back to work. These poor people. At least they would most likely have an ID on the body now. He didn't have any identification on him—the pockets of his swim trunks were empty—but some difficulty identifying a body was preferable to this. No one wanted the cops showing up at the door with hats in their hands, but personally, Bashir would take a somber visit like that over showing up to the scene and actually seeing the body of his lost loved one.

The screaming died down a little, and Bashir chanced another look outside. The woman was now perched on the front bumper of a patrol car, crying and dabbing at her eyes. In front of her, Detective Villeray was saying something, gesturing in a way that suggested he was trying to soothe her, but his expression and mannerisms weren't patronizing. In fact, even from here, he looked genuinely sympathetic, and whatever he was saying... it was working.

Bashir ducked back into the tent and stood there for a moment, trying to process. Some cops were good at dealing with the panicked and the grief-stricken. Some were... not. He wasn't even surprised that Villeray was apparently good at it. If anything, he was caught off-guard by the effect that had on him.

C'mon, Ramin. A cop with an understanding of basic compassion isn't that out of the ordinary.

A cop with an understanding of basic compassion who was also attractive, queer, single, and interested? That was something of a unicorn.

Bashir shook himself and got back to work. The woman's son deserved the focus of a forensic pathologist who would figure out what had happened to him. Not one who was distracted by the cop he maybe should've taken up on the offer for dinner. The cop who'd quite famously been a literal actor before getting his badge.

The thought gave Bashir pause. Then he rolled his eyes and got back to work.

No wonder Sawyer was so convincing.

And attractive.

And...

Goddammit. I am so fucked.

The following morning, Bashir found himself with a serious case of *déjà vu*.

Of course, starting the day with autopsies wasn't unusual. Any bodies brought in were autopsied the following morning, and in a city this size, a handful of people dying on a given day wasn't that out of ordinary. The vast majority of them weren't even suspicious. Aneurysms. Embolisms. Myocardial infarctions. Accidents. Someone choking on a meatball at a wedding like that lady a few months back. That guy last spring who hadn't thought to make sure he wasn't allergic to bee stings before getting into beekeeping. Bashir had seen it all, and he started most of his days by opening up bodies to find out why they'd stopped ticking.

What was new, however, was two days in a row of staring at a body he'd been autopsying, completely at a loss to explain what had happened to the person.

Christopher James White, twenty-seven, had not drowned.

He had been in chlorinated water recently, but there was no sign of drowning. No water in the stomach or lungs. No hemorrhage in the mastoid cavity of the ear. No bloody froth in the mouth or trachea. It was still possible—drowning was a weird one that was sometimes determined by excluding everything else—but still, even this far into the autopsy, literally the only things that even remotely suggested drowning were the swim trunks and the smell of chlorine.

There were signs of bleeding between the endocardium and myocardium. Some fluid had also accumulated in the myocardial interstitium and in the brain. The stomach was mostly empty, and there was some damage to the esophagus that suggested the kid had been sick. Perhaps violently so.

He didn't drown, Bashir , he told himself. Let go of that hypothesis and figure out how he did die.

That was how he always did things. Even when he had a general idea of what probably killed the person, he scrupulously kept an open mind so he didn't miss anything. But this time, "drowning" hung in the back of his mind like a relentless earworm. Probably because it was so wildly incongruous with where and how the body was discovered. It was too weird to ignore.

Ignore it anyway. Stop trying to drown him.

Bashir stared at the body. At his notes. At the body again. "Hey, Tami? "

She looked up from some notes she'd been going over from a routine autopsy. "Yeah?"

"You're not doing anything messy right now, are you?"

She showed her hands, which weren't gloved. "Nope. Just paperwork."

"If you've got a minute, would you mind calling Detectives McKay and Villeray for me?"

Her neutral expression darkened. "Oh. Them."

Bashir fought the urge to roll his eyes. "They're investigating this case." He gestured

at Christopher's body. "I need to talk to them."

This time, interest sparked in her eyes. "Ooh?" She picked up her phone. "Another weird one?"

"Yeah," he said, almost more to himself. "You could say that."

"Do you want them here in the morgue? Or just to call you?"

Bashir thought about it. An irrational part of him wanted to tell her they needed to come to the morgue. Specifically, that Villeray needed to come to the morgue.

Because I'm a fucking idiot, that's why. Jesus Christ.

He cleared his throat. "Just have one of them call me."

That was the safer option. The more professional one. The one that guaranteed Bashir wouldn't say or do something stupid, purely because he was lonely, and frustrated, and stressed the hell out from two weird deaths in less than twenty-four hours, and—

"Okay," Tami chirped. "Done."

"Thanks."

"No problem." She flashed him a quick smile before she got back to work. At least yesterday's bad mood was forgotten, and anyway, she was always good about making calls or sending texts or emails for him when he was up to his elbows in things no one wanted on a phone or keyboard. He did the same for her whenever the need arose. Just one of those things that came with working in a morgue.

And given Tami's attitude about Detective Villeray, he didn't need to check to see if

she was clear about how he needed to call , not come into the morgue.

Yet, maybe twenty minutes after she'd called, no phones rang and no text tones went off. No, the detective himself strolled into the morgue, coffee cup in hand.

“Um, I believe I was clear that Dr. Ramin wanted you to call him,” Tami said testily. “He’s very busy.”

“Uh.” Villeray halted, eyes flicking between Tami—who was practically in his face now—and Bashir, who was still taking some tissue samples from the body.

“Let him in,” Bashir said. “I need to talk to him.”

Tami turned her irritated look on him, but then she rolled her eyes and got out of Villeray’s way, stomping out of the morgue and out into the hall.

Villeray didn’t move for a moment. He watched Tami leaving, eyes wide. Then he faced Bashir and took a tentative step closer. “Is, um... Is this a bad time?”

It was, but it also wasn’t. Bashir should not have been pleased to see the detective, nor relieved he hadn’t brought his partner.

Am I losing my mind? I’m losing my mind.

Sure he was blushing and with absolutely no way to explain why, he muffled a cough. “No. It’s not a bad—you didn’t have to come all the way down here, though. We could’ve done this on the phone.”

Villeray came a little closer, his smile far more endearing than it had any right to be. “I was upstairs when she called, and Kurt was getting...” He trailed off, holding Bashir’s gaze. Then he was the one blushing, and he looked away. “Um. Anyhow.

You wanted—” His gaze landed on the body Bashir had been working on, and he sobered. “Is this about...?” He gestured at Christopher.

Bashir nodded. “I... Look, I don’t know if there’s a full moon or what, but two incredibly weird and unnatural deaths in twenty-four hours is...” He shook his head. “Especially since I can’t see how they’re possibly related except for being weird.”

Villeray eyed him. “Wait, you think this is related to the Upworth case?”

“I...” Bashir considered it. “I don’t know. Maybe? There’s literally nothing connecting them as far as I can see except the timing. But it’s weird as hell to have two bizarre deaths in a row where it looked like the cause of death was one thing, but on closer inspection, it’s something else.”

The detective’s eyebrows climbed his forehead. “So he didn’t drown?”

“No.”

Villeray pursed his lips, an expression that was also annoyingly attractive. “What do you think happened?”

“Poisoning.” Bashir glanced at Christopher. “Without going into a ton of detail, the symptoms are consistent with yellow oleander ingestion.”

“Oh. Shit.” The detective’s gaze slid toward the body again. “Were you able to find any? Like in his...” He gestured at his own stomach.

Bashir shook his head. “One of the symptoms is vomiting.”

“Ah. Point taken. Is there any way to detect it in his system?”

“Yes, but it’ll take time. I won’t know for sure until the toxicology report comes back, so I wanted to loop you guys in so you can check his home for evidence. ”

“Good to know.” Villeray took out his phone. “You said it’s... What was the toxin again?”

“Yellow oleander.”

“Yellow oleander,” the detective murmured to himself as he typed it in. “I’ll have to look up what that looks like so—” He paused, then flicked his eyes toward Bashir, his expression full of earnestness and curiosity. “It’s a flower, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Villeray nodded as he typed something else into his phone. “We’ve got CSI techs at his apartment right now. No idea yet if that’s where he died, or if there was another secondary location, but it’s a start.”

“Any leads at all?”

Sighing, Villeray shook his head. “No. We tried to interview his parents, but they’re a mess. Understandably so, you know? So they didn’t give us much. Same with his girlfriend.” He tucked his phone into his pocket. “I’ll try talking to her again later. I think she’s just in shock right now.”

Once again, compassion from a cop shouldn’t have been a novelty. It shouldn’t have done these weird fluttery things to Bashir’s insides.

He’s an actor , Bashir.

So why can’t I convince myself this is all an act?

He ignored the hell out of all that and shifted his weight. “I can’t imagine.” He paused, then added, “I don’t know how you deal with the living.”

“It’s, um...” Villeray rolled his shoulders. “It’s a lot tougher than I thought it would be. That’s... I mean, when I joined the force, I worried how I’d react the first time I saw...” He nodded toward Christopher. “But the hard part is definitely the living.”

“That’s why I went into this line of work.” Bashir almost slid his hands into his pockets, but he remembered at the last second that he was wearing less than clean gloves. Instead he rested a hand on the autopsy table beside his clipboard. “I had every intention of becoming a physician, but as soon as I started my rotations, I knew it wasn’t for me.”

Villeray’s brow pinched. “Yeah?”

Bashir nodded. “The emergency department was what did me in. It was just...” He shuddered at the memory. “You’d treat one person who was in horrible pain or was terrified or had been failed by the system. Then you’d move to the next room and do it all over again. All night. Every shift. I just... I couldn’t do it.”

The detective studied him. “Wow. I don’t think I could cope with that either. It’s bad enough the families of victims, or the survivors, or...” He shook his head. “It’s hard.” Then he huffed a soft laugh. “But someone has to do it, right?”

“Someone, yeah. I think I’ll stick with...” Bashir tilted his head toward Christopher.

“Well, you handle that part, and I’ll deal with...” Villeray held up his phone.

Bashir actually managed a chuckle. “Deal.”

That earned him a smile that was far too gorgeous for this situation. And for a cop.

Because Bashir was not interested in cops and didn't date cops and definitely didn't notice or care when cops had sexy smiles or beautiful eyes. Damn it.

“Um. Anyway.” Villeray schooled his expression. “I should catch up with Kurt and follow up on this. Thanks for the tip about the yellow... uh...”

“Yellow oleander. ”

“Right. That.” Another quick smile. “Hopefully I won't see you on a scene again any time soon.”

“Yeah. Let's hope.”

Villeray turned to go, and his parting words stuck with Bashir. Hopefully they wouldn't see each other on a scene for a long time. But... he was suddenly disappointed at the prospect of not seeing this detective—this cop , for fuck's sake—at all.

Bashir mouthed a curse. Then he called out, “Detective?”

Villeray turned in the doorway. “Hmm?” God, his eyes were so pretty.

“Is, um... I know you're not going to have a lot of spare time for a while, but...” Bashir swallowed, and he admittedly sounded a bit resigned as he asked, “Is that offer for dinner still open?”

Fuck. That smile. The way this man lit up the goddamned morgue . Bashir was doomed.

“Offer's still open.” Villeray inclined his head. “Text me?”

He shouldn't. He absolutely fucking shouldn't. But...

“Yeah.” Bashir smiled even as his brain rattled off all the reasons he shouldn't do this. “I'll text you.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

“What is that expression on your face?”

Sawyer didn't bother looking over at Kurt, keeping his focus on his phone. “What expression?”

“The one you're expressing right now. The one that's weird.”

“What's weird?”

“It makes you look...happy.”

Sawyer bit back a smile. “Should I not look happy?”

“You generally don't,” Kurt replied. “Especially not when we're in the middle of two murder cases. Kind of doesn't fit the mood.”

“It's not like the victim's family is sitting across from me right now.” No, that had already happened, and it had sucked . It turned out that the person who'd found Christopher White was a friend of his parents, and had called them even before she called the cops. They'd gotten to the scene way too quickly and had, despite everyone's best efforts to stop them, seen their son in a state which...well, no parent should have to see that.

Sawyer had tried his damndest to comfort them afterward, but for all he could read body language like a pro, for all he could pull his most empathetic self to the forefront at will, there was nothing anyone could do that would make a mother feel better about losing her son.

Especially to something like murder.

“Enemies?” Mrs. Calloway had whispered—she was divorced from the victim’s father and had taken her new husband’s name, but it was clear that the three of them had been close. “What do you mean?”

“Anyone who might want to harm Christopher,” Kurt had explained.

“But...I thought he drowned.”

“The preliminary autopsy suggests that he may have been poisoned.”

“ Oh God... ”

“And even if he had died of drowning,” Kurt went on with all the dogged persistence of a cop who’d been doing these interviews for too long, “ someone had to drop his body off on the side of the road.”

“His body , my baby’s body, oh my God, oh my God...” Mrs. Calloway had just about collapsed, and her husband seemed about five seconds away from throwing a punch.

Sawyer had stepped in at that point—sent Kurt for bottles of water, which was code for “get the fuck out and don’t come back,” and taken over the interview.

“I know it’s hard to think about,” he said, careful to keep his voice gentle. Soft eyes will get you more callbacks than hard looks ever could, he remembered his mother saying. She was right, too...up to a point. “I know that this is probably the last place you want to be right now, and I’m sorry we have to ask you these questions. But we do have to, especially if we want to get justice for Christopher.”

Mrs. Calloway had buried her face in her husband's shoulder, but she looked over at Sawyer then. Her eyes were blood-red—she'd burst capillaries from how hard she'd been crying. "Chris worked nights as a bartender," she whispered. "He was a good one, good at making conversation, good at putting people at ease. Like you."

Sawyer forced an encouraging smile. After a moment, she went on. "I don't know of anyone who would have wanted to hurt him, but you should talk to his girlfriend, Larissa. Honey, can you..."

"I'll give the detective her number," her husband promised.

"Does she know yet?" Mrs. Calloway asked. "Does Larissa know? Oh my God, we have to call her! We have to tell her! She's going to be broken— oh my God! "

The interview ended there. Sawyer had escorted them out, then headed back inside and called up the girlfriend, Larissa Smith. Five terrible minutes later, he'd been on the verge of calling in sick for the rest of the day when all of a sudden he got a text from Bashir.

How do you feel about Thai food?

Sawyer couldn't have stopped the smile that crossed his face even if he'd tried. It hadn't even been a day—not even half a day—and Bashir was texting him about dinner. I love Thai food, he sent back, then headed inside to prepare for the next interview and do some looking into the cause of death. Yellow oleander...

"Seriously, why are you so chipper?" Kurt's grating insistence brought Sawyer back to the moment, and he put his phone down with a sigh. Kurt was like a dog with a bone when he got curious about something; if he didn't tell him now, Kurt would hound him incessantly.

“I’ve got a date.”

“A...date. ”

“Yeah, it’s a thing that people who aren’t married get to do on a regular basis.”

“Fuck you,” Kurt snapped. “Married people go on dates. Molly and I used to go on dates every Friday night. Not lately, of course, but we still order in special and watch a movie together. Who are you supposed to be on a date with?”

“Forget about it.” Yellow oleander...it doesn’t grow wild here. Let’s see if it’s a botanical gardens kind of thing...shit. Sold as a common decorative indoor plant. “So, yellow oleander is—”

“Who is it?”

Sawyer sighed. “Can we talk about this later?” Kurt just stared at him. “Fine, no, you’re right, now’s perfect. I’m going on a date with Dr. Ramin.” He glanced back down at his phone, silently counting down. Three...two...o—

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!”

“Right,” Sawyer deadpanned. “Because I’m known for that, how I love to kid around.”

“I’m serious! You want to go on a date with Dr. Death? Hey!” He shouted past Sawyer to the cooler, where another detective, Shenandoah Walker, was filling up her water bottle. “Hey Nan, you’re not gonna believe this!”

“Believe what?” Nan was good people, a ten-year veteran on the force and the kind of multitasker and problem-solver who made you understand how she managed two sets

of twins at home, but that didn't mean Sawyer wanted to make her a part of this discussion.

“Shut up, Kurt.”

“No, I don't think I will,” Kurt chortled, leaning over and getting into Sawyer's space. He smelled faintly...alcoholic. Shit, was he drinking on the job again? He only did that when he'd had bad news about Molly. “Nan, get a load of this—Sawyer here is going on a date with Dr. Death!”

“Dr. Death?” Nan wrinkled her nose as she came over to join them. “Kurt, you better not be referring to Boyce, because that son of a bitch wouldn't know how to treat a man right if you laid it out in 3D. He backed into my car outside of Home Depot a month ago—backed into it—and you know what that man said to me?” Nan affected a low voice and a pugnacious, jutting jaw. “Are you blind, Walker? Didn't you see my Porsche?” She rolled her eyes. “And now that asshole has an Escalade, because I guess he couldn't do enough damage in a fucking Porsche.”

“It's not Boyce,” Sawyer said before Nan and Kurt could go off on what an asshole the guy was. He was , but that would just prolong this conversation. “It's Dr. Ramin.”

“Really?” To his surprise, she smiled. “I thought Dr. Ramin never dated cops.”

Sawyer shrugged. “Apparently I'm an exception.” As long as he doesn't change his mind.

Please don't let him change his mind.

“Well, good! He deserves to go out with someone nice. He's a lovely guy. Damn good at his job, too.” She smiled at Sawyer, showing all of her teeth. “I suggest you try not to fuck this up, hon. God don't make men like that very often.”

“Nan!” Kurt groaned. “You’re supposed to be on my side with this. A fuckin’ death doc and a cop? It’s a terrible idea.”

“It’s a great idea, and—” Nan sniffed, then sighed. “Kurt. Are you drunk?”

“I am not fucking drunk, how dare you—”

“Don’t you swear at me,” she warned, stepping forward and fixing Kurt with a glare. “You know the kind of trouble you’re courting with this. Was one suspension not enough for you?”

Sawyer frowned. “You were suspended?”

“For drinking on the job,” Nan said acidly. “And not responding to an emergency call that ended with his last partner in the hospital.”

Kurt sagged into his chair, rubbing a hand over his ruddy face. “I’m not drunk.” He refused to make eye contact with Sawyer. “I’m just...taking the edge off.”

“The edge off what?”

“Off being told that my wife is gonna die and there’s nothing anybody can do anymore!”

The three of them were silent for a long moment before Nan sighed. “I’m sorry.” She sounded like she really meant it. “But if you can’t handle that news without drinking, then you need to be at home.”

“There’s nothing I can do at home,” Kurt mumbled. “Her sister is with her. My sister is flying in...I can’t get a word in edgewise.”

“But—”

“Detective Villeray?” That was the desk sergeant. “There’s a Miss Smith here to see you. I put her in Room Three.”

“Thanks.” Sawyer got to his feet, feeling was as if he were leaping from one fire into another. He felt drained anew, his brief moment of internal sunshine clouded over by the fact that his partner was in pain.

He and Kurt weren’t friends, not really; they weren’t the sort of people who went to each other’s houses on their off days and watched football, or whatever regular people enjoyed when they weren’t working. But Sawyer liked Molly, who treated him with more care and affection than he knew what to do with, and few things were worse than watching someone you cared for go into a decline and knowing you couldn’t help them back out of it.

He’d have to figure out what to do to help later. Right now, he couldn’t keep Miss Smith waiting. Sawyer took a second to get into character, then headed for the interview room. He could hear Nan whispering vigorously at Kurt behind him, but he didn’t try and listen in.

Focus. Stay on point. Hit your marks.

He knocked on the door, then entered. “Larissa Smith?” He stepped in and over to the young woman sitting on the couch. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“You’re welcome.” Her fingers braided through the strap of her handbag, and it took her a moment to unwind them enough to shake hands. She was young, early twenties, with long brown hair and dark brown skin. Her eyes were puffy, but mostly she looked as though she was still in a state of shock. “I, um. You have some questions for me? About Chris?”

“Yes. But first...” Sawyer got through the basics of verifying her information—name, date of birth, and occupation—before moving on to the murder. “Was Chris having any trouble at work? Someone hassling him, maybe a patron who didn’t want to take no for an answer?”

“There’s always somebody like that.” Larissa sounded a bit helpless. “Not the crew he works with—they’re solid, but Mac’s is the most popular sports bar in town. There’s always going to be some asshole in there angry that their team is losing, you know?”

“Right.” Sawyer had no idea because he would rather dip himself in boiling oil than spend time in a sports bar, but he was good at faking understanding. Fake it till you make it. “Can you think of anyone in particular he mentioned recently? Or anyone else who might have been having problems with him?”

Larissa smiled tremulously. “Usually the problem was that he was getting hit on too much. At work, at the gym, at the pool...Chris is a good-looking guy, you know? He’s constantly being...” She stopped speaking, one hand going to her mouth. “I mean, he was...he...”

“I understand what you meant,” Sawyer assured her. “The pool, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s...” Larissa took a deep breath. “That was his other job. He was a swim instructor at the country club. He was really good in high school, and he had a swimming scholarship in college. We actually met at the Y, where I work, when...” She began to cry. Sawyer handed her a tissue and tried not to look as useless as he felt. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he said. Soft, soft. After a few minutes, she calmed down enough that he felt he could ask some more questions. “So he worked at the country club too?”

“Yeah. Um, he did kids’ classes and a few water aerobics things.”

“No private clients?”

“I don’t think so.” She shrugged miserably. “I’m sorry I’m not more helpful.”

“This has been helpful,” he promised her. “We think he might have been in a pool around the time of his death, so this is very helpful.”

Larissa’s breath hitched. “Did he drown?”

“No.” Sawyer waited for the inevitable follow-up question, but it didn’t come. She just nodded and stared down at her hands. He pulled his phone out and turned it to face her. “One last thing. Have you ever seen a plant like this before?” He’d chosen a photo of a yellow oleander in full bloom. The flowers were gorgeous, like the sort of thing you’d see tucked into a lei or behind an ear. Too bad that every single part of them was deadly if you consumed it or breathed in its pollen. Even touching it could cause serious problems.

She looked at the picture without so much as a flicker of incriminating nervousness. After a moment, she shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. I’m not really much of a plant person, though, so...um, no.” She glanced up at him. “Is it important?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Sawyer said. “If you do see a plant like this in the places you and Chris went to, or something else strikes you as notable or out of the ordinary, please let me know.” She already had his number, but he handed over his card. “This has both my phone numbers and my email address.”

“Thanks.” She held the card so tight that for a moment Sawyer thought she was going to accidentally rip it in half. “And you’ll let me know? If you figure out who killed him?”

“Yeah, I will,” he promised her. If we can figure it out. Right now this wasn’t looking any more solvable than the last murder despite how elaborate it had turned out, which...was weird. It reminded him of something, what was it...well, he’d come up with it.

He said his goodbyes and escorted Larissa outside, then took a few minutes to stand in the shade of the maple tree where the station’s designated smoking area had been set up. No one else was there, but it still stank of cigarettes. Too bad it was the only place around the entire building that had any—

His phone buzzed. Great. Sawyer pulled it out and checked his messages. A second later he smiled, an almost dizzying sense of relief filling him as he read it.

There’s a great Thai place downtown. You have time for dinner?

Tonight? That was even faster than Sawyer had hoped for. Despite both of them being knee deep in a murder investigation—something that demanded round-the-clock attention until the killer was caught—they were at a serendipitous lull. Bashir was waiting on results from tox screens and other tests. Sawyer had Nan and several officers chasing down some incredibly flimsy leads. There were wheels turning and people making things happen, which meant Sawyer (and apparently Bashir) could slip away to grab a meal, however brief. It would be good for clearing both of their heads anyway. Unless some new information dropped out of the sky in the next hour or so, he could get away with escaping to eat. He just had to wrap up the paperwork for the day...and talk to Kurt. The thought of that was almost enough to derail his enthusiasm, but he wrestled it back into the forefront of his mind.

For you? Absolutely.

It took another minute to get a reply, just a smiley face and the address of the restaurant. Sawyer grinned. If there was anything that could make today less than a

trainwreck, it was a date with Bashir, even if it was a brief dinner that was as likely as not to be interrupted.

He put his phone away and headed back inside to his desk, only to find that Kurt was gone. Nan was still there, though, flipping through a file. She looked up as Sawyer got close. “Kurt’s gone home for the rest of the day.”

“That’s probably for the best.”

“He’ll be back tomorrow, though.” She shook her head. “Never mind that he’s going to be next to useless while he comes to terms with things. You know I’ve been riding a desk for a while now, but if you need backup and Kurt is having issues, you call me, all right? It’s not okay for him to leave you hanging, but if we get the brass involved they might just fire him this time.” It went without saying that that would destroy any remnant of stability in the guy’s life.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Sawyer said, “but I appreciate the offer.”

“I expect you to take me up on it.” She closed the file and pointed it at him. “Got it?”

There was no way he was going to be pulling Nan into the field when she had four kids to tuck into bed every night, but he knew that wasn’t the answer she wanted. “Got it,” he said, projecting earnestness.

“Good.” She smiled at him. “Say hi to Dr. Ramin for me when you see him. Or don’t, if you don’t want to bring work into your date. ”

Oh, hell yeah. He had a date tonight. “Thanks.”

You probably have once chance to impress him.

Don't mess it up.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

All things considered, Bashir's day had been quiet. By the time he was ducking out to meet Sawyer for dinner, he'd done all he could with his two exceptional cases. He'd also completed a routine autopsy on a seemingly healthy middle-aged man who'd dropped dead at the gym. It hadn't revealed anything suspicious or worrisome; though Bashir had spent the entire procedure certain he was going to find some obscure poison, bizarre parasite, or impossible but lethal wound. What could he say? The cases of Upworth and White had him on a hair trigger for What the fuck?

In the end, the autopsy's revelation was neither unusual nor shocking—a massive heart attack brought on by severe atherosclerosis. In fact, the coronary arteries had so much plaque, the only real surprise was that the man had lived as long as he had. Bashir had triple-checked everything, certain he'd missed something, but no—he was just jumpy after two bizarre cases had landed in his lap with deceptively obvious causes of death masking the far stranger realities.

Bashir wrote up his report since he had time to do them himself instead of handing them off. Then he signed the necessary forms and made an appointment for next week to get his own cholesterol checked.

Now the day was over, there was nothing left to be done, and Bashir couldn't help being suspicious.

“There has to be something else.” He looked around the morgue from his office door. “Are we sure there's no one else waiting to be autopsied?”

Tami laughed softly, pulling her own office door shut behind her. “Even if they did, you're not doing them until tomorrow anyway.”

There was that. Autopsies were done first thing in the morning. Always. If someone came in at three in the afternoon, they stayed in the cooler until ten the next day. That was how every morgue Bashir had ever worked in operated, and it was the schedule he'd lived and breathed for his entire career.

Everything just felt... off the rails lately. Upworth and White had thrown him for a loop.

And admittedly, so had Detective Villeray. Who he was meeting tonight. For dinner.

For a date .

Was that why he was so twitchy about leaving? Not because he was afraid he was neglecting something in the morgue, but because he was having second thoughts about tonight?

Both. Probably both.

But there really was no reason for him to stay late, and he was curious about how an evening with the persistent and... okay, fine, incredibly attractive Villeray would go. Plus this would probably be their one and only opportunity for a while. Murder investigations were harsh mistresses, and they'd both be eating takeout at their desks more often than not until the cases were solved.

Which... if things went south with Villeray, then at least he'd be too busy to ask Bashir for another date for the foreseeable, so Bashir wouldn't have to figure out a tactful way to reject him.

He locked his office door. "I'm heading out. I have plans for once."

Tami's eyebrows jumped. "You do? Like... like plans? The kinds of plans normal

people have?”

He shot her a look, but couldn't help chuckling when she offered an innocent smile. “Yes, Tami.” He pocketed his keys. “In fact, maybe I'll get lucky and my date won't get interrupted.” Yeah, that would be the day.

“Oh, really?” She grinned. “Another date? Did that guy from the other night decide to give you another shot?”

The guy from... The other night... What?

But then the piece clicked into place and he remembered Max and their truncated attempt at dinner. Why did that feel like months ago? Probably because the two cases of fuckery that had dropped into his lap had made time go wonky.

Clearing his throat, Bashir pulled on his jacket. “No, I don't think he's interested. I, um...” He tugged at one of his sleeves. “I decided to take Detective Villeray up on his—”

“You're going out with him?” she squeaked. “Are you serious?”

He blinked, caught off-guard by her sudden shift. “Um. Yes?”

She scoffed. “What? Why? You said you don't date cops. And I thought you didn't like him!”

“I don't. And I didn't.” Bashir shrugged. “But I guess he's kind of growing on me.”

“Mildew grows on things,” she muttered. “So does fungus.”

He chuckled and rolled his eyes as he started for the door. “Villeray's a little more

charming than either of those things.”

She followed. “Black mold, then?”

“Tami.” He shook his head. “He’s a decent guy. And it’s just a date.” He huffed a humorless laugh as he pushed open the door for both of them. “Maybe it’ll go well. Maybe it won’t. As long as we can get through dinner without anyone dying, I’ll call it a win.”

She frowned but said nothing until they were in the parking garage, at which point she gave him a curt goodbye before continuing to her car. He watched her go, trying to make sense of her sudden one-eighty.

Shaking his head, Bashir got into his own car. She did have a jealous bone when it came to him and they both knew it. He was used to that. And admittedly, what he was doing with Sawyer was out of the ordinary for him. He did not date cops. That was just asking for a relationship where they never saw each other unless they ended up at the same crime scene or in the same courtroom.

He was getting way ahead of himself, though. They weren’t dating. It was one date. It was just dinner, really. By the time the entrees arrived, they’d probably both realize this was never going to last, and they’d just agree to enjoy a relaxed meal with a colleague with no pressure and no expectations. Then they’d split the bill, go their separate ways, hopefully not be awkward and uncomfortable the next time they had to be together in a professional capacity.

Best-case scenario? They made it through dinner without someone dying .

With the way this week was going, Bashir wasn’t holding his breath.

Sitting alone in the restaurant with a half-empty glass of ice water, Bashir had more

than a few second thoughts. There was the whole dating cops thing. And the fact that he'd found Villeray more annoying than attractive in the beginning.

It also felt weird, going out on a date in the middle of investigating two bizarre deaths. Bashir kept telling himself that taking a night or even an hour off to do something close to normal was probably what they both needed to tackle their respective angles of the cases tomorrow. Though neither of their jobs were conducive to it, rest was important if they wanted to stay sharp.

Plus, they had to eat sometime. Might as well step away from everything, shut it all off for a while, and return to the cases with full bellies and fresh eyes. Those wouldn't help much in the absence of things like test results and useful leads, but still.

Though what if Villeray turned out to be one of those cops who couldn't get through a meal without telling gory tales of his job? Like that one nurse Bashir had dated a few years back who'd been mystified that most people—including his pathologist boyfriend—didn't want to discuss bodily fluids, functions, or the failures thereof over dinner. Especially dinner in public. To this day, Bashir wanted to shrivel up and die remembering the woman who'd overheard Jesse describing... well, those details didn't matter, but the point was that she heard more than she wanted to, and her prime rib made a violent reappearance. Bashir had apologized profusely and paid for the entire table's meal, and he still wondered sometimes if Jesse had ever figured out why anyone—including Bashir—had been upset.

"Stuff like that happens all the time," he'd insisted on the drive home. "What's the big deal?"

"It happens all the time to emergency department nurses," Bashir had explained through gritted teeth. "The general population doesn't see it on a daily basis, and they definitely don't go to restaurants like that to hear about it in graphic detail!"

“Pfft. It isn’t like I was talking about—”

“Jesse. Don’t.”

Jesse hadn’t. But the damage had been done, and if Detective Villeray displayed that level of obliviousness at the dinner he’d persuaded Bashir to have with him, it was entirely possible someone would die before the meal was over.

I’m getting too cynical.

Bashir laughed to himself as he took another sip of water. Yeah, he was. But between his appalling excuse for a love life and the sometimes jarring look at humanity provided by his career, well, a certain level of cynicism came with the territory. Probably explained why he was still single at forty-three and—

“Oh my God.” Detective Villeray appeared beside the table with an apologetic smile. “I did not mean to be that late.”

Bashir couldn’t define the mix of emotions vying for dominance. Relief that he wasn’t being stood up. Dread over the inevitable train wreck this date would be. A little exhilaration because, holy shit, Villeray was here. A whole host of other contradictory feelings that somehow didn’t cancel each other out .

He managed to school his expression, though, and he rose, offering a hand, which felt weird. A handshake on a date seemed... too formal and stilted. Anything else seemed too casual and unprofessional. Christ. He was terrible at dates on the best of days. When the other guy was a colleague? That just made it all complicated and confusing.

Unaware of Bashir’s mind spinning out, Villeray gestured at the vacant chair and raised his eyebrows. Bashir nodded, and they both took their seats.

For a moment, they stared at each other with all the poise and confidence of a pair of fifteen-year-olds on a first date while their parents watched from two booths away. The awkwardness was almost physically painful, and Bashir actually hoped for a moment that his phone might ring. He didn't want anyone to die to get him out of this awful standoff, but was a ruptured water main at his house too much to ask? Maybe a burglar setting off his alarm and—

“Jesus.” Villeray laughed, breaking eye contact as a blush rose in his cheeks. “I’m so bad at this. First I’m late, and now...”

It was kind of annoying how charming and adorable he was when he was flustered. Bashir waved down a server so Villeray could order a drink, then said, “I’m not much better, so we’re a good pair.”

Ugh. That little smile. The look through his lashes. Cops weren't supposed to be cute. Or shy.

The server mercifully didn't keep them waiting long, and the pause gave them both a chance to rally and try again. Once the server had gone, Villeray cleared his throat. “Listen, uh, I mean it—I’m really sorry I kept you waiting. I’m usually on time to everything, but stupid me, I thought I could get down Division Avenue in under fifteen minutes.”

Despite himself, Bashir laughed. “Hope springs eternal, doesn't it?”

“Yeah, but I spent enough time patrolling this area, I fucking know better.” He wrinkled his nose and made a dismissive gesture. “We don't need to talk about work, though. At all.”

Bashir blinked. “You don't like talking about work?”

“Not when I’m off the clock, no.”

Well. Thank God for that.

“I agree,” he said. “Not that my job makes very good dinner table conversation.”

Villeray made a face. “Okay, I’m glad you said it, because...” Grimacing, he shook his head.

Bashir couldn’t help laughing. “Hey, you’d be surprised.”

“Yeah? People actually want to talk about that over dinner?”

Bashir just rolled his eyes and nodded.

Villeray shuddered. “No, thanks. Uh, no offense.”

“None taken.” Bashir paused. “So, um... If we’re both completely off the clock and not even talking about work, I guess calling you ‘Detective’ might be... uh...” He cleared his throat. “Now that I think about it, I don’t even know your first name.”

That smile was seriously disarming. Jesus Christ. “Sawyer.”

Oh. Right. Now he remembered hearing Villeray’s—Sawyer’s—partner using it. “Got it,” he said. “Well, as long as we’re off the clock, you can call me Bashir.”

Sawyer nodded his acknowledgment, the smile still firmly in place and screwing with Bashir’s pulse.

Maybe this date hadn’t been such a huge mistake after all .

They did eventually crack open the menus and figure out their entrees. After the server had arrived with Sawyer's drink and taken their dinner orders, Sawyer shifted in his chair and held Bashir's gaze. "Okay, so, no shop talk or gory stuff at the table, but, um..." He hesitated. "Is the subject completely off limits?"

Guarded, Bashir studied him as he tucked his reading glasses back into his pocket. "That depends."

"I'm just curious." Sawyer folded his hands behind his glass. "You said you were aiming to be a doctor before you went into pathology, but dealing with the living was too much." He tilted his head. "What was your plan before that? I mean... like did you want to be a family doctor? A specialist?"

"Oh." Bashir relaxed a little, absently running a finger through the condensation on his glass. "Family medicine. My mother was a pediatrician and my dad was a general practitioner, so it's in my blood, I guess."

Sawyer nodded. "Sounds like it. How did they take it when you... took a different path?"

Bashir laughed. "They were surprised, that's for sure. But they both got it."

"Yeah? So they didn't object to it?"

"Nah." Bashir shook his head. "They did rotations too, and they've also seen—well, you don't work in medicine without seeing some pretty harrowing stuff, let's put it that way. And my mom actually warmed up to it pretty quick because she liked the idea of someone with a family medicine mindset working in pathology."

"How so?" Sawyer sounded genuinely curious, not like he was humoring him or digging for something morbid like so many other people did.

The scrutiny made Bashir a little nervous, and he stared into his drink. “You have to have a lot of empathy and compassion for that job. Family medicine, I mean. You’re seeing people of all ages. All lifestyles. All cultures. So the mindset you need to work with that—it’s good to carry into pathology, too. You treat the body of a bank robber with the same care and respect you do an elderly grandmother.” He paused. “Even someone who was shot by the police or who got drunk and killed someone. You can have all the thoughts and opinions you want about the way they lived their lives or the things they did, but you still treat their body with care and respect.”

This was where a lot of people—especially cops, in Bashir’s experience—usually had an opinion or three about how much care or respect the body of a mass shooter or drunk driver deserved.

Sawyer nodded along, though. “So, you’re not there to judge people. Just figure out how they died.”

It wasn’t that simple—autopsies weren’t solely to establish cause and manner of death—but the rest of it? Yeah, that was on point. “Basically. My mom believes it’s as important for a pathologist to have the same level of empathy as a physician who works with the living. My dad wasn’t so sure about that at first, since he thought it was wasted on the dead, but he came around.”

“What changed his mind?”

“Time. My mom.” Bashir paused. “And also when he testified in a wrongful death case.”

Sawyer sat up. “Yeah?”

“Mmhmm. The defense was trying to paint the victim as the perpetrator. Saying they instigated the situation, and...” Bashir waved a hand. “Anyway, I don’t recall all the

details, but my dad called me up after he was in court one day to tell me he fully supported my career path. He said after listening to the pathologist acting so cold and apathetic toward the decedent, he understood what my mom and I meant about empathy. And then later on, he called me again because it turned out that pathologist had been so preemptively convinced that the decedent was a useless drug addict, he'd been sloppy with the autopsy and overlooked some critical details."

"No shit?" Sawyer made a disgusted sound as he picked up his glass. "Tell me he's not a pathologist anymore after that came to light."

"No, definitely not. He lost his license, and I think the RCMP is still investigating his past cases to figure out if he botched any others. Everyone who was ever convicted or found liable based even slightly on one of his reports is demanding to have their cases reopened." Bashir pushed out a harsh breath. "It's a mess, that's for sure."

"I bet." Sawyer furrowed his brow. "RCMP, huh? Did your parents move to Canada? Or is that where you're from?"

Bashir couldn't help chuckling. Trust a detective to pick up that detail. "You got me. I'm Canadian."

"Huh. So what in the hell brought you"—Sawyer gestured around the room—"here?"

"Here? Well, you see, this detective was very insistent about taking me to dinner, and—"

The laugh and the eyeroll were more endearing than they had any right to be. "Very funny. I meant why would you leave behind all that maple syrup, hockey, and universal healthcare for all this shit?"

"I saw all the geese coming down here and wondered if they were on to something?"

He wasn't avoiding the question. He really wasn't. He just couldn't help teasing when it made Sawyer laugh like that, or when it made his eyes sparkle with mischief.

"Okay, seriously." He rested his arms on the edge of the table. "It's not that exciting. There was a job opening for a forensic pathologist. I applied. They hired me." He shrugged. "So here I am."

"Well, damn," Sawyer said with mock disappointment. "And here I thought the Bashir Ramin origin story would involve some kind of international scandal and intrigue."

Bashir snorted. "Like what? That I was wanted for trying to ride a moose while drunk?"

Sawyer's eyebrow flicked up. "Did you try to ride a—"

"No, of course not." Bashir huffed a breath as he reached for his drink. "Do you have any idea how hard moose are to ride? You gotta be sober for that shit."

The burst of laughter from Sawyer was absolutely worth the uncharacteristically ridiculous comment.

Grinning, he said, "So what about you? Is your origin story more interesting than mine?"

"Uh, well." Sawyer pursed his lips. "There aren't any moose involved, but it is—"

He froze, the amusement vanishing from his expression.

A split second later, Bashir understood why—the muffled ring of a cell phone.

“Shit.” Sawyer dug into his pocket. “I’m sorry. I gotta take this.”

Bashir nodded his understanding. God knew he’d been there. And didn’t it just figure he couldn’t get through a date without someone—

His own phone buzzed in his pocket.

You have got to be shitting me.

Exhaling hard, he took it out and accepted the call .

In under a minute, they’d both ended their calls, and they locked eyes over the table.

Sawyer glanced at Bashir’s phone. “Let me guess—body found behind a grocery store with eyes and tongue cut out?”

Bashir sighed. “Maybe we should carpool.”

Sawyer gave a dry laugh, and he flagged down their server. As Sawyer explained the situation and handed over his credit card, Bashir couldn’t help the disappointment. He’d shift gears and focus on the deceased as soon as he was at the scene, but admittedly, he gave himself a moment to be a little bummed out and pissed off that something had interrupted this date before it had even gotten off the ground. Because despite himself—despite his certainty that this would be a disaster—he’d been warming up quickly to Sawyer. He hadn’t even had a chance to hear Sawyer tell him about his life, where he came from, how he’d ended up here. If all the rumors about his messy Hollywood dynasty family were true.

Maybe they could try this again another time. But for now, they had work to do. From the sound of it, the body had been there for at most thirty, maybe forty minutes, and just going by the dispatcher’s description, time of death hadn’t been much earlier

than that. CSIs were en route, cops had secured the area, and the responding officer was diligently photographing and documenting everything. There was nothing anyone could do to save the person, but maybe they could figure out who'd murdered them.

After Sawyer had settled up with the restaurant, he and Bashir hurried out, heading for the parking garage. They really could've carpooled, but that would just turn heads and start rumors. Neither of them needed that, and once they were on scene, no one needed to be focused on anyone except the decedent, witnesses, and next of kin .

"I guess I'll see you there," Bashir muttered.

"Yeah." Keys jingled in Sawyer's hand. "See you there."

They exchanged glances, then headed in opposite directions.

He'd made it all of two steps, when...

"Bashir."

He turned around. "Hmm?"

Sawyer held his gaze for a moment, jaw working as if he were trying to figure out what he wanted to say.

Then he took a step closer.

Cupped the sides of Bashir's neck.

And kissed him.

Bashir tensed at first—hell, he was already tense because he was heading to a death scene—but he couldn't help relaxing into Sawyer's touch. Into the intriguing softness of his lips and the scuff of his chin.

It was quick. A handful of seconds. This really wasn't the time or place to indulge in more—not when duty called—but when they came up for air, they were both breathing hard.

“Sorry.” Sawyer's fingers were light and a little unsteady on Bashir's neck before he let go. “I just, uh...” He swallowed. “Didn't want tonight to end without doing that.”

Then he strode away toward his car, leaving Bashir standing there with his head spinning and his lips tingling.

Only for a second, though. He shook himself, pulled on his professionalism, and shifted his concentration to the decedent as he continued toward his own car.

But after they were done investigating this scene, he vowed to himself, there would be a second date.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

For the love of God, get your mind on the crime scene.

It wasn't the first time Sawyer had admonished himself since getting here—two minutes before Bashir, and it had taken all of his self-control not to stare at him as he got out of his car, like his appearance would have changed in twenty minutes.

It kind of had, though. The man Sawyer had gone to dinner with—funny and relatable and clever—was still there, but he was covered by the veneer of the very professional Dr. Ramin, who put on his gloves, mask, and shoe covers with the air of someone beginning a solemn ritual before going over to the body.

The very, very curious body.

“It’s weird, right?” Huerta murmured to Sawyer as they stood aside and let Bashir get to work.

“Yeah, I’d say finding a body with the eyes and tongue removed is pretty weird,” Sawyer said.

“No, not that! I mean, yes that, but I mean specifically compared to the other murders! Because it’s not hard to figure out that the tongue and eyes were removed post-mortem, but the body was definitely killed here because you don’t lose that much blood without cacking real fast, and I bet the lividity shows that—”

Sawyer turned more fully to the young crime scene investigator. “You’re that sure they’re connected?”

“Of course! It’s the only thing that makes sense when you take in the statistical occurrence of murders in this city, not to mention the deliberate nature of the presentation and the...oh. I...uh. Huh.” Huerta made a face. “I guess it does sound kind of incriminating of me when I say it like that, doesn’t it?”

“Just a little.” Not that Sawyer thought Huerta was involved in these murders or any murder outside his job, but the guy was utterly oblivious to social norms. “Why don’t you go stand over with Officer Doran for a while? I think he could use a distraction.” He’d been the first on the scene again, and while this death wasn’t nearly as gory as the first one the young officer had had to deal with, he had still been white-faced and shaky when Sawyer got there. He’d sent the young man to tape things off and hold back anyone who might be out for a late-night stroll behind a grocery store—eh, stranger things had happened.

“Okay!” Huerta bounced off toward the unsuspecting Officer Doran, and Sawyer was finally able to get some one-on-one time with Bashir again.

Or rather, Dr. Ramin. Which was fine, he liked both aspects of the guy.

“Do you have an idea about the cause of death?” he asked as he stopped about five feet away. There was no sense in risking more contamination of the scene.

“The stab wound through the chest seems like a good candidate, although I really can’t rule anything out.” Bashir gestured at the slash through the man’s flannel shirt and the formerly white T-shirt below it. “Although I’ve got to say, if that is the cause of death, it’s either the luckiest strike ever or this man was drugged before he was killed.”

Sawyer nodded. People had a lot of misconceptions about being attacked with knives, and one of them was the idea that all it took was a single strike and you’d be done for. Sawyer had had to tackle a man who’d been stabbed over twenty times, five minutes

into a brutal fight, because the guy just wouldn't go down. He'd seen another man's neck slashed open—the kind of slash that sprayed arterial blood all over the place—and yet the guy had stayed on his feet for a full minute after the fact, ranting and swinging a crowbar around until he finally passed out. Both men had survived, too.

“Yeah, that would be a hell of a lucky strike.”

“If he was drugged,” Bashir went on, “then there might be some sort of connection to the type of drug used and removing the eyes and tongue, possibly as a means of lessening our chances of identifying the drug itself, but...that's really not how toxicology works.” He was staring at the victim's pants now.

Sawyer followed his gaze. Huh. The fly on the jeans was unzipped.

Bashir narrowed his eyes. “Not much I can conclude here. Not until I've autopsied him.”

Sawyer nodded. “Your people should be here soon, right?”

“Right.” He smiled suddenly. “This might be the first time Tami was ever glad to hear me on a night call.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. She was a little...less than enthusiastic about the prospect of you and I going on a date.”

Overprotective staff. Got it.

Sawyer already knew she didn't like him or his interest in Bashir; she hadn't gone out

of her way to hide the fact. It figured that she'd be protective of her boss. "Think of how disappointed she's going to be when she sees that I'm the detective on the scene."

Bashir's smile vanished. No, wait, come back. "Where's your partner?"

"Detective McKay has something personal to deal with right now. I've got a temporary partner until things settle down, but I told her not to come out tonight." Which Nan hadn't liked, but tough cookies.

"Ah." Bashir paused. "Is Mrs. McKay all right?"

Of course Bashir knew about Molly. This was a decent-sized city, but not so big that there wasn't a lot of cross-talk between city employees. Sawyer knew for a fact that Selina at dispatch was the biggest gossip on the force, and she had friends everywhere. Besides, Molly's illness was...not exactly fresh news. "As much as she ever is these days." He didn't say a word about Kurt's drinking or the family flying in for what could be the end. There was a line between accepted gossip and private matters, and he wasn't about to breach it. "Is there an ID for the victim?"

"He had his wallet on him, actually, as well as a medical alert bracelet." Bashir stared down at the body, one gloved hand on the dead man's wrist, almost like he were feeling for the nonexistent pulse. "His name is Gerard Johnson, and he's allergic to shellfish."

Gerard Johnson. Sawyer nodded and pulled out his phone, which buzzed at him before he could call up Nan. New notification from...his sister?

Shit.

Well, she was going to have to wait. He thumbed through to Nan's contact and dialed

.

She picked up after the first ring. “Do you need me on scene?”

It seemed like someone was suffering from a bit of desk fatigue. “No, it’s fine,” Sawyer assured her, and he could practically hear her deflate. “We have an ID, though, if you want to start looking into the victim.”

“Shoot.”

“Stabbed, actually.”

Nan sighed. “You’re not funny.”

Sawyer was pretty sure he was a little bit funny, but he let it go and read off the victim’s information to her. “It’s definitely a murder, so be careful reaching out to family,” he finished, remembering the terrible scene last time with Christopher White’s parents. “We should set up interviews as soon as possible in the morning.”

“Got it. Do you think we’ll have more information from the M.E.’s office by then?”

Sawyer glanced over at Bashir, who was in the process of loading the victim onto a stretcher with his assistant. “Maybe. Depends on what shows up during the autopsy. Bashir is taking him now, so—”

“I’m sorry, who is taking him now?”

Sawyer rolled his eyes. “It’s not like I was going to call him ‘Dr. Ramin’ on our date, Nan.”

“Oh, shit.” Her tone veered from teasing to apologetic. “Of course this had to happen

right in the middle of your date. Damn it, Sawyer, you should have let me take it.”

“It’s not like I could have continued the date anyway, since Bashir was called in at the same time,” he pointed out.

“Still...”

Sawyer gave in. “I promise to help you get out of the office soon, all right? Your wife is going to kill me if she finds out, though. ”

Nan made a zzzzip -ing sound. “My lips are sealed,” she promised, then ended the call.

Sawyer checked in with the scene commander and updated his captain before he turned back to the victim and saw Bashir taking off his gloves. The body was loaded into the van, which was just starting to pull out. He’d apparently missed Tami. What a shame.

Sawyer picked his way over to Bashir. “Anything else you can share before an official autopsy?”

Bashir frowned at the spot where the body had been. “It’s just a hunch at this point, but I think the evidence definitely points to the victim being drugged. There’s nothing I can see that would indicate he fought back.”

“That’s similar to the first two murders, then.”

“It is, but...” He shook his head. “There’s something that seems different. The first murder was staged so elaborately, like there was a genuine effort to hide the fact that the death wasn’t accidental. And the second...again, there was a lot of work put into making the death unusual, even though a toxin was definitely involved. This time, it’s

almost as though...I don't know, as though the killer was rushed. Cutting out the eyes and tongue—those are brutal, but I'm positive they were post-mortem wounds. Apart from the stab wound to the chest, that's all I've been able to confirm so far. So what was the point?"

That was a good question. The victim—Gerard—was an average-looking man in his mid-thirties, with tan skin and brown hair. He wore a polo shirt, khakis, a pair of black tennis shoes that could double as more formal loafers at first glance...why target him?

Why target any of these people? Maybe the investigation would turn up something interesting in the victim's background this time .

"I don't know," Sawyer said, "but I'll keep you updated."

"Thanks." Bashir's frown turned into a rueful smile. "I wish we'd gotten to finish our date."

"You'll just have to let me take you on another one." There wouldn't be a lot of time—not with three bizarre unsolved murders in as many days—but he'd make it work, damn it.

Bashir's smile became more genuine. "Maybe breakfast next time? I know a great place for it."

"That sounds perfect." They stared at each other, smiling obliviously, until Sawyer said, "It would be really bad form for me to kiss you at a murder scene, right?"

"Right...yeah, I better—I need to get back to the—"

"Yeah, and I should—"

“Right.”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Bashir nodded firmly, then extended his hand. “I’ll see you later, Detective Villeray.”

Sawyer shook his hand. Bashir’s grip was warm compared to his own; he really didn’t want to let go, but he was aware that he didn’t have a choice. “I look forward to it, Dr. Ramin.” Sawyer watched him go, then straightened his shoulders and turned back to the scene.

Time to help Officer Doran with interviews.

Having Nan as his temporary partner made things that used to feel like a heavy lift take way less effort than Sawyer was used to. By the time he got back to the station, she’d already gotten a background check done on the victim, informed his family of the situation, and set up interviews for the next day. “Which I’m happy to take lead on,” she said, “because Christine and the kids have gone to her parents’ place for the weekend and if I spend too much time at home I’ll just end up cleaning the house for forty-eight hours straight.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Sawyer asked.

“It is if I’m doing it by myself,” she said. “Go home for a while. No one’s coming in until the afternoon, you can get some rest.”

Sawyer took Nan’s advice. He went home, stared longingly for a moment at the nice suit he’d intended to wear on his date with Bashir and hadn’t even had time to change into, showered, and fell into bed. He slept for six solid hours, a miracle during an investigation like this, and he could have slept even longer if not for the sound of his

phone on the verge of buzzing itself off the bedside table. Sawyer grabbed it and answered instantly. “H’lo?”

“Sawyer! I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for forever! Where have you even been?”

“Jessica?” Why was his sister calling him at...he checked the clock...ten in the morning? “What’s wrong? Is Chloe okay?” Chloe was her daughter.

She tsked. “Chloe’s fine.”

“Do you need someone to bail you out?”

“Sawyer.” There was genuine hurt in her voice. “I haven’t asked you for bail money in years, why would you even go there?”

Sawyer groaned. She was right, it was rude, but... “Give me a break, I just woke up.”

“It’s ten in the morning where you are. Why are you just waking up?”

It was no use trying to explain a cop’s schedule to his sister. After her second course of rehab—the one that actually made a difference—Jessica had decided to design her life around a strict schedule: waking up at six, meditating, eating a light breakfast, having a run, doing her green tea ceremony...by nine o’ clock every morning she was already well into her day, and she never went to bed later than ten at night. It made life better for her—made it easier to manage the tough times—and Sawyer would never say a word against it.

Not even when he wished he was still asleep. He could have had hours more sleep if she hadn’t decided to call him at New York o’clock... “I’m sorry. Why are you calling?”

“Can’t I just want to talk to you?”

“Not at ten in the morning,” he replied. “Don’t you usually save this hour for yoga?”

“Pilates, actually, but I decided to switch it out for an afternoon block because I have something I’ve got to talk to you about.”

That sounded serious. “Is it Mom?” The other option was their father, but Sawyer hoped it wasn’t anything to do with that man. He’d gone no-contact with him a decade and a half ago, and he wasn’t budging unless Pierre Villeray was on his deathbed. Maybe not even then.

“No, she’s fine too. She’s in Milan for Fashion Week right now. No, this is about an opportunity I just got!”

Oh, that sounded promising. Jessica hadn’t worked in Hollywood in years, all her latest efforts going to Broadway, but he knew she wanted to. “Is this about a role?”

“It is, although the role would be for Chloe, not for me. I would be in the position of producer.”

“Wow, that’s great.”

“It is!” Some of her enthusiasm bled away. “But there’s a tiny little bit of a catch.”

Not so great. “What kind of catch?”

“Well...” It turned out, the show was a variation on the detective theme—a young, super-smart female officer haunted by her tortured past, solving crimes right out from under the noses of older cops all while hunting down the serial killer who had murdered her parents and running a true crime podcast on the side. It sounded rote, to

be honest, but rote was a decent way for an actor to get consistent work if they weren't being chosen for tentpole movie roles.

"It's a pretty new effort," his sister went on. "And we don't have many experts lined up to consult with on the actual police work aspect of things yet."

"So you want me as a consultant?" That sounded...possibly tolerable.

"Exactly!" Jessica sounded pleased. "We're working on the pilot episode right now, and as soon as my writer heard about that crazy chainsaw thing in your city, I knew we—"

"Wait. What?"

"The chainsaw murder! Hello? It's all over the crime vlogs right now."

How had it gotten all over the crime vlogs? What the hell?

"—just so exciting," his sister was saying. "I mean, that's the sort of thing you only hear about in movies, but now it's happening in real life! My writer is really into verisimilitude, so as soon as I told him I could get the details of what really happened from you, he jumped on it."

Sawyer ran his hand down his face. "Yeah, that's not going to happen."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you're asking about a case we're actively investigating." He was irritated and didn't bother to hide it. "A case that's only a few days old. I have no idea who started talking about it, but I hope whoever it was stops, because there's nothing I can tell you. If you want to write about a chainsaw murder so bad, make some shit

up or research another one.”

“No!” Jessica protested. “Part of the selling point of this show is the idea that we’re drawing directly from real life, from things that are happening almost right now ! It’s what will make it stand out in a sea of similar content. We can’t just start ‘making shit up’ or no one will watch it!”

“Then no one watches it.”

“Sawyer.” Oh, that was her pleading voice. “Come on. You know how badly I need a break. And this could mean amazing things for Chloe’s career, too.”

“Chloe is working on two different shows right now. Her career is fine.”

Jessica scoffed. “Are you kidding me? It’s Netflix. There’s no certainty that another season is going to be picked up. And you didn’t hear it from me, but that bitch of a lead in Uncanny slept with the director and got him to promise her that he’d kill Chloe’s character off in three more episodes. By this time in a month, she could be completely out of work.”

“Then she can try out for something else like everybody has to.”

“ I’ve got the next big thing for her!” Jessica insisted. “This is a show that could make her into a household name! We’ve got interest from HBO!”

“You don’t even have a pilot yet.”

“Sawyer!”

He gritted his teeth. He hated upsetting his sister, but there were a dozen good reasons he kept his distance from anything related to show business at this point. She

should have known better than to ask him in the first place. “You know I only want the best for you and Chloe, but I’m not going to break confidentiality about a case just to give you a few more titillating facts to throw into your maybe-show. I want you to keep my name off this project, and don’t ask me for help on this again.”

Jessica started to cry. “I can’t believe you’re doing this to me!” she gasped out. “How can you be so cruel to us? To family !”

“Good luck with the project,” he said, then ended the call.

Well. That was not how he’d hoped his morning would go. Still, there was nothing else he could do. His sister would forgive him...or she wouldn’t, but either way, Sawyer wasn’t going to compromise a case for her. He hoped she left well enough alone and found another murder to write about. Jesus, it sounded so macabre when he put it that way.

It was macabre either way. And he wasn’t going to be a part of it. His sister could bitch as hard as she wanted.

Let’s hope she stops here. If I have to talk to Mom too... Ugh.

He needed coffee to face the day now. Lots of it.

Even work had to be better than this.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

Going into last night's date, Bashir hadn't really thought he and Sawyer would end up in bed. Not that he was a guy who moved slowly or anything—he was more than happy to jump between the sheets with someone if the chemistry was there—but in the back of his mind, he hadn't expected to get naked with Sawyer quite yet.

Today, though, he was seriously pissed off that they hadn't fucked.

Not pissed off at Sawyer. Wasn't his fault someone had been murdered before their flirting could even start getting spicy. Just... pissed off at the whole debacle. The date being interrupted. The two of them having to jump back into professional mode and back to a professional distance. The fact that, instead of spending part of the morning grinning at each other over coffee, Bashir was already here in the morgue and Sawyer was... Well, wherever he was. At home. At the precinct. Somewhere. Probably interviewing witnesses and family members by now.

Bashir had long since grown accustomed to his job sabotaging everything that wasn't his job, including—especially—his love life. This was nothing new.

Except... it was. Because there'd been a string of bizarre murders, which meant he was under a ton of pressure to do his part to stop whatever deranged psychopath was mutilating people in this town, and Bashir needed some goddamned stress relief. It wasn't that stuff like this turned him on or anything. Far from it—what he needed was catharsis, and sex was great for that.

Flattening his gloved palms on the stainless steel table beside Gerard Johnson's autopsied body, Bashir pushed out a breath through his nose. He was in the middle of the biggest shitstorm he'd ever encountered in his career. Was it really too much to

ask to take a break and do whatever it took to mentally reset?

Apparently so.

He stared at what remained of Mr. Johnson. The Y-incision had been sutured. The decedent's scalp had been sewn back into place. His eyelids were unnaturally sunken, but the funeral home would take care of that, assuming the family wanted an open casket. That was, fortunately, not Bashir's department; he treated bodies with tremendous respect, and he did what he could not to cause further damage than necessary. Especially damage that would prevent the family from getting the closure they needed. But he was grateful his job didn't include the processes morticians used to make decedents appear lifelike enough for a funeral. Something about that made his skin crawl, though he'd never been able to articulate why.

Maybe because it felt like erasing the truth. Because it felt like destroying evidence. Even when the body was no longer needed for evidentiary purposes, it gave him an anxiety spike to imagine covering up wounds and blanching and bruising. It was as if those might be the critical factors that meant the difference between guilty and not guilty verdicts.

And why the fuck am I getting all maudlin and philosophical at 11:03 in the goddamned morning?

Probably because this was the third autopsy he'd performed this week on the victim of a vicious crime, and maybe he was just a little fucked up in the head right now. It was very possible there was a serial killer in town. In his town. That was quite literally too close to home. And with the weird causes of death on each victim, it was entirely possible Bashir's testimony would be the deciding factor.

If this guy was ever caught.

If this case ever went to trial.

If...

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered into the stillness of the morgue. Only years of muscle memory kept him from wiping a hand over his face or rubbing his eyes; that would just make this day worse.

He was far more threadbare than he’d realized. Frustrated over last night. Desperate for some human contact and some catharsis. Buckling under the pressure of his role in stopping whoever was killing all these people.

Should’ve just taken Sawyer home and let him drill me before we got interrupted.

Nothing he could do about it now. Maybe next time, assuming they found an opportunity any time soon.

Bashir gave Mr. Johnson a mournful look, promised himself and the decedent that he would figure out what the hell was happening, and vowed to see that justice was served. Not that there was much he could do to besides submit his reports and testify. Someone else had to actually, like, find the killer.

Someone like Sawyer.

Bashir groaned with fatigue and frustration. Then he put Mr. Johnson back into the cooler, finished entering a few things on his report, and got started on another autopsy.

This one was fairly routine. A middle-aged mother of three had died from what appeared to be a cardiac event, and her death was not considered suspicious. Bashir’s job in this case was just to establish (or confirm, really) the manner and cause of

death, do a full final physical to document any additional abnormalities or health issues, and submit a report for the state, her insurance company, her family, and anyone else with an interest in the outcome. It was a horribly sad situation, but at least her loved ones wouldn't be losing sleep over who had done this to her, why, and if justice would ever be served.

Yeah. About that.

There was nothing in the report about Narcan being deployed by the paramedics or the emergency department. He suspected they had—better safe than sorry if someone was unresponsive and not breathing, especially someone so young and otherwise healthy—but it hadn't helped, so they'd moved on to other treatment options. Bashir didn't even need to look at the report to know they'd performed CPR, and probably for an extended period. The bruising and broken ribs were testimony to just how hard the first responders and trauma team had tried to save her life.

But with that many pills in her stomach...

Bashir again found himself resting his hands on the edge of the table and acutely feeling the weight of the world on his shoulders.

It never ended, did it? It never fucking ended. The pressure was on him to stop and help convict a serial killer. Now, in the middle of all that, he had to be the one to let a grieving family know their loved one had not been taken by bad luck or biology, but that she'd succumbed to a drug overdose. One that, going by the sheer quantity of pills in her stomach, was undoubtedly a suicide. Had they even known she was in crisis?

There was a part of him that wished he could sign off that she had died of natural causes so the family could find some peace. Natural deaths were still tragic, but they were often far easier for survivors to cope with than murders and suicides. There was

less “Why?” and “Could we have done something?” Bashir couldn’t bring the woman back. Carla Marie Lowry, age forty-four with four kids and a husband, was gone forever, and there was nothing anyone could do. With the stroke of a pen, Bashir could give them the most peace they would ever find in her death.

But that would also be highly illegal and would cost him his job. He had no choice but to tell them that, in his professional opinion, this petite woman with pink highlights in her hair, a butterfly tattoo on her left ankle, and a C-section scar had died by way of an intentional opioid overdose.

That was news he’d had to break to family members more than once in his career. It never got easier, but Jesus Christ, it could sure get harder.

Of course, right then, the door to the morgue beeped, indicating someone had swiped their badge.

“Fucking seriously?” Bashir hissed, and he rolled his eyes while he was still alone. It was probably Tami coming in to get in some overtime on the weekend; she spent a lot of her off-hours here, and with a fresh murder from last night, there was plenty of work to be done. Or maybe Boyce was coming in to catch up on paperwork, since he inevitably procrastinated on most of it until the D.A. or the state started breathing down his neck .

But the snap of dress shoes on the hard floor told him it wasn’t Tami or Boyce.

No, it was much worse than that.

“Bashir?” Sawyer’s voice echoed through the morgue.

Bashir closed his eyes, sighed behind his mask, then called out, “I’m in here. Body on the table.”

The footsteps faltered slightly, but only for a second. Bashir pulled up a sheet to cover Carla to the collarbones; she may have been mid-autopsy, but she still deserved dignity.

Sawyer came in, and he halted, his shoe scuffing on the floor. “Oh. Shit. I thought... I figured you meant the other body.”

“No.” Bashir tipped his head toward the cooler. “He’s already done. Unfortunately, other people don’t stop dying just because somebody was murdered.” That came out a lot bitchier than he’d intended, which just made him more aware of his raw, brittle mood. “Sorry. Sorry. I...” He exhaled, suddenly feeling even more exposed than the poor woman on the table. “It’s been a long morning.”

“Apparently so. Do you, um... Do you want me to come back?”

Yes. No. Please get out of here. Please don’t go.

God, he was a mess.

He sighed and lifted his gaze to meet Sawyer’s, finding nothing but empathy and concern. “Is this business or personal?”

“Business,” Sawyer said quietly. “I, um... I mean, personal, too. But...” He chewed his lip. “There’s a new development you might be interested in.”

Oh, that was just what Bashir needed on this shit sundae of a day—a “new development” cherry on top. Especially since, from Sawyer’s grim expression, this wasn’t a they-found-the-killer-dead-beside-a-full-signed-and-notarized-confession new development.

“Okay. Uh.” Bashir glanced down at Carla. To Sawyer, he said, “Give me another

hour and a half or so to finish with her.”

Sawyer nodded. “All right. Text me when you’re free.”

There was a part of Bashir that wanted to tersely suggest that Sawyer could just send him a text—or, if it was lengthy, an email—explaining the new development. But there might be a reason he wanted to discuss it in person. Every written word was considered evidence. Bashir knew a cop who’d written something on his hand during an investigation, and he’d had to photocopy his hand so the note could be admitted into evidence. It was possible Sawyer wanted to discuss this off-the-record.

Because that wasn’t an unsettling thought.

And... Bashir also kind of wanted an excuse to be in Sawyer’s presence. Even if it was strictly professional and discussing this horrible string of murders, it sounded far more appealing than being alone in this morgue with his thoughts and the remains of innocent people.

“Sure,” he said. “We’ll talk soon.”

Sawyer flashed him a quick smile—pleasant and friendly, not flirtatious—and then disappeared out of the morgue.

After the door had shut, Bashir exhaled. He wondered what fresh hell Sawyer was about to reveal to him.

But right now, Carla was his priority.

The autopsy itself only ended up taking another hour, and the report was a relatively quick process. He’d winced as he’d read it over.

Preliminary autopsy findings pending toxicology analysis.

Lowry, Carla M.

Manner of death – Suicide

He kind of hoped her family had already known that suicide was a possibility. It would still be devastating, but he couldn't imagine grieving his partner or his parent after an apparent heart attack, only to discover they'd actually died by suicide. The guilt. The questions .

He shuddered, submitted the report, and pulled out his phone with every intention of texting Sawyer.

Then his desk phone rang.

On the other end was the desk sergeant. "Dr. Ramin? I've got a gentleman here demanding to see you. I can either send him your way or I can stick him in a holding cell for—"

"You can't arrest me!" a voice shouted in the background. "Freedom of speech! This is public property! You're all public servants, so you work for me! "

The desk sergeant sighed like she was a hundred percent done with humanity. "Doc, just let me know what you want me to do, because he absolutely won't leave until I at least try to—"

"The people have a right to know! You can't hide!"

Oh. Shit. That sounded ominous.

And vaguely amusing in a way Bashir couldn't quite define, but also couldn't help welcoming. If nothing else, it would be a break from this emotional funk.

“Send him down. I’m always game for a reminder of why I decided not to work with the living.”

That got a laugh out of the desk sergeant that probably saved the idiot from being tased or something. “I’ll have an officer escort him down.”

“Thanks, Sergeant.”

They ended the call, and he texted Sawyer, Done with autopsy + report. Desk sergeant is sending some ranting weirdo down here. Not sure how long it’ll take, but come on in.

Sawyer responded a moment later, Some weirdo? Dangerous?

Bashir thought about that. The guy sounded loud and entitled, but the desk sergeant and everyone else up there usually had decent instincts about if someone was a threat or if they were just obnoxious. And there was a metal detector between there and here, which Ranty McShoutypants would probably be thrilled about, so...

Probably safe. Coming with an officer escort. He hesitated, then decided a little flirtation couldn't hurt, right? If you want to come be my big strong bodyguard, I won't say no.

Just as a shouting voice started coming down the hallway toward the morgue's entrance, Sawyer responded. No words, just an animated GIF of a sweaty, veiny, spray-tanned bodybuilder posing with a murderous expression.

The laughter that poured out of Bashir felt damn good. Maybe that was the catharsis

he needed. Sex would be even better, but a real, heartfelt laugh would tide him over for now. Funny how it had come from Sawyer. The same man Bashir had been kicking himself for not screwing last night.

He didn't have much time to contemplate that, because the door opened, and the shouts from the hallway exploded into the morgue. Everything echoed in here anyway, thanks to all the open space, stainless steel, and concrete, so this ranting jackass sounded like a small angry mob .

"I have a right to carry a weapon," he was preaching to the officer with all the conviction of a pulpit-pounding pastor. "It is unconstitutional for you to disarm me as a condition of entry into a public building to exercise my constitutional right to free speech! You are a fascist , officer. You are a—oh my God. What is that—what the fuck is that smell?" That was followed by theatrical gagging noises.

The response was a heavy sigh.

Bashir had to work to school his expression. Face as bland and professional as possible, he rounded the corner into the small vestibule where people entered the morgue. There he found an officer who looked like he'd been tasked with wrangling a sugared-up toddler. Beside him, a white guy with a binder under his arm, a bushy beard, and a Stab in the Light Podcast hoody, was gagging and acting like he was about to hurl on the cop's feet.

The cop met Bashir's gaze with pleading eyes.

Bashir offered a neutral but pleasant smile. "Can I help you?"

The man's head snapped toward Bashir, though he was still grimacing and gagging. "Are you Dr. Ramin? The medical examiner?"

“I am, yes.” Bashir extended his hand.

The man peered at it before tentatively accepting the handshake. That wasn’t unusual. It was comical how often Bashir went to shake hands with someone and they eyed him as if they wanted to ask if he’d washed his hands. Just as well he hadn’t been eating or something. He’d once absently licked some chocolate off his finger on the way out of the morgue, and an attorney passing by had almost gotten sick.

If he did that now, there wouldn’t be any “nearly” about it, and though it was funny when it happened, neither the escorting officer nor the janitor deserved that.

“Your name?” he asked.

“Felix Daughtry. I host the—” He gagged again, covering his mouth. “Seriously, what is that smell? Is there... Am I smelling dead people?”

“It’s a morgue, genius,” the cop said. “What do you think you’re smelling? Garlic?”

Felix lost some color, not that he had much to begin with, and the way he swallowed was ominous.

“No, no, that’s not decomp.” Bashir chuckled. “Trust me—that’s a smell you never forget.”

“So what is it?” Felix wrinkled his nose. “Formaldehyde? Because it... Ugh, I think that’s what my seventh grade biology lab smelled like.”

“Good memory.” Bashir couldn’t resist, and he said with a perfectly straight face, “What you’re actually smelling, though, is Febreze.”

That earned him skeptical looks from both Felix and the officer.

Bashir smiled. “It just smells like formaldehyde when it mixes with decomp.” Both men gagged, and Bashir chuckled. “That’s a joke. People in our business—well, now you know where the term ‘deadpan’ comes from.”

The officer snickered, rolling his eyes. Felix just glowered. And grimaced some more.

“Anyway.” Bashir cleared his throat. “You wanted to see me, Mr. Daughtry?”

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m...” Felix took a deep breath, something he instantly regretted. He managed to collect himself, though, and pushed his shoulders back as his earlier entitled bravado returned. “I’m with the Stab in the Light Podcast. We’re investigating a string of murders where you did the autopsies, and I want to interview you about some details.” The challenging look he shot Bashir suggested he meant “interview” in the same way cops did —“We’re not interrogating you, but we’re absolutely interrogating you.”

A mix of wariness and irritation tightened behind Bashir’s ribs. True crime podcasts hit him up all the time, usually about cold cases. “String of murders” wasn’t something he could apply to very many situations in his career, though, which made him think this was about a case that was anything but cold.

Guard fully up, he said, “All right. Why don’t we come back in here?”

He led them deeper into the morgue. There were chairs in his office, and though it was small, the three of them would be able to sit comfortably and have a conversation. That was where he conducted interviews with most podcasters, grad students, writers, and whoever else came his way with a list of questions and a voice recorder.

Felix had Bashir on edge, though, and Bashir fully intended to level the playing field

by returning the favor.

So, instead of sitting in his office, they'd stand.

In the autopsy room.

Felix swept an uneasy glance around the room. His gaze landed on the cabinet doors along the far wall. Most crime podcasters had at least a passing familiarity with morgues, so he probably knew exactly what he was looking at—the cooler. Maybe wondering how many bodies were behind the various doors. For as much as people like him loved doing deep dives into violent crime, many going as far as hunting down photos and even videos of the crime scenes and victims, a surprising number of them were incredibly squeamish about being in the presence of death.

That wasn't a discomfort Bashir made a habit of exploiting, but he'd heard of Felix's podcast. The pun in the title wasn't just to get around the fact that there was already a *Stab in the Light* podcast; it was him being an edgelord peddling in “we don't just refuse to accept what they tell us—we take what they tell us and slash it apart until all the lies and coverups are exposed.”

The show was a mix of anti-government conspiracy theories and almost masturbatory descriptions of the horrible things people could do to each other. He was like the true crime version of a shock jock—in it for the notoriety and the shock value more than the analysis and pursuit of justice that were the genre's usual hallmarks. If Bashir had to guess, Felix would come down a peg on his hunt for a juicy tabloid exposé if he spent the interview backed into a corner by his own revulsion toward death.

Bashir leaned against the table where he'd been discovering the truth about Carla's death less than an hour ago. “So.” He clasped his hands together and kept his professional smile firmly in place. “What would you like to know?”

“Oh. Um.” Felix stammered a bit, then seemed to remember the binder he’d been holding. He took it out and flipped it open. “I wanted to ask you about your autopsy on Gilroy Upworth.”

Bashir tensed. “I can’t really discuss an ongoing—”

“The news is still saying it was an accident,” Felix steamrolled over him, “but you found a bullet in Upworth’s spine. Correct?”

Bashir’s own spine prickled. “I’m sorry—where are you getting this information?”

Felix met him with a sarcastic look and a haughty huff. “Don’t try to gaslight me or cover up the truth.” He stepped closer and thrust the binder at Bashir. “Or is that not your signature?”

Bashir took the binder, and the prickle turned to a full-body chill. His head snapped up. “Where did you get this?”

Felix sniffed indignantly. “That’s a public health document, Dr. Ramin. You know that as well as I do.”

“I do, yes.” Bashir fought to keep his voice calm and professional, and that was a chore when panic was snaking along his nerve endings. “But documents like these are not made publicly available until any criminal proceedings have been adjudicated. I’ll ask you again— where did you get it?”

“I don’t have to name my sources,” Felix snapped. “I’m a journalist. I’m not turning over my sources to the fucking cops.” He threw a sneer in the officer’s direction, earning him an eyeroll.

Bashir dropped any pretense of politeness. “Mr. Daughtry, you being in possession of

this document means it's been leaked illegally." Felix tried to shout over him, but Bashir had not only had it up to here with everyone and everything today, he'd also inherited his father's ability to bark anyone into silence. "I am not done."

The podcaster's teeth snapped shut, and he stared at Bashir with wide eyes. Even the cop looked a little alarmed.

Bashir lowered his voice to one that was quieter, but no less effective at shutting people right up. "This is information that could compromise the investigation and prosecution of a murderer. Do you understand, Mr. Daughtry?" He held up the binder. "Do you understand that your need to be first on the scene and break something shocking could contribute to a murderer walking free and potentially killing again?"

He thought Felix had paled at the smell of the morgue, but the kid was almost translucent now. "I... But it's..." He was trying like hell to bring back his chest-puffing arrogance, but Bashir had him off-balance. Exactly where he wanted him.

"I need to know your source," he said through his teeth. "And I need to know what other information you have about this case." He paused, remembering Felix's comment about "a string of murders." "I also need to know what you have about any other active cases."

Felix stared at him, but then his eyes flicked toward the binder that was now in Bashir's possession, and his righteous fury came back. "You can't just confiscate my property! That's a Fourth Amendment violation, and—"

"No, it isn't." The officer sounded about as done with this whole thing as Bashir was. "You handed it over voluntarily, and it's considered stolen property." He paused. "Dr. Ramin might not be able to confiscate it from you, but I absolutely can."

“The hell you can! Not everything in there is—it’s not stolen! It’s a copy of a report that’s on file, so you’re—”

“It’s not a report you’re legally entitled to view or possess,” Bashir snapped. “And maybe instead of making this about your rights, you should consider the rights of the victims and their families, not to mention those of any victims that might die while we’re wasting time instead of apprehending the suspect.” He slammed the notebook down on the autopsy table, making both men jump. “You can obtain the information with a Freedom of Information Act request after the case has been adjudicated, and not before. Period.”

“That’s bullshit! You can’t just withhold—”

“Is everything all right in here?” Sawyer’s voice jerked Bashir’s attention to the doorway, and for the first time today, there was some actual relief.

Oh, thank God you’re here.

Felix coughed a caustic laugh. “And look at that. More cops. Anything to suppress free speech and make sure the truth doesn’t come out. What the fuck are you assholes hiding about these deaths, anyway? Why are you so determined to—”

“How do you know I’m a cop?” Sawyer’s tone was smooth, almost casual, but the question was still pointed.

Felix blinked stupidly. Then he laughed again, still full of sarcasm and derision. “So now we’re playing ‘good cop’...” He gestured at the officer. “Bad cop.” He gestured Bashir. “And not a cop? Is that the latest game?”

“No, it isn’t.” Sawyer stepped deeper into the room, eyes never leaving Felix, expression not even twitching with the slightest hint of annoyance. “It’s a genuine

question.” He looked down at himself, then back at Felix, and shrugged. “How do you know I’m a cop?”

Felix’s mouth opened and closed like a fish’s.

“Mmhmm.” Sawyer slid his hands into the pockets of his overcoat, and only then did he narrow his eyes and let the subtlest—and maybe sexiest—little smirk come to life. “See, you could’ve just said the fact that I let myself in through the front door, which clearly meant I had credentials allowing me to get this far into the police department, as well as into the morgue. As opposed to, you know, someone coming to collect or drop off a body, who’d pull up to back and ask to be buzzed in.”

Felix blinked.

Bashir had to fight a laugh at the kid’s flustered expression, and he was admittedly impressed by—just impressed, not at all turned on by or attracted to—Sawyer playing verbal chess with this checkers novice.

“So, with that out of the way...” Sawyer’s smirk vanished and his serious cop mask was firmly back in place. “How did you know I’m a cop?”

As amusing as the interplay was, Bashir couldn’t quite understand why Sawyer was harping on this so hard. Yes, he was in plainclothes, but what did it matter if the podcaster knew he was a cop?

Felix shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. “I, um... I saw you. Last night. At the scene behind the grocery store.”

The officer and Bashir both tensed, but Sawyer didn’t even flinch.

“Uh-huh. And what exactly were you doing there?”

The podcaster half-shrugged, some color blooming in his previously pale face. “I... I have a police scanner. It said there was...” He shifted a little more. “Said there was a body behind the store.”

“Mmhmm. So you just strolled on up to an active crime scene, and now you’re in here haranguing the medical examiner?” He gestured at the binder beside Bashir. “While in possession of evidence you shouldn’t have? Tell me—did you get your hands on all of that before or after you got in touch with Jessica Villeray-Blanc to produce a potential television series starring her daughter?”

Felix’s jaw went slack. Truthfully, so did Bashir’s. A television series? And... Villeray-Blanc So, a relative of Sawyer’s? What in the actual fuck was happening here? He had to literally bite his tongue to keep from asking that question out loud, and he only did that because he didn’t want to interrupt Sawyer’s momentum.

While Felix was on his heels and still trying to rally, Sawyer started ticking off points on his fingers. “You’ve got information you shouldn’t have about active investigations. You’re using that information to interrogate the M.E., likely to obtain more information that absolutely should not be made public any time soon. You were at the crime scene last night. And you’re in talks with a producer about a potentially lucrative TV deal with a headline actress.” Sliding his hands in his pockets again, he fixed a glare on Felix that probably could’ve made a serial killer wet his pants. “Mr. Daughtry, you’ve got five seconds to give me one good reason why I shouldn’t name you my prime suspect in all three murders.”

The kid was back to being so white, even Bashir could’ve mistaken him for a corpse if not for the way his mouth was soundlessly moving. And Bashir might’ve been making a gobsmacked face himself. Actress? TV deal? Was that... Was that the new development Sawyer had wanted to tell him about?

A renewed chill worked its way down his spine. Coincidences were rarely actual

coincidences, especially when dealing with a psychopath who liked to play games. Had the killer involved Sawyer's sister as a way to toy with him? Maybe as a way to fuck with his mind by showing him how close he could get to Sawyer's family? Because that wasn't creepy at all.

Finally, Felix managed to croak, "I'm not a murderer!"

"But all those other facts I stated are still true." Sawyer was unmoved. "So now would be a damn good time to start talking." With a subtle sneer, he added, "I'm pretty sure that's something you're skilled at doing, yes?"

Felix glanced at Bashir. Then at the other cop. Then back at Sawyer. He was wound tight now, like a terrified animal.

Shit. It hadn't even occurred to Bashir that Felix might be a suspect, or that he might have ties to the suspect.

This is why Sawyer is the detective. Leave me to the autopsies .

Sawyer made a show of checking his phone. Then he fixed a glare on Felix. "Well?" His waning patience even made Bashir a little nervous. "Are you going to talk or not?"

Where Felix had been dangerously close to vomiting earlier, he looked even closer now to crying, shitting himself, or both. He was shaking badly, inching back from all three of the other men like a cornered animal. "I want..." He swallowed hard and tried again. "I want a lawyer."

Oh. Shit. Was he the killer?

But Sawyer didn't seem bothered. He half-shrugged and said to the other cop, "Set

him up in an interview room upstairs, and get him on the phone with a lawyer.”

“Will do.” The cop gave a curt nod, then gestured for Felix to head out of the morgue. All the screaming and arguing from earlier were gone, and the podcaster fell into step with the officer.

When they’d left, Bashir said, “Do you think he did it?”

“No,” Sawyer said without hesitation.

“Even though he’s asking for a lawyer?”

“A lot of people do. Everyone should, honestly, so he’s smart.” Sawyer gazed in the direction Felix had gone. “Hopefully he’s smart enough to lead us back to the killer.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

Sawyer would never think of denying someone their right to a lawyer. He just wished the lawyer in question wasn't this particular lawyer. He didn't lend credence to the idea of intelligent design, but this guy in particular seemed built to embody the ideal of a human stumbling block.

"Unless you're charging my client with something, then we're done here." Devon Larue folded his hands on the folder in front of him and stared smugly across the table at Sawyer. He was as thin as Felix was bulky, with a pointed face that reminded Sawyer of a Doberman Pinscher. "Unless you'd like me to start going through all the civilian complaints your department has received over the past five years again?"

"We're not here to litigate the police department, or your client's guilt or innocence," Sawyer said. Good thing they weren't, because Devon had a point when it came to poor behavior in the past by the police department. There was an external oversight committee in place now that reviewed every complaint, and things were getting better, but earning back trust was a slow process. "All I want to know is where Mr. Daughtry got his very heavily classified information."

Felix, also far more smug now that his lawyer was here, opened his mouth to speak, but Larue cut him off. "That's not germane to the subject at hand, which is his guilt or innocence. If you aren't going to charge him, then by law he's free to go. If you do charge him, and these charges turn out to be as baseless as I expect them to be, then you can expect a lawsuit within the next week on behalf of my client for pain and suffering."

"And will your client be paying your legal fees from the money he expects to get for selling his storytelling skills to HBO?" Sawyer asked.

The self-satisfied look dropped right off Felix's face, but Larue didn't even flinch. "It's not my job to ask where the money comes from," he said with a shrug.

"Until it is."

"Until then, yeah. But for now?" He smiled. "What's the verdict, Detective Villeray?"

Sawyer smiled. "Oh, you're free to go."

"Ha!" Larue turned and shook hands with Felix, and the two of them pushed back their chairs noisily.

"But." They paused. "If, over the course of my investigation, I find a link between Mr. Daughtry and the killer, and if I determine that he did know something that could have helped us save more innocent lives that he decided not to turn over to us...well. I think being charged with obstruction of justice and accessory to murder will be the least of his worries then."

Larue sneered as he tucked his paperwork back into his briefcase. "Threats, detective? Another black mark against the police department."

"Not a threat," he said. "A fact. I appreciate honesty, and so I prefer to be upfront about my intentions. Don't say later that you didn't see this coming." He stood and got the door. "Have a nice day, gentlemen."

"I will have a nice day, thank you," Larue said as he walked through the door and down the hall with a brisk pace.

Felix moved slower, and even came to a stop in front of Sawyer and leaned in. "Hey, listen..."

Is he about to give me something? “Yes?”

“I know you don’t act anymore, but you’ve got the look down? you know what I’m saying? Jessica’s daughter is cute and all, but we could turn things in a way more powerful direction if we could convince the studio to cast you, and—”

“Get. Out .”

Felix pulled back, a little shaky but still bombastic. “It was just a fuckin’ thought, there’s no need to threaten me over it, Detective Villeray!”

“Threats?” Larue spun on his heel and hustled back with all the excitement of a hunting hound on the scent. “More threats? Detective, I can have your badge for this!”

“Really? You can?” Sawyer didn’t bother looking at Larue, though—he kept his eyes on Felix, who was turning red as the impact of what he’d just decided to throw out there on a whim hit him.

“Are you kidding?” Larue squawked. “I can file a suit against you and this department for—”

“Let’s just go,” Felix muttered before turning and hurrying down the hall with his tail between his legs.

Larue stared after him, a look of disappointment on his face, before turning back to Sawyer. “Anything you have to say to my client needs to go through me after this,” he said, nose in the air. “If I hear about you talking to him directly, I’ll consider that harassment and— ”

“File a suit against me. I think I’ve got it.”

“I don’t think you do have it, detective.” Larue took a step forward. “Let me lay this out for you plainly—the police in this city have coasted for a long time. They’ve ignored a lot of problems and angered a lot of people by being a bunch of lazy, ineffective slobs, and don’t even get me started on the racism. I would love nothing more than to see this entire force thrown out of their positions so we could start over clean, so I’ll be watching not only how you interact with my client from here on out, but how you handle this case.” He tilted his head condescendingly. “You’re not off to a very good start on it, I’ve got to say. I hope you do better...fast.” He turned and walked off with the firm stride of the self-righteous.

Sawyer watched him leave, then pulled out his phone to check the messages that had come in while he’d been talking to Felix. The first was from Bashir. He opened it eagerly.

Had to go back to work. Shit. Of course he did, but it still bothered Sawyer that he didn’t get a chance to say goodbye. Bashir had followed that with, Assuming we can both get away, dinner tonight?

Getting away was always a gamble during an active investigation, but he chose to be optimistic. Hell yes, dinner tonight. Sawyer had to stop and restart his text twice because he was typing too quickly. Absolutely. Where?

The reply came gratifyingly fast. I was thinking my place. Eight?

Sawyer bit the inside of his lip hard in an effort to remind his body that this was not the place to be getting a hard-on. I’ll bring a bottle of wine.

All you need to bring is you.

Holy shit. He stared down at his phone with a feeling that was entirely out of place right now, and even more welcome because of it. How long had it been since he’d

flirted with someone like this? At least a few years, since he and Jaz called it off. It felt like longer, though. Should he reply? At the very least he needed to get Bashir's address, instead of looking it up in the database like a creeper—

“You...seem happy.” Sawyer glanced up to see Nan walking toward him from the other end of the hallway. “Way too happy for someone who just had an altercation with that bastard Larue.”

“Nan,” he said a bit chidingly.

“Don't you ‘Nan’ me, he's a son of a bitch on his best days,” she replied. “The worst thing about him is that he's not wrong about everything, which of course makes him feel like he's got to be right about everything.” She rolled her eyes as she stopped beside him.

“What's he right about in particular?” Sawyer asked, putting his phone away.

“Oh, the fact that our department doesn't have a spotless record when it comes to community interactions and proper policing. We had a big reckoning about six months before you came in; a lot of the old guard was forcibly retired, and a few even ended up serving sentences. I'm honestly surprised that Kurt didn't quit then. Not that he was ever one of the bad ones,” she added, “but he's had one foot out the door ever since he turned fifty-five.”

Ah. So Kurt's attitude wasn't just related to his wife's health. “And Larue helped prosecute all that?”

“Not directly, but he was definitely one of the muckrakers. But he's also willing to work with some of the worst assholes in the city in order to give us trouble, including defending our former mayor. ”

Sawyer didn't know anything about the former mayor. "And...why is that a problem?"

"Because the guy was into child porn."

Ew. All right, it was time to change the subject. "Do you have anything interesting to pass on about the latest victim?"

Nan sighed. "Come look at this." She led him back to the bullpen, where she'd swiped one of the big whiteboards and set up a map of the city. Everywhere one of the bodies had been found was marked with a small red magnet and a picture of the victim, while the empty sides of the board were slowly filling with handwritten information. Sawyer was suddenly very glad Felix hadn't had a chance to look in here—he could only imagine the sort of sensationalist spin he could put on something like a "murder chart."

"Gerard Johnson was found here." She tapped a spot about two miles away from the precinct. "Chris White was here." She pointed to a road at the very edge of town, about five miles from the first murder. "And Gilroy Upworth was in his home here." That was in the farming community in the northeast edge of the city, next to the nature preserve. "Apart from them all being white and male, I've found next to no commonalities. They weren't the same age, they didn't have the same interests, and they didn't live in the same neighborhood or go to church together. I'm still digging into their friends and families, but so far these present as crimes of opportunity."

"Which they obviously aren't, given the effort that the killer is going to," Sawyer said.

"Exactly. But...I'm not sure if the victims are the point."

Sawyer frowned. "If they're not the point, then...what? A taunt for the police?" It

wouldn't be the first time a serial killer had tried toying with the cops that way, but it was vanishingly rare. Occam's razor would probably indicate that there was a connection between the victims they were missing. Something the killer was honing in on. They just hadn't found it yet. Or there were three separate and unrelated killers who happened to be killing in bizarre fashions in the same place at the same time. Not likely.

So what if Nan was right?

"It could be a taunt for us." Nan lifted the end of her thick black braid to her mouth and tapped her lower lip. "But let's be honest here, the first murder alone could have been written off as bad luck if we hadn't gotten an assist from the M.E. there. If this is about us and the killer, then they're guilty of overthinking it."

"Good point." He stared at the board a while longer. A gunshot. A toxin from a plant. Pending cause of death for the last victim. None of them were the most obvious cause of death when you looked at the scene the first time, but if it really were about the victim... "Upworth was diabetic, wasn't he?"

"Umm..." Nan checked the notes real quick. "Yeah. Type two; he was on synthetic insulin."

"And Johnson had an allergy to shellfish."

"Yep. Said it right there on his medical bracelet."

"So there were relatively low-key ways of killing both of them without resorting to the lengths that the murderer did if they knew anything about the victims in advance."

"Definitely." Nan nodded slowly. "Which lends a little more credence to the idea that these particular people weren't special to the killer. They might have been

convenient, but they're a message meant for someone else. But who?"

Sawyer shook his head. "I don't know." But he sensed that they were closing in on something big. "What about—" His phone buzzed with an incoming message.

I swear to God if this is Jessica...

He wasn't in the right mental space to deal with his sister right now without screaming. He checked, then did a little double-take when he saw it was from Molly.

Please call me as soon as you can.

He called immediately. "Molly? What's wrong?"

"Sawyer." Despite the ever-present fatigue in her voice, she sounded all right. Honestly, she sounded pretty annoyed, if he was honest. "You haven't seen Kurt, have you?"

"No. He's been put on administrative leave until..." Until your cancer runs its course. "Until he's ready to come back to work."

"Well, he's definitely not ready to come back to work, honey, but he's not home right now either." She sighed. Somewhere in the background, another person was ranting about "irresponsible son of a bitch douchebag piece of—" "I think he went to the bar. Murphey's. Out on Midland Road. Do you know it?"

"Yeah." Kurt had taken Sawyer there a few times before Sawyer had made it clear that he didn't want to drink over their lunch break. Murphey's bar was the sort of place where, if you weren't drinking with the food, you basically couldn't get it down. "Why did he leave the house?"

“Because he’s a stupid shithead! ”

“Nadine!” Molly chided, then spoke over Kurt’s sister to say, “I think he’s feeling a bit...surrounded, here. Lots of people, none of the privacy we’re used to—it would be a lot for anybody.”

“— ought to get his big-boy britches on and realize it’s not all about him right now! Our daddy would tan his damn hide if he could see how —”

“I’ll go get him,” Sawyer interjected, “and tell him you want him to come home. I’ll drive him too, if he’s too drunk to do it himself.”

“He probably will be.” Molly sighed again. “I’m so sorry to have to ask for this, honey. I know you’ve got a lot to work on with that case of yours.”

“It’s fine.” It really wasn’t, but Molly had enough on her back right now—she didn’t need Sawyer causing problems for her too. “I’ll take care of it. You rest. Maybe ask Nadine to, ah, settle down a bit.”

“I will. Thanks so much, Sawyer.” She ended the call, and Sawyer put his phone away and turned to see Nan with one eyebrow up.

“Kurt’s on a bender?”

“He’s in a tough spot right now.”

She shook her head. “I get it. Better he fuck around like that when he’s not supposed to be working too, but that’s a hard thing to put on Molly. It’s not like she’s asking to die of cancer.”

“It’s been just the two of them for almost forty years.” That was one of the first things

Sawyer had learned about Kurt—the woman in the frame on his desk was his Molly, wife and high-school sweetheart. She was an elementary school nurse with a heart-shaped face and a huge smile. In every picture Sawyer ever saw of her, she was smiling. They'd never had children—Sawyer didn't know the details and it was none of his business anyway, but he had the feeling they'd tried—and had been an inseparable pair since they'd married at eighteen. “And now he's got to deal with sharing his space and saying goodbye to the woman he loves. That's shitty.”

“It is,” Nan agreed. “But that's life. It's a bunch of shit moments punctuated with occasional joy, and you didn't hear that from me because Maria would knife me, but it's true. I change diapers for twins, I know better than most. C'mon.” She grabbed her purse off the desk. “I'll ride with you, then drive him home. You can do some more interviews, then...” She grinned. “Go see your sexy doctor.”

“Nan...” Despite himself, Sawyer smiled. “He's not my anything right now.”

“Yeah, but you want him to be.”

“I take the fifth.”

“Don't you start lawyer-talking at me or I will cut you,” she warned as she led the way out to the parking lot.

“You talk a lot about knives for someone with little kids around the house,” Sawyer commented as they reached his car.

“I know, I have to get it all out of my system before I get home,” she said. “Same with swearing. Speaking of which, let's go get that shitpissing motherfucker.”

There was a time to speak up and a time to shut up, and Sawyer knew which was which. He made a few calls to let other officers know to tap in if something came up

on the case, then headed for his car. He and Nan drove in comfortable silence to Murphey's Bar, a sleazy dive that catered to truckers not far from where they'd found Christopher White's body. Sure enough, Kurt's Mustang was in the parking lot. Sawyer waved Nan back when she made to get out of the car with him. "He'll be easier to manage if it's just me, I think."

"He'll be easy to manage if I get him in a hammerlock, too," she muttered, but then shrugged. "Whatever you want."

"Thanks." Sawyer headed into Murphey's tentatively— the last time he'd been here, he'd been tackled the second he stepped through the door. Or rather, someone else had been tackled, and then run into him. This time there was no full-body contact, but he did see two men arguing over a pool table in the background with an air of developing violence. Hopefully they kept it contained.

And there was Kurt at the bar, staring into a dark glass like it might just hold the secrets of the universe. Sawyer walked over and, after some consideration of its likely cleanliness, sat on the stool beside his partner. "Molly called," he said.

"Thought she might." Oof, he was drunk but not too drunk. Not staggering drunk, just drunk enough to say "fuck it" to everything. "Molls is a good woman."

"She is," Sawyer agreed. "And she's worried about you."

"Waste of her time." He snorted. "Not that she's not wasting her time already, spending it all on those two hags who moved into our home."

"You're referring to...your sisters?"

"Who else?" Kurt threw back the rest of his drink, then motioned to the bartender for another one. Sawyer waved the man off, which made Kurt turn on him with a gimlet

eye. “Look, you little shit. You don’t come into my bar and try to tell me what I can and can’t—”

“I could send Nan in instead,” Sawyer challenged, and Kurt abruptly shut his mouth. “And believe me, I wouldn’t be doing this if Molly hadn’t asked me. I’m not your babysitter, but to be perfectly frank she isn’t either, and it’s shitty of you to make her call me to come and get you when you could be home with her right now.”

Kurt ran a hand over his moustache, tugging on it so hard Sawyer was a little worried he was going to pull it off. The fight over at the pool table was getting louder. Keep it together, people. “You have a sister, right?” he said at last.

“Yes.”

“Then you know what awful busybodies they can be sometimes.”

Did he ever. “That’s true.”

“Molly’s sister wants to be hands-on with everything, doin’ all the things for her that I ought to be doing, while my sister has taken over cleaning the entire house while telling me what an awful husband I am for not doing it earlier. We don’t live in filth or anything!” Kurt emphasized, stabbing his forefinger on the counter. “It’s not that fuckin’ bad! It’s just hard to remember to do laundry when you’re watching your wife fall apart right in front of your eyes, you know what I’m saying?”

Sawyer couldn’t say he knew exactly, given how he’d never been married, but he’d seen his parents’ relationship fall apart after everything that had happened with his mother. His father had been unable to cope with her new reality, and it had led to a complete fracture of their family unit. “I get it.”

“I just needed a break,” Kurt said with a sigh. “Someplace I wasn’t gonna be shouted

at for having a second beer or told to scrub the damn toilets again, and where her sister can't get mad at me for 'keeping her to yourself.'"

Well. Sawyer hadn't come in here expecting to commiserate with Kurt at all, but it turned out he could still be surprised. "That's rough, but you still need to—"

He was cut off by being cut—literally, as the argument over who was cheating at pool erupted into a glass-throwing, bottle-breaking brawl that led to something shattering right over the bar and raining glass down on him, Kurt, and the bartender. A piece left a bleeding scrape along his cheekbone and more fragments lodged in his hair.

Kurt, drunk on beer and full of fury, lost his shit. "You sons of bitches are all under arrest!" he shouted before throwing himself at the nearest brawler.

"Fuck." Sawyer turned to the bartender. "There's a woman in a black Charger out in the parking lot. Tell her to call for backup." Then he ran after Kurt just in time to keep his partner from being stabbed in the gut with the pointy end of a pool cue.

Sawyer had never arrested the entire clientele of a place before. Between sorting people into the drunk tank, taking witness statements, and getting looked over by the medics who'd come roaring in along with three other cop cars, it had turned into a long fucking day. But now, at last, all the paperwork was filed, Kurt was back with Molly and nursing a broken thumb on his right hand, and Sawyer had two stitches in his cheek and two bruised ribs from where a biker's steel-toed boot had caught him while he was slapping handcuffs on the glass-thrower.

"You need to go home," Nan said, wearily brushing hair back from her face.

"I can't." It was six-thirty; if Sawyer left now, he'd have just enough time to grab a bottle of wine before heading to Bashir's. He'd only gotten one more text from the man throughout the day, this one related to the case: Toxicology will have to confirm

what kind, but it looks like snake venom injected into the abdomen

Snake venom had been the cause of death? Seriously? For a second Sawyer had gotten excited, before Bashir told him you could buy a lethal dose of almost any kind—including King cobra, black mamba, and Christ knew what else— online for about five hundred dollars. There wasn't a single distributor, either; dozens of different companies sold the stuff. It was rare, and it would help narrow things down if they could pin down an order sent to this area, but it wasn't as rare as he'd hoped. A lot of companies to comb through before they found that order, and not all companies were willing to give up info like that without a subpoena, which would take time.

“Oh right, your date,” Nan said, bringing him back into the moment. She looked him up and down. “Are you sure you're up for it? You look pretty rough right now.”

“I have to be up for it.” He wasn't going to put Bashir off for anything, especially given how their last date turned out, but Sawyer had to admit he hadn't envisioned himself showing up bruised and battered either. “I don't want him to think I'm not serious about this.”

Nan raised an eyebrow. “Slow down, tiger. Just how serious are you about this?”

Sawyer shrugged. “I don't ask people for a date if I'm not prepared to get serious.”

“No hookups for you, huh?”

“No.” That wasn't his style at all. Hopefully it wasn't Bashir's either, at least so far as it related to Sawyer. “I've got to go. See you tomorrow?”

“Yep. I'm taking Wednesday off, though, investigation permitting,” she added as he began to walk away. “Maria and the kids come back then.”

“Sounds good.” Sawyer made it out to his car, got into the driver’s seat, and gave himself a few seconds to feel how exhausted he was. Adrenaline hangover. Twice as strong as the usual kind of hangover, without the fun of acquiring it through drinking. Get over yourself.

He wandered through the nearest liquor store in a bit of a fugue state, eventually picking a decent bottle of red from a winery in France that he’d visited as a kid. Offering in hand, Sawyer drove the rest of the way to Bashir’s hoping he didn’t look as rough as he felt.

His hopes were dashed when Bashir opened the door of his two-level, spotlessly groomed home. The man’s gorgeous smile dropped away, his eyes widened, and he said, “Wow. What on earth happened to you?”

Sawyer sighed. “It’s a long story.” He held up the bottle of wine. “I’ll tell you about it over a glass of something that I’m not supposed to drink for another seventy-two hours, if you want.” Not that he thought he had a concussion, but the EMT was erring on the side of caution. “Or we can talk about something completely different. I just...” Time to be honest? Eh, why not. “Wanted to see you.”

Bashir opened the door wider and took Sawyer’s arm. “Come inside.”

Sawyer went.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

Bashir was beginning to get the distinct impression that he and Sawyer were cursed. Or at the very least, they were never going to experience anything close to a normal date. Not that life was ever close to normal for anyone involved in active murder investigations, but still. So far, they were batting oh-for-two, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know how the third strike would play out. A freak tornado? A volcano emerging in the middle of downtown? Alien invasion? He wouldn't be surprised by any of it.

"I can grab another pillow if you need it." He eased onto the couch opposite Sawyer, who was gingerly trying to get comfortable, and offered him one of the two wineglasses.

Wincing, Sawyer took the glass. "This is probably as good as it's going to get." He shifted again, hissed sharply, then settled. "I'll be fine. Doc says I just won't be sleeping on my back any time soon."

Bashir bit back a comment about how that could potentially limit some of their options; sex probably wasn't anywhere near the front of Sawyer's mind right now. Wasn't his fault Bashir had spent the afternoon caught up in imagining how things might play out once they were alone. And honestly, even if Sawyer hadn't been roughed up, Bashir had to wonder if he'd have been in the mood. Everything happening with his partner sounded awful. If one of Bashir's colleagues was going through something even half as stressful, he didn't imagine he'd be up for socializing, never mind a date or anything in the bedroom. Just getting an earful from Boyce or listening to Tami's latest crisis could derail his mood for hours.

But somehow, Sawyer was still here. He sat on Bashir's couch, twisted slightly to

keep from leaning against the left side of his back, and he held a throw pillow against his midsection as if he just needed something to curl around. He'd lost some color apart from the bruising around the bandage on his face, and he was breathing in that slow, measured way people did when they'd either broken ribs or fucked up their back.

Quite frankly, he looked miserable.

"You know," Bashir ventured cautiously, "I would've understood if you'd bailed. Rescheduling over something like this is—"

"No." Sawyer shook his head. "Tonight is about the only thing that's kept me upright today."

Bashir blinked. "It... Really?"

"Well, yeah." Sawyer gave him a tired smile. "It's been a while since I've had anything to really look forward to."

"Oh." Bashir had no idea how to respond to that.

"I'm fine. Honestly." The smile got a little stronger. "It's been a long day, but capping it off like this is perfect."

"So, no pressure to not burn dinner?" Bashir nodded toward the kitchen, where their meal still had about twenty-five minutes left to cook .

Sawyer half-shrugged, a half-smile forming on his lips. "If it's burned, we'll order delivery."

"Fair. But I can actually hold my own in the kitchen, so..."

“I’m sure you can.”

Bashir returned the smile, but awkward silence set in. He scrambled for something to say, trying not to let himself think this was all a mistake and they really didn’t have any chemistry outside of work and some physical attraction. He’d never been great at this with anyone. Was it a good idea to potentially fall on his face with someone he had to see at work on a fairly regular basis? Shit, should they have just—

“So, um...” Sawyer scratched the back of his neck. “There’s—” He bit his lip. After a moment, he started to lean forward, probably to put his glass on the table, but then hissed a curse.

“Here.” Bashir took the glass. “You probably shouldn’t be moving more than you have to.”

Through his teeth, Sawyer muttered, “Probably not.” Eyes squeezed shut, he sat back again, “Fuck, that hurts.”

Bashir grimaced as he put Sawyer’s glass down. Sitting back himself, he said, “Anything I can do to help?”

“Not really.” Sawyer fidgeted a little, then slowly pushed out a breath before he met Bashir’s gaze with a less than convincing smile. “I’ll be fine.”

Sure he would.

Bashir opened his mouth to suggest driving Sawyer home so he could rest—they could do this another night—but Sawyer spoke first.

“Listen, I really want this to be a... not work-related thing, you know?” He met Bashir’s eyes. “I don’t want to get into shop talk.” He inhaled as deeply as his pain ap

parently allowed. “But there’s something I need your input on.”

It was a struggle not to groan with frustration or roll his eyes. There were a number of reasons Bashir resolutely did not date cops—or, well, hadn’t before Sawyer had so smoothly sidestepped all his defenses—and this was one of them. At the same time, though, they were both up to their chins in an absolute circus of weird murders, and there really wasn’t any clocking out completely from something like that.

So, he took a gulp of wine, then put the glass down beside Sawyer’s. Facing Sawyer, he rested his elbow on the back of the couch. “All right. What’s on your mind?”

Sawyer met him with apologetic eyes. “The thing is, I’ve been thinking about these last few murders. About the pattern.”

“You’ve found a pattern?” Bashir asked dryly. “Because I sure as hell can’t find one besides ‘they’re fucking weird.’”

“Yeah, that’s... That’s kind of the pattern.”

Bashir raised his eyebrows.

Sawyer shifted slightly, pausing for a sharp inhalation. God, he really did look miserable. He pulled it together, though, and said, “I don’t think this is a serial killer getting his rocks off by torturing or mutilating people. I think they’re fucking with us .”

“With—” Bashir stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“Well, look at how absolutely bizarre the deaths have been. That’s—I mean, that’s literally the only thing connecting them to each other besides happening within the same time period and geographical area. The fact that the causes of death are weird

and hard to pin down.”

Bashir nodded as he spoke. It did make an unnerving amount of sense, especially since the chosen causes of death were anything but protracted. Yellow oleander worked within hours. Certain types of snake venom within minutes. And a bullet through the heart didn’t exactly lend itself to a lengthy monologue of last words.

He regarded Sawyer curiously. “So, you think the killer is fucking with us?”

“Yeah. Like I don’t know if he gets a charge out of watching us try to solve the puzzle, or if he’s trying to get us to trip up, or...” Sawyer shook his head. “I don’t know. But my gut says the motive relates to us more than the victims.”

Bashir hadn’t had nearly enough wine for this conversation, and he drained his glass. “Fuck. So...” He glanced at Sawyer as he poured himself some more wine and topped off Sawyer’s glass for good measure. “What do we do? Bring in every podcaster and true crime enthusiast?” His own question gave him pause. “You don’t think Felix is our killer, do you?”

Sawyer pursed his lips, but then shook his head again as he took the offered glass from Bashir. “No. I think our killer has been in contact with him—and I’ve got my partner following up to see if she can tug on that thread a bit more—but I don’t think he’s a suspect.” He brought up his glass and muttered, “Just a fucking moron with a lawyer who needs to be tossed in the river.”

Bashir choked on his own wine, clapping a hand over his mouth and barely keeping himself from spitting pinot noir all over Sawyer. To his credit, Sawyer looked a little sheepish, though the curl of his lips didn’t offer up much contrition.

The grin came fully to life as he asked, “You all right?”

Bashir flipped him off, which earned him a laugh that had no business being that attractive. Of course that laugh also made Sawyer wince, and Bashir decided he deserved that.

When he was done sputtering, he took another drink and cleared his throat. “You don’t like his lawyer, I take it?”

“Oh my God. ” Sawyer groaned and rolled his eyes. “It’s like he paid enough attention in law school to get his degree and pass the bar, but the vast majority of his legal education came from movies. Like he watched the worst of the worst lawyers Hollywood could conjure up, and he said”—Sawyer snapped his fingers and pointed toward Bashir’s TV—“ that is the kind of attorney I want to be.”

Bashir laughed. “Do I even want to know who it was?”

Sawyer made unhappy noise, then muttered into his glass, “Devon Larue.”

It was Bashir’s turn for a groan. “Oh, fuck. That guy?”

“You know him?”

“Ugh. Yes.” Bashir took another swallow of wine, then put the glass down and rested his elbow on the back of the couch again. “Every time I see his name on a case where I have to testify, I think this is it— this will be the trial where I end up on the front page for backhanding the defense attorney across the face.”

A laugh burst out of Sawyer, and he only grimaced a little. “You too, huh?”

“Yes. I can’t stand that asshole.”

Sawyer watched him with a devilish sparkle in his eyes, and he gave Bashir’s foot a

little nudge with his. “Come on. Tell me a story about facing off with him in court.”

It felt like they should’ve been diving deeper into Sawyer’s theory about their case, just like they both should’ve been downtown poring over notes and leads, but they also both needed the downtime. It wasn’t unusual for cops to work eighteen-hour or twenty-hour stretches during major investigations, and Bashir had had to pull some marathon shifts at death scenes and doing court prep, but the human body and brain were what they were. Rest was a necessity. Downtime wasn’t negotiable. Otherwise people started missing details, including major ones.

Besides, Sawyer needed to be resting his body, and there honestly wasn’t anything Bashir could do for any of their victims until some toxicology and other reports came back. Sawyer’s partner was working Felix to see if she could find out who’d leaked information to him. Some officers were checking in with every company that sold snake venom or yellow oleander to see if any had been shipped to the area recently.

So what was the harm in taking a breather together?

“Okay. Well.” Bashir sipped his wine again. “You know that joke about the attorney who grills the M.E. on the stand about how he knows the person was dead? Where he asks if he checked for a pulse, respiration, brain activity?”

Sawyer nodded. “The one where he finally says he knew the guy was dead because his brain was in a bowl on his desk?”

“Yes, exactly. And then the lawyer asks, but was there still a possibility he was alive? And the M.E. responds, only if he was an attorney?”

Sawyer snickered. “I feel like Larue would have a hundred percent been involved in that exchange.” He paused. “That joke wasn’t based on the two of you, was it?”

“No, no.” Bashir waved his hand. “I heard it back when I was a kid. But about two years ago, I was testifying in a case. Really awful one involving a drunk driver and—” He shook his head. “Anyway. I’m on the stand, and he just starts grilling me about the time of death. He kept trying to get me to say that if first responders had done their job and tried to save the victim, there was a chance she might’ve survived.”

Sawyer rolled his eyes. “Let me guess—he was trying to play it that his client shouldn’t go down for killing the victim, just injuring her, because she would’ve survived if the EMTs had tried?”

“Bingo.” Bashir exhaled. “He literally asked me straight out if it was unusual for me to be called in before paramedics on-scene had even tried. And I said, yes, under many circumstances, that would be considered irregular. But when the victim is pinned from the waist up beneath an overturned vehicle...” He grimaced and shrugged. “That’s more my area of expertise than theirs.”

With a dry laugh, Sawyer shook his head. “Wow. I mean, it’s horrible what happened to the victim, but Larue’s stupidity? What the fuck?”

“I know, right?” Bashir tsked. “I’ve always wondered which cereal box he got his law degree out of.”

Sawyer snorted. “No kidding. I’ll never forget being cross-examined by him this one time back when I was a patrol officer. He looks me right in the eye and asks me—with a completely straight face—how I could possibly know his client’s son was a threat to my life before I shot him.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “My dude, I’m no psychic, but”—he dropped his hand and met Bashir’s gaze with an exasperated look—“when someone’s running at me and brandishing a large sharp object while he screams, ‘I’m going to fucking kill you, you stupid fucking pig,’ it’s reasonable to assume he’s going to kill me.”

Bashir shuddered even as he chuckled. “Did that convince him?”

“Pfft. Are you kidding? He tried to say it was like a wild animal rushing at someone to scare them away. It’s scary and menacing, but they’re not actually attacking.”

“Oh Jesus.” Bashir huffed out a breath. “This from the same guy who tried to have one of the K9 dogs put down because it barked at him.”

“Right?” Sawyer swore under his breath. “I’m so glad the city told him to pound sand. That K9 is still one of our best. And she was literally doing what she was trained to do when someone came at her handler. Larue was getting in Officer Gale’s face over—God, I don’t even remember what his problem was, but Angel protected him. And she just barked, for fuck’s sake. One word from Gale and she’d have had him on the ground.”

“She’d have deserved a commendation for that.”

“They both would’ve.”

“Seriously.” Bashir chuckled, but then he sobered. “That thing that happened to you—the guy coming at you with the knife. Did he actually—I mean, he obviously didn’t kill you, but...”

To his horror, Sawyer pulled up his sleeve, revealing a white scar across his forearm. “Took a fuckload of stitches to close it up, too. And that was after I’d shot him twice.”

Bashir whistled and went for his wine. “See, this kind of shit is another reason I don’t like working with the living. Corpses can startle me sometimes, but they don’t come at me with knives.”

Sawyer cocked a brow. “Startle you? How? You open one up and confetti flies out?”

By some miracle, Bashir didn’t choke on his wine this time. “No, but bodies can... Well, decomp means gases building up, and sometimes those gases let go.” He snickered. “Nothing funnier than the first time a new intern hears a corpse groan.”

“Oh my God.” Sawyer chafed his arms and made a face. “That’s... ugh. No, thank you.”

Bashir just laughed.

Sawyer tugged his sleeve back down, and Bashir’s humor vanished, replaced by a sudden rock in the pit of his stomach. He and Sawyer hadn’t even known each other when that man had slashed Sawyer’s arm, but Bashir remembered the incident. He remembered because although he hadn’t been the one to attend the death scene, he had performed the autopsy. It was one of thousands, but some stuck out in his mind more than others.

“Not all that blood is his,” Bashir’s assistant at the time had mused when they’d begun prepping to clean the body. “The cop who shot him is damn lucky he didn’t join him.”

Now that cop was sitting here on Bashir’s couch, alive but scarred.

Bashir’s mouth went dry.

Sawyer could’ve died that night.

And now, there was a serial killer who was apparently fucking with investigators. How long before he got bored with mind games and actually targeted them with his violence?

How long before something else happened? Like the brawl in the bar tonight? Sawyer's injuries had been mild, but head injuries and bruised ribs were like getting grazed by a bullet—a millimeter or two in a different direction, and the situation got a whole lot worse.

How long before it was Sawyer on a slab in Bashir's morgue? How long before—

“Hey.” Sawyer tilted his head. “You still with me?”

“Yeah. Yeah. I should, um...” Bashir thought fast, then pushed himself up. “I need to check on dinner.”

Sawyer didn't say anything. Not that Bashir gave him much of an opportunity; he'd barely finished speaking before he got the hell out of the living room.

Alone in the kitchen, he paused with his hands flat on the counter, and he closed his eyes as he took some deep breaths. He tried to tell himself this was stupid. That he was freaking out over nothing.

But he'd been mentally off the rails since this morning. Since he'd had to be the one to tell a family their wife and mother hadn't just died of natural causes. Since he'd been having one of those rare but intense moments of being overwhelmed by mortality and how unfair and brutal the universe was and...

And now I'm dating a cop.

This wasn't a good idea. Not if he was going to stay sane, and he'd known that from the start. Since well before he'd given in to Sawyer's flirtation. Yes, he liked the guy. He liked him a lot.

That was the fucking problem.

There was a laundry list of reasons he didn't work with the living, and another of reasons he didn't date cops, and both of those lists were hitting a little too close to the bone right now.

Just like that knife that could've killed Sawyer.

He swore into the silence of his kitchen and wiped a hand over his face.

I'm losing my damned mind.

Yeah, probably. Which meant he should just find a way to bow out of tonight so he could get his head together and—

Soft footsteps moved from the living room to the kitchen. Goddammit. Then a hand slid lightly over Bashir's shoulder, and he had to swallow hard just to pull himself together. He wasn't usually this raw or emotional, least of all in front of someone he really, really wanted to date despite all the reasons he didn't want to date him. The last few days had just been... too damn much.

"Bashir." Sawyer's voice was as gentle as his touch. "Look at me."

Bashir didn't want to, but he turned around and met Sawyer's concerned eyes.

"What's wrong? We were shooting the shit about idiot lawyers and weird crap that happens, and then you bolted like I'd said something wrong." His brow pinched. "What's on your mind?"

Bashir dropped his gaze, scrambling to organize his thoughts. He ran his hand down Sawyer's forearm, where the scar was now hidden beneath the sleeve. "I don't know what the hell is wrong with me."

That was a lie. He had a feeling Sawyer knew it. Why bother trying to lie to a cop, for God's sake? Especially a detective who was clearly quite good at his job?

Sawyer didn't call him out on it, though, and the silence lingered for an uncomfortable moment.

Finally, Bashir moistened his lips and looked at Sawyer again. "I like you. I like... I like this. A lot. But..." He swallowed. "Look, I've done autopsies on cops before, Sawyer. Cops who've been killed on the job. I don't..." He hesitated again, still trying to put his thoughts into order, and he ran a shaking hand along Sawyer's forearm. "That scar you showed me? That guy could've easily killed you. Even after you shot him. I know because I've autopsied a cop who was killed by someone he'd fatally wounded. It's..." Fuck, why couldn't he talk?

Sawyer's fingertips were soft on Bashir's face. "You also do autopsies on civilians. People who die doing everyday things." He ran his thumb along Bashir's cheekbone. "I know it's hard—when your job is basically one reminder after another of all the horrible things that can happen to people. Believe me, I do."

The impulse was almost irresistible to snap back that no, he couldn't possibly understand. Except he could. Because he was a cop. Because he saw a lot of the same horrific things Bashir did. If anyone knew how horrible people could be to each other and in what horrible ways a life could be snuffed out, it was a cop. It was Sawyer.

"I know you get it," Bashir whispered. "I... God, does that mean we're just trauma bonding? That this isn't really—"

Sawyer's mouth stopped the words, and for a second, Bashir was frozen, caught off guard by the kiss. He wanted to protest and insist that, no, this really was a bad fucking idea, but...

But he liked the way Sawyer's lips felt against his.

And he loved the way it felt when Sawyer nudged him back against the counter and deepened that kiss.

So...

Fuck it.

He wrapped his arms around Sawyer's neck—he'd have gone for his waist but didn't want to aggravate the bruises on his back—and he let himself be kissed. He let himself be pinned by Sawyer's hips to the counter as Sawyer explored his mouth like this was the first time.

And it kind of was the first time. Before tonight, they'd had one opportunity for a brief stolen kiss, and now they both indulged completely, going from shutting Bashir up to making out like they had every intention of ripping clothes off. They wouldn't—despite both their hard-ons, sex wasn't happening when Sawyer had freshly bruised ribs, for Christ's sake—but the way they were kissing and touching now meant that sooner or later, sex was inevitable .

Fuck, I wish we could do it tonight.

Bashir was dizzy with need, utterly consumed by Sawyer's gentle aggression. He'd almost forgotten his panicked train of thought until Sawyer broke the kiss and met his gaze. He drew the tip of his tongue along the inside of his bottom lip, and his words came out as a hoarse whisper. "Does this feel like trauma bonding to you?"

Fuck. Right. That was... That was what he'd been worried about? Because it seemed ridiculous now. He felt ridiculous. And hot. And high. And turned on. And... like he absolutely didn't want to let go of Sawyer.

He touched their foreheads together and closed his eyes. “No. It doesn’t. It’s... I don’t know what it is.”

A warm laugh gusted across his lips. Then Sawyer gently claimed Bashir’s mouth again. Only for a moment this time, though. Drawing back, he caressed Bashir’s cheek. “I know this is weird. Dating cops is a bitch, and we’re right in the middle of... The timing isn’t great. I get it.” He carded his fingers through Bashir’s hair. “But it’s worth a try, you know?”

All those arguments Bashir had against dating cops rushed to the surface, just to melt away in the warmth of Sawyer’s gaze. Why was he even trying to push away the first man who wasn’t either grossed out or weirdly intrigued by his profession? The first man who not only seemed to understand him, but had seen Bashir at his prickliest and still wanted to know him better?

His shoulders sank, and he slid a hand behind Sawyer’s neck, drawing him in. Just before their lips met, he murmured, “Anyone ever told you how persuasive you are?”

Sawyer’s lips curved against his, but then softened into another long kiss. This one was gentler and lazier—less insistent but no less amazing .

They were, predictably, interrupted, this time by a shrill squawk from Bashir’s phone.

For once, though, the sound didn’t herald another crisis or another death scene to attend to.

Bashir gently freed himself from Sawyer’s embrace, tugged the phone from his pocket, and silenced the alarm. “Dinner’s ready.”

Sawyer met him with a smile that chased away any lingering concerns Bashir had about this being a mistake or trauma bonding or any of that shit. “Let’s eat.” He

tipped his head toward the living room. “I’ll grab the wine.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

Dinner was delicious. Sawyer would have eaten anything at this point—it had been way too long since his last meal, and damn it when was he going to remember to carry protein bars around with him—but even biased toward enjoyment as he was, the meal was...

“Holy shit, how?” he asked after swallowing a mouthful of tender lamb tagine.

“It really wasn’t hard,” Bashir assured him. “I just put it all in a slow cooker and let it go for a while.”

Sawyer knew false modesty when he saw it. The tagine, sure, you could throw a bunch of ingredients in a pot and let them do their thing, but the pomegranate couscous? The cucumber raita? The flatbread? Hell no. That took planning.

“Sure, sure.” He raised an eyebrow. “A man who’s busy enough to give the cops a run for their money, and you just happened to have enough time to put all this together.”

“Well.” Bashir looked down at his plate for a moment. “I wanted to make it good, after our last date was interrupted the way it was. And I actually got off from work fairly early—Andy wanted extra hours.”

Who? Sawyer would have asked if he hadn’t just taken a bite, but Bashir seemed to read the question in his expression easily enough. “Andrew Boyce. He’s the other pathologist in the morgue.”

“Ah, Boyce.” Sawyer had forgotten the man’s first name—none of the other officers

used it when referring to the guy. Probably because he didn't invite that level of intimacy. Or any level of intimacy, really. "He's...huh."

"Competent," Bashir suggested.

"Sure, we'll go with that." Sawyer scooped up some lamb with a piece of flatbread. He'd have to brag to Nan about this amazing meal tomorrow. "Remind me to tell you about his last interaction with my current partner sometime."

"I'm not sure I want to know," Bashir said.

That might be for the best. Sawyer didn't want to create drama where there was none. He finished his bite and reached for the cucumber raita, then winced as his injured side reminded him it existed.

"Are you all right?"

Sawyer nodded. "Fine." Bashir looked far from convinced. "I mean, as fine as I can be. I really do feel a lot better, I promise. I think spending some time with you is just what the doctor ordered."

"You know, if I was your doctor, I would probably have ordered you to go straight home and get some rest instead of coming over here."

Sawyer grinned. "Good thing you only work with the dead then, huh?" If you'd asked him this morning whether flirting with Bashir would include references to dead bodies, he'd have laughed .

"I suppose it is."

They finished the meal, sticking to light topics like Bashir's family (he had some

incredible stories about the shit his nieces and nephews had said) and Sawyer's last job (in a town where smuggling moonshine was still a thing, and the only time he'd ever seen a vehicle actually explode was one that had been filled with jugs of the stuff). It was easy, warm—it seemed like once someone got past Bashir's prickly exterior, he let them in without reservation.

Eventually the food and wine were gone, but Sawyer wasn't ready for the evening to end.

"Let me help you clean up."

"Sure." Bashir welcomed him into his pristine kitchen and, at first, put him to work loading the dishes that he rinsed off into the dishwasher, but when he noticed Sawyer wincing every time he bent over he switched their jobs. Once the machine was loaded and running, Bashir reached out a hand. Sawyer took it and let himself be reeled in, nice and slow, until he was close enough to see the amber flecks in Bashir's eyes.

"So," Bashir said, holding him close but being very careful with where he put his hands. "I'd love for you to stay, but I don't think that there's much we can do tonight, given..." He glanced at Sawyer's side, then kissed his cheekbone right beneath where the black eye started.

"I think you underestimate me," Sawyer said, pressing a little closer.

"I kind of doubt that." His look was mostly amused, but there was some compassion there too. "You're probably going to have a hard time lying down tonight."

"I'm really great at sitting," Sawyer replied. "So great at it. I've won literal awards for my ability to sit." That was truer than Bashir knew, but Sawyer didn't want to get into the Oscars bullshit if Bashir didn't know to bring it up. That could be saved for later, when he was ready to break his silence around his family and the crap his sister

was trying to pull.

Bashir laughed, but that wasn't what Sawyer was going for. He ran one hand into the short, thick hair at the back of Bashir's head and pressed him forward into a kiss. It started gentle but didn't stay that way for long, escalating into a heated, hungry exchange that made Sawyer fight to keep from making some truly embarrassing noises.

He finally leaned back and was gratified to see Bashir's eyes had gone glazed, his mouth slack, and his hands a little less careful now than they had been. "Amazing at sitting," Sawyer breathed. "Let me show you on the couch."

"The—"

"Couch. Right now."

Sawyer let Bashir lead him into the living room, but as soon as Bashir sat down Sawyer straddled his lap and wiggled around until he found an angle that worked for him. From this position he was a little taller than Bashir, and it made it easy to wind his arms around Bashir's shoulders and pull him into another kiss. The fading buzz from the wine was replaced by a sweet flood of endorphins as Bashir's hands found a spot that was definitely not injured in the fight earlier today.

"Oh, fuck," Sawyer moaned when Bashir grabbed his ass and hitched him forward. He wasn't so gentle there, gripping hard enough that Sawyer hoped it bruised. He wanted to be able to look at his butt tomorrow and see exactly where Bashir's hands had been, and yeah, he wanted to be pulled in like that and he wanted to grind down like that and shit, he wanted to feel the ridge of his cock pressing against the fly of his jeans hard enough that Sawyer could fucking writhe on it, and—

His phone went off.

No! He wanted, desperately, to ignore it, but...what if it was Molly again? What if Kurt was going and doing something stupid again?

Sawyer broke the kiss with a grimace. “Damn it.” He disentangled himself from Bashir and reached for his—phone, jacket, where the hell was his jacket?—he got it just before the call went to a message. It was Nan. “What?” he asked, sure that he sounded pissed off but trying not to take it out on Nan any more than he already had.

“I’m so sorry,” Nan said, and to her credit she sounded it. “I know you’re on a date, but Felix is back. He’s demanding police protection and threatening to sue the department at the same time, and since you’re the lead detective on the case he’s involved in...”

Sawyer pressed the heel of his hand to his closed eye hard enough to make sparks fly across the darkness. “Felix wants police protection from whom , exactly?”

“Fuck if I know. He’s not talking but he says he’s got video proof that he’s being surveilled.”

“And he’s figured this out in the...what, five hours since he left the station?”

“I know it’s probably bullshit, but...”

Sawyer dropped his hand and looked over at Bashir, still reclined on the couch, deliciously rumpled and so fucking hard it made Sawyer’s mouth water. “I’ll be there in fifteen,” he said tiredly, then ended the call. “I...am so sorry about this.”

Bashir, because he was awesome, was more sympathetic than annoyed. “It sounds like a uniquely irritating sort of emergency. ”

“It is.” He couldn’t say anything else about it, but he knew that Bashir had heard

enough. “I really, really don’t want to have to leave, though.”

Bashir got to his feet. He stalked across the living room with hungry eyes, grabbed Sawyer’s face in his hands, and proceeded to kiss the breath out of him. “I don’t want you to go,” he said when they finally parted, “but I get it. And you should know that when I go to take care of this—” he stroked himself through his jeans, and Sawyer groaned “—I’ll be thinking of you.”

“You’re going to kill me,” Sawyer breathed.

That dimmed the light in Bashir’s eyes a bit. “I hope not,” he said quietly, then stepped back. “Hey, at least we made it through dinner this time.” He tipped his head toward the wine bottle. “Are you okay to drive?”

Sawyer thought about it, then nodded. “I’m good. I only had about a glass and a half, and I finished that a while ago.”

“All right. Drive carefully anyway.” Bashir smiled. “Maybe next time we’ll get through dessert, too.”

“We should do dessert first next time,” Sawyer insisted. Bashir grinned, and Sawyer left with a lighter heart than he’d thought he would. Work was a stumbling block, for both of them, but so far...

So far, they’d handled it. Now if he could just get a chance to handle Bashir.

Sawyer spent a long and tedious night reviewing footage from an irate and extremely loud Felix about how he was being stalked now because he’d had two potentially-the-same generic black SUVs drive past his house in a single hour .

In the end, he was able to talk the man down from both his demands and his threats,

but he seemed committed to finding something to hold the police department directly culpable for. “For all I know, it’s a cop who’s trying to intimidate me, and you’re covering for him!” Felix said more than once. “You can’t stand that I’m getting close to the truth of this case before you are!”

“Is that what you really think?” Sawyer asked.

“I know it!”

“Does that mean you’ve become aware of new information since we last spoke...”—he checked his phone— “seven hours ago? Because if so, you’re withholding evidence from an investigation.”

“Don’t make me call my lawyer!”

No, God forbid Sawyer made him do that.

A late night turned into an early morning thanks to a hit-and-run at four a.m. The department—unexpectedly understaffed thanks to a sudden and unseasonal bout of the flu running through everyone—was pulling detectives to fill in for beat cops. Sawyer woke up to sand in his eyes and the desk sergeant in his ear. “You sure you’re not sick?” Sergeant Reyes asked after Sawyer groggily said he’d be there. “I could call Detective Walker instead.”

“Mmno, her wife just came home. I’ve got this.” As he rolled out of bed with a groan—Bashir had been right, he shouldn’t have laid down to sleep because now his back was pissed —and fumbled into some clean clothes, he kind of wished he was sick, though. Hit-and-runs were some of the worst crimes to investigate, in his opinion; they stank of avoidance and desperation and always carried terrible consequences, no matter who was at fault. And this time, with one of the club-going party girls dead on the scene and another still unconscious in the ICU, there was very

little to go off so far.

But...actually, there was one faint silver lining to this very grim cloud, and that was the prospect of seeing Bashir not even half a day after they'd parted. It even made listening to Huerta go on and on about tire treads and the statistics of wear and tear in various environments tolerable.

Until the pathologist arrived. It wasn't Bashir.

It was Boyce.

Oh, fuck my life.

"Dr. Boyce," Sawyer said as the man walked over, shooting for professional and...eh, close enough.

"Thank you for demonstrating your ability to recall my name," the bald pathologist said sourly as he knelt next to the body.

Thanks for demonstrating your inability to recall mine. Or, more likely, he just didn't care to bother using it.

Awesome, this was off to a great start...if they were filming a cop show like the one his sister wanted to produce. As it was, Sawyer needed to have a working relationship with this asshole, so he didn't pursue the disrespect. "Lena Reid, twenty-two, struck in a hit-and-run after leaving Club Tango about—" He checked his phone. "Fifty-five minutes ago. Witnesses say she died instantly."

Dr. Boyce spent a few long moments inspecting the body before replying. "That would track with what looks like a broken neck. Vehicle make?"

“A sports car of some kind. We’re in the process of getting camera footage to find out.”

“Hmm.” He checked her legs. “Impact happened just above the knee. Severe bleeding from the legs. Probably severed the femoral artery...” He glanced over at Huerta. “Are you going to start writing this down sometime today? ”

“Oh!” The young man had gone weirdly quiet as soon as the Boyce arrived. “Yes, Dr. Boyce, let me just—um—” He fumbled in his pockets for a few seconds before Dr. Boyce shook his head.

“Never mind, you’re useless. Go prep the stretcher.”

Huerta didn’t answer to Boyce and could’ve easily told him to pound sand because none of that was his damn job, but he probably wanted to avoid confrontation. And it was as good an excuse as any to get away from the asshole for a moment, which, Sawyer guessed, was why he took the order and ran off.

Sawyer weighed the good to be had from biting his tongue versus saying something. In the end, he decided to speak up. “I didn’t know it was his job to take notes at the scene for you. Or help you remove the body.”

“I didn’t know it was your business either,” Dr. Boyce replied as he got to his feet. “I don’t try to do your job, detective, so I’d appreciate it if you don’t even attempt to understand mine. I’ll have a preliminary report on the death for you sometime later today.” He took his gloves off with a resounding snap, then headed briskly toward the van where Huerta was getting the stretcher out of the back. “You’re not being paid by the hour—what the hell is taking so long?”

Sawyer wasn’t sad to see Dr. Boyce drive off with the victim fifteen minutes later, leaving a chastened tech who seemed to have had all the verve knocked right out of

him. "I can finish up here," Huerta said. "There's not that much. You can go."

"I'll help," Sawyer said. It took a few minutes, but Carlos finally seemed to get his second wind.

"I hate going out on scenes with Dr. Boyce," he confessed. "He's always really impatient and sometimes he doesn't want to wait for me to finish taking photos or collecting all of the evidence I need to, but if I don't get absolutely everything then we might end up compromising a case, so I really have to be thorough."

"I get it."

"And then he starts yelling at me to hurry up and he never listens when I tell him I am, and the last time he went out on site with Tami, she came back crying."

That was surprising. Tami didn't seem like the type of person to be intimidated by a blowhard like Andy Boyce. "Wow."

That was all the encouragement Huerta needed to keep going. "Yeah, I mean, nobody really likes working with him in the field, but Tami especially. They always used to argue about who needed to do what and he tried to treat her like he treats me. Then one day she says she's not his servant or something like that, and then he says she is basically his servant, and...it's a real mess. She doesn't ever argue with him or push back at all anymore. Like ever." Huerta sighed. "I wish he could be more like Dr. Ramin. He never gets mad at us or acts like the CSIs work for him, but sometimes he's busy somewhere else, you know?"

"He seems like a good guy." I bet he's even better in bed. Sawyer chided himself firmly for veering in a sordid direction while he was working. He blamed sleep deprivation.

“He is! He’s the best medical examiner I’ve ever worked for, including one guy named Dr. Krane who was one of my professors at school. I really thought he was the best for the longest time because he was also really patient and...”

Eventually, the kid shut up and got back to work. By the time Sawyer was waving goodbye to Huerta, the young man seemed in a much better mood.

Sawyer couldn’t say the same. He did not—absolutely did not —need a hit-and-run case on top of the fucking serial killer he was already investigating, but the world never seemed to care much about timing. He drove to the hospital to check on the second victim, whose family had been informed. Her older sister sat in the waiting room, drawn and red-eyed, with a sleeping baby in a sling across her chest as they spoke.

“I don’t know what I’ll do if Chris doesn’t recover,” she said, staring down at the baby. “Michael is hers, not mine. I’m not ready to be a mother, I...I just offered to babysit while she went out with Lena, I didn’t...I don’t—” Her face crumpled. “How could I ever tell him about this? About what happened to his mother?”

“She might pull through,” Sawyer said, although the doctor hadn’t been encouraging. Massive compound fractures to both legs, swelling on the brain from the impact with the ground; it was honestly surprising she’d lived this long. He left his contact information with the sister, gave the baby a gentle rub on the back, then headed for the precinct.

Nan was entering the building at the same time as him, a smile on her face and a bounce in her step. “Hey! I’m sorry about Felix. I hope you were able to ditch him after a few...” She slowed down and stared at him. “Holy shit, did you get any sleep?”

“Hit-and-run this morning.” Sawyer collapsed into the chair at his desk, then

regretted it as his ribs tried to jump right out of his body. “Too many sick officers, not enough coverage. I handled it,” he added when she looked like she wanted to argue about it. “It’s fine.”

Nan made the face that meant she knew it wasn’t, in fact, fine, but that she also knew there was nothing either of them could do about it. “You want to work on that one and I’ll keep up with the others for now?”

“Sure.” At least reviewing camera footage was easy work compared to the mental slog of putting puzzle pieces together in the serial killer case. Sawyer normally would have preferred the complexity, but too few hours of sleep and too many cups of coffee after getting his ass handed to him yesterday didn’t make for the most attentive mental state today.

He got lucky with the footage. Two of the nearby stores had good angles on the car that hit the young women—a Maserati Levante, a heavy, luxury SUV that stuck out like a sore thumb from the Toyotas and Fords on the road. He couldn’t see the driver, but after a little bit of work he was able to get a partial on the license plate. UWAN ...a quick search pulled it up, and Sawyer rolled his eyes. UWANTME, the perfect vanity plate for whoever was driving this fucking car, because Sawyer did want them now, badly, to be under arrest. The address associated with the car was in a city a hundred miles away, but that didn’t mean anything. He just needed to make a few calls, look for family connections or friends in town, and then—

Sawyer’s phone rang. “Detective Villeray,” he said distractedly.

“Sawyer.” It was Bashir, but his tone of voice said that this wasn’t a social call. “We’ve got another body.”

Sawyer’s heart sank. “Is it the other victim in the hit and run?” he asked. Her doctors hadn’t been confident she would make it, but damn it, her sister was going to be

devastated—

“No. Another one of those bodies.”

Oh. Oh, shit.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

Today was going from bad to worse, and it wasn't even because of Bashir's increasing saltiness over getting cock-blocked by the universe. That wasn't helping matters, especially when he had to act like a professional goddamned adult around the object of his frustration, but it was more peripheral bullshit than centerstage.

No, there were three men who were going to drive Bashir into a bottle before this day was over, and none of them were Sawyer.

One was Colby Simpson, the thirty-something Caucasian male currently crumpled in a heap at the base of a stairwell inside one of the financial buildings downtown. He was positioned with his upper torso on the landing and his lower body on the bottom steps. His neck was clearly broken, and his left arm was unnaturally bent, so the cause of death seemed obvious at first glance. Either on his own suicidal volition, after a shove from a killer, or by quite literally falling victim to physics, Simpson had made an accelerated descent down the stairs at just the wrong angle and snapped his neck .

At first glance.

The destroyed security cameras on both this landing and the one above it were too convenient to be coincidental. That was for the cops to address, though. For the very tired and confused medical examiner crouching beside the body, the biggest clue that things weren't what they seemed was the cherry red of the decedent's skin, which suggested Mr. Simpson had succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning. Or, judging by the way every other autopsy had gone recently, his cause of death would be something so rare and statistically improbable that Bashir would have to run a few tests twice just to be sure.

Tami looked up from photographing the man's face. "Do you think he was getting carbon monoxide poisoning, and then went stumbling down the stairs?"

Bashir shrugged. Anything was possible, and it was up to the cops to piece together the story told by the scientific evidence. Bashir and Tami just had to collect and report that evidence. They'd speculate and brainstorm with cops, sure, and Bashir could never resist trying to piece it all together himself, but at the end of the day, it was—thank God—the cops' job to actually complete the puzzle.

He didn't envy the cops, because seriously, what in the ever-loving fuck was happening in this town? A serial killer with a Pinterest inspiration board that looked like something out of the weirdest episodes of *Forensic Files* ?

Which...

Bashir's neck prickled. Maybe Sawyer needed to revisit Felix the True Crime Podcaster. Not necessarily as a suspect—though Bashir wasn't ruling out anyone or anything at this point—but perhaps as an unwitting source of inspiration for the killer. Maybe he'd had some weird fan mail? Weird comments in the chat? Every thread was a thread worth tugging, so he made a mental note to bring it up to Sawyer.

Sawyer, who was down the next flight of stairs, where he was dealing with the second of the three men who were testing Bashir's sanity today.

"Kurt. Listen to me." He had his hands on his partner's shoulders, probably both to steady him and keep his attention. "You have got to go home. You can't be—"

"Back the fuck off, Sawyer," Detective McKay snapped back, and he made an animated but ineffective attempt to shove his partner away. "I don't need you telling me what to do."

Sawyer dropped his arms to his sides, and the pained expression tugged at Bashir's heart. McKay was clearly in crisis mode—drunk, belligerent, trying to barge onto a crime scene where he absolutely didn't belong. Sawyer was doing his level best to talk him down and gently escort him out of the crowded stairwell, but McKay was having none of it.

McKay again tried to push past Sawyer, and in doing so, gave him a shove that had him teetering precariously on the top step. In that split second of imbalance, Bashir's heart went into this throat as his mind filled with visions of Sawyer lying below the stairs like Colby Simpson.

Fortunately, Sawyer only went down one step before he caught himself on the railing, wincing as if that had aggravated his sore ribs.

McKay didn't even seem to notice he'd damn near killed his partner, and he turned his belligerent attention on Officer Bailey. Bailey had been posted midway down the stairs below Bashir to minimize traffic and potential contamination of the crime scene. She positioned herself in the middle of the step and stood her ground.

"Only the investigators on this case, the CSIs, and the medical examiner's personnel are allowed, detective. You'll have to—"

"The fuck I will," he snarled, straightening to his full height. He'd have towered over her had she not been two steps above him. As it was, they were nearly eye-level. "I will be on the phone with your superior if you don't let me through, Officer."

She didn't budge. "I'm sorry, detective. Dr. Ramin was very clear about—"

"You don't answer to Dr. Ramin and neither do I," he snapped, waving the hand that was in a cast. "Now move. Aside."

Bashir rolled his eyes, schooled his expression, and stood on the top step. “Detective McKay, you’re not assigned to this case, so you have no reason to be on my crime scene. I need—”

“Your crime scene?” the detective slurred up at him. He laughed, letting his inebriation really show. “I think you’re getting a little above yourself, aren’t you, doc? This is—”

“Kurt.” Sawyer appeared beside McKay and put a hand on his arm. “Let me take you home. We’ve got this scene. You need to be with Molly.”

At the mention of his wife’s name, all of McKay’s anger and bravado died away. He seemed to wither, losing an inch or two in height as he leaned hard on the railing.

“Come on.” Sawyer gave his elbow a gentle tug. “Let’s go.”

McKay didn’t look at anyone as he followed Sawyer down the stairs. At the bottom, just before they turned the corner to start descending the set McKay had nearly sent Sawyer tumbling down, Sawyer glanced back at Bashir. They locked eyes for a second, and Sawyer’s expression was full of apology and embarrassment. As if this were somehow his fault.

Bashir tried for a look of empathy and understanding. He wasn’t sure if he succeeded or failed, only that Sawyer responded with a slight nod before he continued out of sight with his partner.

“What the hell is up with him?” Tami asked.

“No idea,” Bashir muttered. “But Detective Villeray has it under control.” He turned away from the stairs and met her gaze as he gestured at the body. “Let’s finish up here so we can take him to the morgue.”

An oddly amused look crossed her face. One that didn't usually materialize at death scenes, where they both kept stoic, professional expressions firmly in place.

He cocked a brow. "What?"

"Nothing." She shook her head and returned her attention to Colby Simpson. "Just... It's weird to hear you call him 'Detective Villeray.'"

Bashir eyed her as he reclaimed his place beside the body. "It's his name, isn't it?"

"I figured you two were on a first-name basis by now."

He cut his eyes toward her, then rolled them and clicked his pen. "We're at work."

"Mmhmm. I know."

He opted not to pursue the line of questioning any further. This was hardly the time or the place. They often spoke casually and about normal things while they were autopsying someone, but there were no hot mics, cameras, cops, or bystanders in there. Out here in the real world, people would be uncomfortable and even offended by the conversations, irreverent banter, and even dark humor that were so normal for him and Tami.

So... it could wait .

When they'd observed, documented, and collected every imaginable piece of evidence or potential evidence on the body, they bagged him up. Rather than stretching Mr. Simpson down eight floors, they wheeled him into the hallway and onto the elevator, which took them to the lobby. Officer Bailey had radioed ahead of them to make sure the driveway beyond the lobby was clear of reporters, bystanders, and—most importantly, in Bashir's mind—anyone who knew or was related to the

deceased.

The doors opened, and they rolled the stretcher through the deserted lobby. The building had been briefly evacuated at Bashir's order due to a possible carbon monoxide leak, and when the space was determined to be safe, only cops and other law enforcement personnel returned. The people working here had taken a half day off, and Bashir didn't blame them at all.

Outside, many had returned to gawk at the scene, and cops were keeping them back with barricades, police tape, and their imposing presence. A few cameras flashed and some people gasped as the stretcher rolled past them, but no one made a scene or got in the way.

Bashir and Tami loaded up the body, and their work here at the scene was done. He shut the van's back doors, and then Tami left; she'd come in her own car, and Bashir could handle everything from here.

Alone behind the van, he stole a moment to exhale. He was almost tempted to get started on the autopsy as soon as he got to the morgue, because this one was going to be another shitshow, wasn't it? Some bizarre cause of death, or at least one that didn't remotely match the circumstances surrounding where and how the body had been found. Was he even going to be able to sleep tonight, knowing what awaited him ?

But he'd have to try. He needed to be fresh when he started an autopsy, and today had run him into the ground both physically and mentally. Colby Simpson deserved better than the autopsy Bashir would perform in his current state.

Approaching footsteps reminded him he was still at a crime scene, and he still needed to have on his professional game face. He pulled himself together, squared his shoulders, turned around, and—

Released his breath again.

“Hey.” Sawyer approached, his face a mix of sheepishness and sheer exhaustion. “Sorry about, uh...” He gestured at the building behind him.

“Wasn’t your fault.” Bashir shouldn’t have moved closer to him, but he did. Even if they couldn’t touch out here—they were both way too professional for that—he just needed to be a little closer to Sawyer. “How is he, anyway? I assume he’s home?”

“He’s...” Sawyer glanced toward the parking lot, then sighed and shook his head, renewed fatigue radiating off his slumped shoulders. “I mean, he’s always been a workaholic. And... between you and me, an alcoholic. So he’s trying to dive into work and a bottle at the same time to cope with losing his wife, and...” He trailed off, shaking his head again.

“Shit,” Bashir whispered. “Is there, um... How much time do they think she has left?”

“Hard to say,” Sawyer whispered. “He said he heard her telling his sister they should’ve moved to a euthanasia state while they had the chance. Because now she’s just in constant pain and waiting to die.”

Bashir had to fight off a shudder. In medical school, he’d witnessed the horror of terminal illnesses slowly claiming victory over patients. He’d visited his aunt during her awful final weeks. And God knew he’d autopsied plenty of people who’d been ravaged for months if not years before their bodies had finally given out.

Death itself didn’t scare him. It was the possibility of taking the long way to get there that terrified him.

“That has to be awful for him,” he said softly. “Can’t really blame him for buckling

like he is.”

“No, definitely not.” Sawyer pushed a hand through his hair. “I get why he’s not doing so hot. But still... I’m sorry for—”

“Don’t.” Bashir couldn’t resist, and he touched Sawyer’s arm. “It’s no more your fault than the two of us getting called out to a death scene.”

“Still...”

Bashir studied him. Sawyer was obviously exhausted, but the closer Bashir looked, the more he wondered how the man was even still standing. He’d lost a few shades of color except under his eyes. One was black, and the other had a dark circle that made him look like a medical student cramming for finals. His shoulders were hunched almost as much as McKay’s had been when he’d given up and followed Sawyer out of the stairwell.

Giving his arm a gentle squeeze, Bashir asked, “When was the last time you ate?”

That seemed to bring Sawyer up short. “Uh...”

“Coffee doesn’t count.”

The faintest wisp of a laugh escaped him, and he shrugged heavily. “It’s been a while.”

Bashir grunted. “And I assume you drove yourself here?”

Sawyer nodded.

“Mmhmm.” Bashir gestured at the van. “Come on. We’re going to drop off Mr.

Simpson, and then you're going to stuff some food in your face before you collapse."

Sawyer's eyes widened and flicked toward the van. "We're... We're not eating at the morgue, are we?"

Bashir blinked innocently. "Why not? We have all those refrigerators right there, so..."

Just as he'd hoped, Sawyer actually laughed with some feeling, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "Oh my God. Gross."

Chuckling, Bashir nudged him toward the passenger side of the van. "Get in. Let's go."

Sawyer stiffened, glancing back toward the small crowd of cops still managing onlookers. "I should..."

"You're signed out of the scene, right?"

Sawyer blinked a couple of times as if he genuinely couldn't recall.

Bashir took out his phone, and he called the officer who'd been in charge of signing people in and out of the scene. Once he'd confirmed that Sawyer had, in fact, signed out, he ended the call and again sent him to the passenger seat.

Stubbornness flashed across Sawyer's face, but it was no match for the exhaustion or—Bashir guessed—hunger. He nodded and meekly went around to the side of the van.

Alone, Bashir stole a moment to give in to his own fatigue, releasing a breath and rolling his shoulders.

Then he went around to the driver's side, and they headed downtown to the morgue.

As soon as Bashir closed and latched the drawer where Colby Simpson would spend tonight, the third of the three men on his shit list made an appearance .

“What the hell is this, Ramin?” Boyce slammed a file folder down on the empty exam table. “You want to tell me why you’re undermining me? Again?”

Bashir blinked. Then he glanced at Sawyer, who was definitely a few degrees closer to awake now, alert in that way cops always were when a situation got tense. Bashir kept his tone measured, not so much to calm down his heated colleague, but to signal to Sawyer that he had things under control.

“I’m not undermining you, Andy.” Bashir picked up the folder. “What’s going on?”

“This death was clearly a suicide. And now when the decedent’s employer gets sued by the family over the”—he made viciously sarcastic air quotes—“ ‘accidental’ death, the attorneys are going to rip me apart for being incompetent.”

Bashir skimmed over the notes, including the ones he’d included disputing Boyce’s conclusion. Ultimately Bashir made the final decision as the medical examiner, but anything made in writing—including Boyce’s erroneous conclusion that the death was a suicide—was subject to discovery. In the very likely event of a lawsuit, Boyce’s credibility and competence would be ripped to shreds in whatever way the various lawyers thought it could benefit their cases. Bashir would, not for the first time in his career, have to testify and walk the fine line between defending his own decision to override Boyce and defending his colleague’s competence.

He couldn’t fucking wait.

Holding on to his calm by his fingernails, Bashir said coolly, “I’m not risking my

position or my license to avoid bruising your ego.”

“Uh-huh. And I’ll bet you lose all kinds of sleep at night over making me look like an asshole while you’re the star of the show.”

Only his familiarity with Boyce’s temper kept Bashir from rolling his eyes, but he did abandon the calm, even tone. “Of course, you’ll gloss right over how much I’m risking my professional reputation every time I choose not to fire you over something like this.” Sliding the folder back across the table to Boyce, he added, “This is why I don’t assign you to the major cases. I would suggest you either review this report and figure out exactly how you went wrong, or you update your résumé.”

Boyce’s nostrils flared as he snatched up the folder. “Are you threatening me, Bashir?”

“I’m letting you know, as your direct supervisor, that I’m not going to continue to cover for you, and I’m not going to continue putting up with the disrespect.” It had been so tempting to include insubordination in there, but he was already prodding at a sore spot. Boyce despised Bashir’s position as his supervisor. He loathed Bashir’s status as county medical examiner and as the man with the power to fire or demote him. Usually, Bashir was careful to avoid nudging those landmines, but in the interest of making a point, he was stomping on them now. “Am I clear, Dr. Boyce?”

Boyce grunted something Bashir didn’t quite catch, and then he stalked out of the morgue.

Blowing out a breath, Bashir leaned against the drawer he’d just latched. “Fucking Christ.”

“What was that all about?” Sawyer asked.

Bashir finally let himself roll his eyes, and he shouldered himself off the drawer. “A pathologist who seriously hates answering to a foreign doctor who’s younger, browner, and more qualified than him. ”

Sawyer blinked. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ll tell you about it over dinner.” He gestured for Sawyer to follow him. “Let’s go find you some food before you pass out.”

Though the precinct above the morgue had a halfway decent cafeteria, Bashir wanted something a little less institutional and without so much blached fluorescent lighting. He also wanted to make sure Sawyer ate something substantial, rather than picking at a stale sandwich or swallowing some watered-down soup.

He hadn’t been going for anything romantic, but that was what they ended up with: two blocks down from the precinct was a cozy European fusion restaurant with soft, dim lighting, rich red cushions and curtains, and intimate booths around hardwood tables. The prices were a little eye-watering, but the way Sawyer almost groaned as some fragrant bread was carried past the table, Bashir decided the check would be worth it. It wouldn’t take any arm-twisting to get Sawyer to eat in this place.

And, hell, it turned out Bashir hadn’t eaten in a number of hours himself. He ended up ordering the beef bourguignon with a Caesar salad. Sawyer hemmed and hawed a little, joking he was trying to decide what not to eat, before settling on the bruschetta chicken and vegetable soup.

When their soup and salad arrived, they both inhaled better than half the bread in short order along with their first courses.

Sawyer put down his spoon in the empty bowl and sat back with a happy sigh. “Oh, Jesus. I was hungrier than I thought.”

“Same.” Bashir picked up one of the few remaining pieces of romaine on his plate. “Who do you think has worse eating and sleeping habits? Cops or doctors?”

Sawyer snorted. “I’m not playing that game. There’s already a universal joke about cops and doughnuts, so...”

Bashir almost choked on his salad. “Okay, okay. Fair. You win.” He took a swig from his water glass. “Though I think the people who make those jokes just don’t see residents lumbering around during hour twenty-seven of a thirty-six-hour shift. You get so damn tired you barely remember what eating is.” He paused, then huffed. “And about the time you’re remembering how to be hungry, a patient throws up on you, and that’s all she wrote.”

“Oh God.” Sawyer laughed, chafing his arms. “I’ll pass, thanks.”

“Same. Though I apparently thought getting away from the living would mean I’d be somewhat more inclined to eat regularly, but...” He half-shrugged.

“I guess we’re all masochists to some extent.”

“Except I’m pretty sure masochists enjoy the misery.”

Sawyer made a face but didn’t argue. He sipped his own water, and when he faced Bashir again, his expression had turned serious. “So, this shit with your colleague—what’s going on there?”

Bashir’s appetite almost fled as his thoughts shifted to Boyce. Sighing, he absently swirled his water glass like wine. “God. It’s so...” He sat back against the soft cushion as he considered how to explain it. “The thing is, ever since I showed up, he’s had a massive chip on his shoulder. He hates that when the medical examiner position opened up, they brought me in from out of state—hell, out of the

country—rather than giving it to him. He hates that he has to answer to me, and that more often than not, I’m the one who gets called in to testify as an expert witness.”

Sawyer tilted his head. “Didn’t he say he’d get called in on the case he was salty about? ”

“Yep. Most likely to undermine the jury’s trust in the results of the autopsy. If I had to guess, it’ll be from an angle of wanting to claim he has no credibility because he missed some key points and deemed it a suicide. Then the other side will use that to remind the jury that the medical examiner’s opinion is just that—an opinion—and how do we possibly know which opinion is correct?” He sighed. “I think he’s secretly pissed at himself for screwing it up that badly, but he’s also extra pissed that I basically had to write, ‘no, Dr. Boyce is wrong; this was actually an accident and here’s why.’”

“Wow,” Sawyer said. “I guess I can see why you’re the M.E. instead of him.”

Bashir shook his head. “No, I’m the M.E. because I’m a forensic pathologist. He decided to stop at pathologist, and I think he regrets not pursuing the forensic pathologist designation.” He grimaced. “And the fact that people sometimes mistake him for my assistant doesn’t help.”

Sawyer whistled. “Sounds a lot like the old and grizzled beat cops who piss on young detectives.” He showed his palms. “Not my fault you didn’t take or pass the exam, dumbass.”

Bashir snorted. “It’s a lot like that, yeah. Plus I think he just doesn’t like me.” He sighed. “Honestly, I doubt he’d be heartbroken if I got hit by a bus, except then he’d probably end up working for an even younger M.E.”

“Damn,” Sawyer said with a laugh. “I never thought there was that much drama in a

morgue.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised.”

“Yeah?” Interest sparked in Sawyer’s eyes, which were a lot brighter than they’d been an hour, a bowl of soup, and three breadsticks ago. “Do tell. ”

“Really? You want to hear about the soap opera of the medical examiner’s office?”

“Why not?” Sawyer grinned as he reached for another breadstick. “It isn’t the giant stack of cases I can’t keep up with or the shitshow that is my partner’s life, so... yeah. Do tell.”

Okay, that was fair. Bashir was up for a distraction from everything at work, too, and maybe after this, he’d be able to sleep. Then he could actually do tomorrow’s autopsies like a professional instead of a semi-comatose med student.

“All right, all right...” He pursed his lips. “Well, at my first job, we had two forensic assistants who were screwing. Which was fine... until they broke up.”

Sawyer leaned in, eyes wide. “Seriously?”

“Mmhmm. Let me tell you, you haven’t lived until you’ve been listening to a guy begging his ex to take him back over an autopsy while she’s trying not to die from morning sickness...”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“Bullshit.”

“Nan.”

The look she gave Sawyer could have peeled paint. It was the strangest combination of scathing disdain and searing guilt he’d ever seen. “I think it’s the least I can do after what happened with Kurt stalking your crime scene.”

Sawyer shook his head. “You didn’t have anything to do with that.”

“I did, though. I’m the one who took the time off.”

“You were spending time with your family!”

“Sure, but I still should have told the desk sergeant to make sure he didn’t answer any questions about you!” She pointed a pen at him. “This is Partnership 101. Kurt’s already proven himself unstable; that’s the whole reason we got placed together, and then I wasn’t there to have your back when he stormed onto a crime scene.”

The memory of nearly falling was still a little too fresh for Sawyer to focus on. He’d done a stunt like that once— well, almost done a stunt like that. His character had fallen down the stairs, but Sawyer had just filmed the initial drop. He’d hit a padded mat, then given things over to his stunt double, who rolled backward down the rest of the flight. His double had been all right at the end of it, but Sawyer already knew that he wouldn’t have been. Not in either situation.

“He would have found a way to get into trouble no matter what,” Sawyer said tiredly. “He can’t handle being at home right now, but he can’t handle doing anything else either.”

“Not sober, at least,” Nan agreed. “But whatever, Kurt’s issues are sad but they’re not our main concern right now. We’re looking at...” She sighed. “That fucker’s podcasts.”

“Yep.” Honestly, it was an angle Sawyer couldn’t believe he hadn’t considered before. Felix had been running his weekly true crime podcast for three years, and he’d become pretty popular. As his popularity grew, the cases he spotlighted had gotten more and more outrageous. He had a reputation for delving into not just issues of police malfeasance, but also the strangest, goriest, most disgusting deaths he could find.

Sawyer had thought Felix had a connection inside the department that he’d learned about their serial killer from, but maybe he’d had it reversed. Maybe the serial killer was mimicking Felix’s old cases, and Felix had put that together and was trying to insinuate himself into the investigation in a very weird case of meta.

The easiest way to figure out whether the connection started with the podcast would have been to ask Felix, but thanks to his bulldog of a lawyer, that felt akin to trying to walk across a minefield. However, thanks to a website of fan summaries, Nan had been able to narrow down a selection of similar cases. None was an exact match so far, but if they found one that involved carbon monoxide poisoning as a mask for something else...well, then they could look at this angle more seriously.

Unfortunately, the summaries could only take him so far.

“Number twenty-eight,” Nan said and pressed play. There was Felix’s theme music, something like a techno version of Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,” which made

Nan roll her eyes, and then Felix's voice came on.

"Who would have thought," he said, his podcast voice noticeably lower than his in-person voice, "that a trip to the family farm could end in so much terrible tragedy? Not Michelle McNiell. Five people dead, all of them poisoned...a dismal end for a picture-perfect family, one that rocked the tight-knit community they lived in. But the truth is so much stranger than the picture the killer tried to paint. What is the truth?" Felix laughed. "Nothing like what the so-called authorities would have you believe. Welcome to Stab in the Light, where—"

"Oh my God, how is he even more insufferable when you don't have to see him in person?" Nan asked. "Do we really have to listen to this one?"

"Come for the murders, stay for the poisons," Sawyer said. "I can't find a decent summary of it online, so yeah, I'm afraid we do have to listen. At least long enough to see whether we can cross it off the list."

"Fine." Nan sat in silence for a moment. "Coffee?"

"Sure." There was some left in the pot in the break room, he knew, but it had been stewing for hours now. "I'll walk down to the cart and back."

"Thanks." Nan turned the playback speed up with a grim look, then smiled. "Actually, he'd make a decent chipmunk."

"Congratulations on your coping skills." Sawyer grabbed his jacket and headed out of the repurposed interrogation room. He walked as fast as he could without seeming like he was rushing down the hall and through the lobby, finally breaking into the fresh air and bright sunshine with a sigh of relief, instantly feeling better. The only things that could improve this moment were a cup of decent coffee and Bashir, but Bashir was working, so coffee would have to do.

A black Americano and a caramel latte later—Sawyer hadn't decided yet which one he would give to Nan—he was headed back toward the precinct when his phone went off. He considered ignoring it and answering once he got back inside, but it was so nice out... He sat on the low brick wall between the sidewalk and the parking lot, set the coffees down, and fished out his phone.

Speak of the devil! “Hey,” Sawyer said, smiling wide enough that Bashir surely had to be able to hear it. “I was just thinking about you. What's up?”

“Sawyer...”

Oh. Shit. That wasn't a good tone of voice, not the “I'm on break and wanted to call” sound he'd been hoping for. “What is it?” It had to be another murder—but if it was a murder, why didn't he know first?

“I got a call an hour ago about a suicide in Bellfield Park.” That was one of the city's larger open space areas. “I didn't realize until I got here that...” He took a deep breath. “I wanted to be the one to tell you, and I wish it could be in person, but Sawyer... The person who died—it's Detective McKay.”

Everything went fuzzy for a minute. Sawyer wasn't aware he'd stopped breathing until he almost dropped the phone; then he had to fumble to keep a grip on it.

“—yer? Are you still there?”

“Yes.” He was, he was present, he was...he could do this. “I'm...yes. Are you sure it's him?”

“He had his wallet and badge on him.”

“Yeah, but are you sure it's him?” Sawyer persisted. “Someone could have taken his

identification, someone could have—”

“His features are still intact,” Bashir said with the sort of gentleness reserved for grieving friends and family members. “I know him, Sawyer. It’s Kurt.”

Oh my God.

“Have you...” Sawyer cleared his throat. “Have you called Molly?”

“I don’t have her number, but even if I did I wouldn’t feel comfortable stepping in like that when you’re involved.”

That made sense. “And...and you’re sure it’s a suicide?”

Bashir hummed. “At first glance, that’s how it looks. But I’ve learned better than to trust appearances, especially recently. I think you should come and see things for yourself before I move him. You might see something I don’t.”

Sawyer swallowed. “Where is he?”

“The east side of the park, about a hundred feet off the loop trail. You can see the cemetery from here.”

Of course he could. Shit. “I’ll be there as soon as possible,” Sawyer said.

“All right. I’m so sorry,” Bashir said, and despite how much of a bastard Kurt had been about him, Sawyer could tell that Bashir meant it. He wished he could appreciate that more right now.

“Thank you,” he said mechanically, then hung up. He stood, turned, and walked on rote back into the precinct. Jacket...badge...gun...

“Hey, finally!”

Sawyer glanced behind himself to see Nan standing in the hallway, hands on her hips. “That took forever,” she complained, then frowned. “Wait. Did you even get the coffee, or—”

“Kurt’s dead.”

Nan went silent, one hand rising to her mouth.

“I have to go,” Sawyer said. “Bashir’s at the scene. He thinks it might be a suicide. Or... not. I need to see it.” Everything was still fuzzy enough that Sawyer didn’t really feel the impact of what he was saying. “I’ll handle contacting Molly.”

Nan made to grab her purse. “I’ll come with you.”

“No.” Nan was a good partner and a better detective, but if it was a suicide—and the odds were regrettably good that it was , given how insane Kurt had been acting lately—then she didn’t need to be there. “Stay and work on the podcast.”

She folded her arms. “You want me to hang around here listening to that drivel while you handle one of the toughest moments of your career? Sawyer, come on.”

“Nan.” The fuzziness was beginning to clear, the sharp edges of reality nipping at his brain. He wasn’t going to be able to get through this if he didn’t stay numb, and he’d never manage that if Nan came with him. “Please. Let me do this.”

She stared at him for a long moment, then nodded. “All right. But...” She came over to him and gave him a firm hug, managing to avoid his bruises. His skin crawled with awareness where she touched him, but he squeezed back. She needed this, he realized. She’d known Kurt a lot longer than he had, and if this helped her, then it

was...fine. It was fine, but he needed to go before she stripped away his defenses.

“I’ll keep you updated.” He let go and stepped back. She didn’t try to hang on, thankfully. Sawyer left her standing by their desks—by Kurt’s desk, too, with a mug full of mostly empty pens and a picture of him and Molly from twenty years ago at Niagara Falls—and went to the parking lot. He got into his car, turned the radio off, and drove in silence to Bellfield Park.

There was the M.E.’s van. There was a patrol car. Sawyer parked as close to the entrance as he could manage, then headed for the loop trail. It felt like he was walking in quicksand, every step dragging and slowing him down. He couldn’t force himself to go any faster, though. He was exhausted and out of breath, like his lungs were on the verge of revolt. In the end, he felt lucky he made it all the way to the scene without having to sit down on the way.

The officer on the scene was a vaguely familiar face. I’m glad it’s not Doran. He’d had enough crazy calls lately. Sawyer showed his badge and was pointed in the direction of a thick-trunked oak tree. He recognized the bent-over figure there and thought about calling out, but the words stuck in his throat.

Luckily, Bashir turned around and saved him the trouble of trying to get through a greeting. He straightened up and came over to meet him about ten feet from the—

Corpse. Body. Dead person. Get used to it.

“Here.” Bashir handed over a pair of shoe covers, and Sawyer put them on without a word. “He was found hanging from the lowest branch of this tree,” Bashir continued in his soothing voice. “My rough estimate is that he was here for between ten and twelve hours. ”

“So he died around midnight.” Wow, his voice sounded as scratchy as ancient vinyl.

Bashir just nodded. “Are you ready to see him?”

“Yes.” He wasn’t looking forward to it, but he knew he had to do it. Sawyer followed Bashir over to where the body lay on the ground, covered in a standard white sheet. There was nothing standard about the feelings that surged through Sawyer the second he was able to confirm that it really was Kurt, that this hadn’t all been some horrible mistake. No, this was Kurt, and he was dead. That was his off-the-rack suit. That was his green-wrapped cast on his broken thumb. That was...

That was Kurt.

Victim: Kurt McKay, fifty-seven-year-old white male with a history of substance abuse and mental illness.

Sawyer got down onto one knee to get a closer look. Not because he was unsteady on his feet, no matter what Bashir must have thought when he went to support him on the way down. He eyed the dark ligature marks high on Kurt’s neck and smelled the stale, sticky-sweet scent of alcohol on his shirt. Kurt’s eyes were closed, like he was sleeping, but the way his lips seemed to bulge, Sawyer was pretty sure his tongue had been protruding from his mouth before Bashir decided to tidy him up a bit.

He didn’t have to do that. It wasn’t like Sawyer hadn’t seen a hanging before. Speaking of...he looked over at the tree where the deed had been done and frowned. “You found him hanging on the lowest branch?”

“Yes.”

Huerta was over there now, taking samples with a guilty expression. Sawyer ignored him and focused on the fact that—

“It’s only, what, five feet off the ground? ”

“About that,” Bashir agreed. “It’s, um... It’s not unusual. People use doorknobs, all kinds of low-hanging...” He trailed off.

“So...he could have taken the weight off his neck at any time?” Had Kurt really been out of it, been drunk and depressed enough, to tie himself to a five-foot branch and then just...slouch until he suffocated?

“Getting second thoughts in the middle of a suicide attempt isn’t unusual,” Bashir said cautiously. Sawyer kind of wanted to yell at him to stop treating him like glass, but he knew if the situation were reversed he’d be doing the same thing. “That said...it’s possible he was too drunk to get back to his feet, even if panic did set in. I’ll test his blood alcohol level at the morgue.”

The morgue. Oh my God. My partner is going to the fucking morgue. He hated that place. Sawyer almost laughed at the absurdity of it.

A thought struck him. “What was he hanged with?”

“Nylon tie-downs.”

Sawyer frowned. “Kurt doesn’t drive a truck.” Not that that was conclusive in any way, but Sawyer knew for a fact that he didn’t carry them in his car either.

Bashir looked like he was thinking something over for a moment. He finally said, “There’s no petechiae of the eyelids. It’s not a hard and fast rule when evaluating a murder versus a suicide, but seeing petechiae would suggest that he was alive when he began to suffocate.”

Even as slow as his mind felt like it was moving right now, Sawyer was able to understand the significance of that. “So he might have been strung up after he was dead,” he muttered.

“It’s a possibility.”

If there was a chance that Kurt had died as a result of...of that fucking serial killer instead of his own free will, no matter how twisted that will was... Sawyer closed his eyes and turned away, sitting down hard a few feet from Kurt’s body. He folded his arms, put his head on his knees, and just breathed.

A few seconds later, he felt the warmth of another person at his side. Bashir didn’t touch him, but he did say, “I’m sorry. I can’t imagine how hard this is.”

Sawyer wanted to tell him it was okay, to thank him for his compassion and his diligence, but all that came out was, “I’ve got to tell Molly. What am I going to say to her?”

“I don’t know.” Bashir sighed. “But I do know that she’d rather hear about this from you than anyone else.”

Oh, that was definitely true. Given how news traveled in this town, especially news in the force, that meant he needed to get going. He opened his eyes and looked at Bashir, who was staring back at him with a furrowed brow. “Can you help me up?”

“Of course.” Bashir took Sawyer’s hands and lifted him back up to his feet. “Do you want me to drive you? Or you can borrow Carlos. I believe he owes you one.”

Sawyer shook his head. He didn’t want to come back here to get his car after everything was said and done. He might never want to come back to this park again. “I can do it.”

“Safely?” Bashir pressed.

Sawyer glared at him. “I wouldn’t be on the road if I wasn’t safe. I’m not a—” drunk

like Kurt, who might have been a detective but sure as hell wasn't a safe driver. "I'll be fine, I promise," Sawyer said instead, and Bashir nodded.

"I'll walk you down."

Sawyer wanted to tell him it wasn't necessary, but given the way he was feeling it honestly did seem like a good idea right now. He and Bashir walked down to the parking lot together, ignoring stares from incoming hikers and some very pettable dogs. When they got to Sawyer's car, he pulled out his keys and just stared at them for a moment.

It was only ten minutes to Kurt's house from here. Should he call Molly and give her a heads-up? Should he surprise her? Should he...

"Sawyer."

"I'm fine." He grimaced. "I mean, I'm not, but I can drive. I'm just wondering whether or not to call ahead."

Bashir nodded. "I think this sort of thing is best delivered in person. I hate that I had to tell you over the phone."

"Okay." Okay, then that was what he'd do. Which meant it was time for him to go and, well, do it.

Fuck.

"I have to go."

Bashir paused, then clasped Sawyer's hand in both of his. "You have to go," he agreed. "I know it's going to be hard, but you can do this. But later, if you want to

talk...I'll listen."

Listen to what? To Sawyer talk about how awful this was? It wasn't as though Bashir didn't already know. That would just be boring for him, awful and clingy and repetitive. Still, the offer was meant well. "Thanks." Sawyer pulled away and got into his car, busied himself with buckling up and backing out, then drove away on autopilot. Careful autopilot.

Sawyer knew how to perform grief. He knew how to look sad for himself, sad for other people, sad about pets and relationships and the world. He wasn't nearly so good at feeling grief—at letting it writhe around inside him for as long as it needed to get the worst of its bite out.

The last time he'd felt sadness like this, his mother had been abducted by a stalker fan. For three brutal days Sawyer had lived with grief, fear, and anger, ignored by his frantic father and his weepy sister. Then his mother had come back, but the feelings hadn't gone away. If anything, seeing her in the aftermath, how she'd changed, they'd raged more than ever.

No, his personal experience with grief was the worst compass right now. He needed to think clearly, for Molly's sake. What would make this easiest for her? Did she need straightforward and earnest? Factual and reserved? Gentle and comforting? Did she need a shoulder to cry on, or would she rather he leave as soon as he told her what had happened so she could lean on her family?

Sawyer pulled up to Kurt and Molly's house before he was able to settle on an answer. He'd have to play it by ear, then. He inhaled deeply, way down into his core, working to settle himself the way his acting coach had trained him to.

Blow out fear, blow out nerves, blow out reservations. You can do this.

You don't have a choice.

Sawyer got out and walked up the flagstone path to the ramp that had been installed over the steps leading up to their front door. There was a sign taped over the doorbell— DO NOT RING! He knocked instead, fast, before he could let himself prevaricate. A few seconds later he heard footsteps, and then—

“Are you here about that bastard?” a heavysset blonde woman in an oversized purple sweatshirt demanded, one hand on her hip.

“Callie,” Molly called out from deeper inside the house.

“This looks like one of his cop friends,” Callie replied, her eyes narrowing. “You’d better be here to tell us you threw that drunk son of a bitch in a cell this time. He needs to sober up and start thinking straight, that—”

“Will you stop it?” another woman snapped as she came up behind the blonde. She had grayish-brown hair and shared too many facial features with Kurt to be beautiful, but wore a flattering dress and a pair of heels, even inside. “He’s having a hard enough time without you swearing at him constantly.”

“I’m not swearing at him, I’m swearing at this guy!”

“Sawyer?” That was Molly again. “Honey, if that’s you, please come inside.”

Sawyer stepped into the foyer, automatically taking off his shoes and pushing them to the side of the door. He ignored the other ladies’ bickering and went into the living room, where Molly was sitting in her recliner. Her walker, with her portable oxygen tank, was pushed off to the side, and she had a cup of tea in her hand that was still steaming.

“Hi,” she said with a small smile when she saw him. “Please tell me he hasn’t gotten into another bar fight.”

All the words, all the choices, all the thought Sawyer had put into preparing himself for this moment vanished. He was left unable to speak, staring at Molly desperately as he willed his voice to cooperate.

“Sawyer?” Molly lowered the footrest of the recliner and sat up. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

He shook his head, helpless. Acrid tears sprang up in his eyes, and when Molly reached out a hand toward him, he went to her. Her grip was nothing like Bashir’s; her skin felt almost as cold as Kurt’s must have been, but it was strong. Painfully strong.

“Sawyer...please.”

“Molly,” he managed at last. His voice sounded nothing like it usually did, low and gritty. The women behind them went silent. “I’m so sorry.”

“No.” She shook her head, slowly at first, then wildly. “No, no, no...”

Sawyer’s throat had tightened up again. He nodded, then braced himself as Molly collapsed into him, her hands claws against his back as she wailed.

All Sawyer could do was hang on.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

The autopsy should have waited until the next morning. That was standard procedure, apart from bodies that came in before about noon.

In the case of Detective McKay, it had been after eight in the evening when he was finally transferred into the morgue. Literally no one would have faulted Bashir for putting the body into the cooler and coming back in the morning, after a solid night's sleep, to autopsy him along with the other two bodies that had come in this evening. In fact, anyone who knew how the morgue did things would be shocked to see anyone still here at all for anything other than dropping off a body.

But here he was, standing beside the table at almost nine o'clock, steeling himself before getting started.

He was hardly squeamish about autopsies, and he could usually compartmentalize enough to begin working without flinching on even the most disturbing of cases. That was a job requirement—a pathologist had to be able to put aside their emotional responses enough to get the job done, but still hold on to those emotions enough to remain human. Some people thought doing this job meant being completely numb and detached, but that wasn't true. When someone could autopsy a child without feeling anything, it was time to find another line of work.

Doing the job meant feeling those emotions, acknowledging them, but proceeding with the task robotically. Empathize, be horrified by what happened to the person, have sympathy for their loved ones... but still confidently cut into skin and unflinchingly saw through bone.

Standing beside Detective McKay's body... Bashir wasn't so sure he could pick up

the scalpel or the bone saw.

The man lying on the table was not a man Bashir had particularly liked in life, and he didn't apologize for that. McKay had always been one of those cops who made Bashir rethink his career choices; the blowflies at death scenes were less annoying than cops like Detective McKay.

But that didn't mean he'd deserved this, whether "this" turned out to be suicide or murder. His family—his dying wife—didn't deserve this.

His partner didn't deserve this.

Bashir closed his eyes and sighed behind his surgical mask. That was the issue, wasn't it? Bashir faced down the results of cruelty and tragedy every day in this cold place. He was as accustomed to it as anyone could ever be without emotionally flatlining.

But he wasn't used to being so close to someone who loved the decedent.

Under normal circumstances, it was understood that everyone in the morgue could bow out of participating in an autopsy on someone they knew. Boyce had stepped in when a friend of Bashir's had passed away last year. Bashir had performed the post-mortem on Boyce's cousin. Tami had taken the day off when a friend from high school had arrived at the morgue following a car accident.

There were times when it couldn't be avoided, of course. Two years ago, a friend of Bashir's had died under questionable circumstances. Being the medical examiner and the only forensic pathologist within a hundred miles, Bashir couldn't completely escape that one. Since he'd have to sign off on it either way, he'd gone ahead and performed the autopsy himself. His friend's family and girlfriend were still angry that he'd ultimately ruled the death as natural causes when they'd been convinced he'd

been murdered.

Was that why he was hesitating now? Because he was afraid he'd have to tell Sawyer and the grieving, dying widow that McKay had killed himself? Or that someone had murdered him? Neither outcome was going to bring a lot of peace to anyone in McKay's orbit. Would Sawyer blame him? Resent him?

And since when was any of that reason to hesitate on doing his damn job? Bashir's duty was to the person on his table and to the truth. Be respectful of the family and of any traditions surrounding death and funerals, but first and foremost—respect the deceased by finding and telling the truth about their death.

Not everyone took that well. Grief was a bitch of an emotion, and shooting the messenger (metaphorically, in most cases) was not uncommon.

Bashir closed his eyes and exhaled behind the mask. Maybe he should wait until morning after all. He needed sleep. He needed distance. He needed—

Sawyer.

“For fuck's sake,” he muttered into the stillness of the morgue. He was a mess, and that meant the last thing he should be doing was an autopsy. And no one would fault him if he followed standard operating goddamned procedure by waiting until tomorrow morning.

But am I going to be able to sleep? Am I really going to be any more together in the morning?

No. No, he was not.

So it was time to get to fucking work and—

Someone started entering a code at the front entrance.

Bashir's head snapped up. Who the hell? During the day, people could come and go through the front, but after hours, a code was required.

The door opened. "Bashir?"

Sawyer. Oh shit .

Bashir bit back some curses, then called out, "Just a minute!" as he grabbed a sheet to pull over McKay. The last thing Sawyer needed was to see his partner, deathly white and naked, laid out on a table. Maybe it was just as well Bashir hadn't started cutting.

With McKay covered, Bashir took off his gloves, mask, and the protective gear he'd been wearing over his scrubs, and went to meet Sawyer.

He was waiting by the front desk, and he was almost as pale as the man on Bashir's table. His eyes were red, which wasn't a surprise.

When he met Bashir's gaze, he said, "I tried to call, but it went straight to voicemail. And then I saw your car out front when I came to the precinct, and..." He deflated, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I just... needed to see you."

Bashir stepped closer. "It's okay. Come here."

Sawyer didn't even flinch at stepping into Bashir's embrace. In fact, he almost collapsed into it, leaning hard on him as he buried his face against Bashir's neck.

Bashir held on to him, trying to be careful of the places he knew Sawyer had been bruised in that bar incident. God, had that really been this same week? No wonder he was flagging.

“I’m sorry,” Sawyer murmured. “You’re probably busy, and—” He suddenly jerked out of Bashir’s arms and stared at him. “Oh, fuck. If you’re here this late—were you... is he...” His eyes flicked toward the doorway Bashir had come through, and he seemed to get even paler.

“Relax.” Bashir put a hand on Sawyer’s chest. “I just came in to get some paperwork done. I wasn’t—autopsies are first thing in the morning.” He flinched internally over lying to Sawyer, but he decided the lie was kinder than the truth. Sawyer was threadbare enough without knowing his partner—his friend—was just around the corner on a table beside a bunch of surgical instruments.

Fortunately, the white lie seemed to calm Sawyer down a little. He sighed and leaned against the reception desk. “I’m interrupting your paperwork, too. I’m sorry. I’m... God, I am such a fucking wreck right now.”

“Of course you are.” Bashir ran a hand through Sawyer’s hair. “Anyone would be. But... why are you at the precinct? You should be with his widow. Or at home.”

“I know.” Sawyer’s voice sounded hollow. “I came to... I don’t know. I thought I could get some work done, but...” He shook his head.

“What about your partner’s wife?”

Sawyer rubbed the back of his neck. “I stayed with her for a while, but she needed to rest. She’s...” His shoulders dropped farther. “I think me being there was upsetting her even more, and she doesn’t need that right now.”

“What do you need?”

Sawyer looked up at him, confusion written all over his face. “What? ”

Bashir touched Sawyer's cheek. "You just lost someone close to you. What do you need?"

For a few seconds, Sawyer still seemed confused, as if he couldn't comprehend that he even had needs, let alone that anyone might care enough to meet them. Slowly, though, his focus sharpened. He wiped a hand over his face and blew out a breath. "What I need? Honestly?"

Bashir nodded. "Yeah."

Sawyer swallowed. "I just want to shut everything off for a while."

Concern rose in Bashir's chest. "You're not going to go get shit-faced, are you?"

The ghost of a laugh escaped Sawyer's lips. "No, no. Nothing like that. Because then I'll just be sick tomorrow. What I want..." He avoided Bashir's gaze as some color rose in his otherwise pale cheeks.

"What you want...?" Bashir prompted gently.

Sawyer lifted his head, and Bashir wasn't ready for the sudden heat in those beautiful eyes.

But he also wasn't surprised by it. In fact, he recognized it as the same heat that had driven him and a friend into bed an hour after they'd left another friend's funeral. And that same need that'd had him on Grindr almost every night in the week leading up to finals.

Was it the most appropriate thing for the situation? Probably not. Was it healthy? Eh, it was better than some of the alternatives. Sometimes there was nothing to be done except get close to someone, shut out the rest of the world, and don't come up for air

until they'd wrung out every last drop of grief, stress, and everything in between.

Either way, Bashir knew exactly what Sawyer meant when he shakily whispered, "I want to turn off my phone. Lock the fucking door. And not think anymore tonight."

Nodding, Bashir reached for him, and Sawyer didn't resist being pulled in. He sure as hell didn't resist being kissed. In fact, he seemed to melt, whimpering softly as he slid his hands over Bashir's waist.

No, this wasn't the time or place, but Bashir understood. And at least this was something he could actually give Sawyer when he was powerless to give him the things he truly needed.

He couldn't provide any answers right now. He couldn't bring him any peace about his partner or the recent string of murders. He couldn't do a damn thing to fix everything that had driven Sawyer to this.

But give him a few hours of downtime and distraction?

That he could do.

If any of Sawyer's bumps or bruises were giving him grief, he didn't let on about it. Not while they were making out in Bashir's living room. Not while they were pulling clothes off all the way down the hall. Definitely not when he dragged Bashir down onto the bed.

There was a small part of Bashir's brain that warned him they might regret this later—cathartic sex was fine and good, but perhaps not the best thing for the first time with a new partner in a fledgling relationship?

That, like everything they'd locked outside, was tomorrow's problem. Tonight, even

while Bashir's body tried to remind him he was exhausted, he was determined to make sure Sawyer couldn't think about anything but him. Sawyer's phone was turned off and his captain had ordered him to take the night off, forbidding him from showing his face at any crime scene or at the precinct for the next twenty-four hours minimum .

Bashir? Well, there was only so unavailable the medical examiner could be on a moment's notice. Boyce was on call (which Bashir would absolutely hear about later), and he was qualified to handle most situations that could arise. If Bashir's phone rang, it rang, but he just prayed like hell it waited until he'd well and truly had his way with Sawyer.

For the moment, the phone was blessedly silent, and Bashir took full advantage, kissing Sawyer hungrily as they rutted their naked bodies together. God, this man felt amazing against him. Bashir was pretty sure he hadn't even liked him all that much until recently; tangling up with him now, he had to admit he was glad Sawyer had been persistent. Not pushy, not annoying or creepy—Bashir had no doubt that a firm no would've made him back down immediately—but just bold enough to pique Bashir's interest.

So glad I stopped being stubborn.

He broke the kiss and started down Sawyer's neck. "Tell me what you want."

"Exactly what I'm getting," Sawyer slurred, dragging his fingers up Bashir's back. "Jesus..."

Bashir kissed under his jaw. "Let me rephrase—how do you want me to get you off?"

The moan thrumming against his lips was the sexiest thing he'd ever felt. "Can't... Oh God, I can't decide if I want your dick or your mouth."

“Oh, so you bottom?”

“I do anything. And right now...” Sawyer’s fingers dug into Bashir’s shoulders. “Ungh. Yeah, I feel like bottoming tonight.”

Bashir was the one to moan this time, shivering at the anticipation of riding this beautiful man into oblivion. Like Sawyer, he was happy to go either way, and he hadn’t really thought much about whether he was in the mood to top or bottom. The second those words tumbled off Sawyer’s lips, though, Bashir was all top.

But he wasn’t about to rush this. While some part of his brain was aware they could be interrupted at any moment—and knowing his luck, they would be—he just couldn’t resist. Maybe their first time was cathartic distraction sex, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t indulge in exploring and savoring this sexy, naked man in his bed.

He came up to kiss Sawyer’s mouth. “I’m gonna ride you into the mattress,” he purred.

Sawyer whimpered, arching under him. “Please?”

“I will.” He brushed his lips across Sawyer’s. “But not yet.”

The next whimper was a mix of protest and anticipation, and Sawyer swore as Bashir started back down again. This time, the kisses didn’t stop on his throat. He kept going down to Sawyer’s chest, teasing each nipple in turn with teeth and tongue.

He’d heard the rumors floating around the precinct about Sawyer’s Hollywood family, and how he’d apparently tried his hand at acting before fleeing California to become a cop in this godforsaken place. Bashir had no idea how much truth there was to any of that, and he’d also heard that asking about it would piss off Sawyer.

What he could say with certainty, though, was that Sawyer absolutely had the body for Hollywood. Not chiseled like a porn star or an underwear model, but still with perfect contours and angles in all the right places. Powerful arms and legs spoke of more than a passing familiarity with the inside of a gym. Smooth abs begged for fingertips and lips to trail over them. And what could Bashir say? The fading bruises from the other night's altercation added some sexy ruggedness, like a battered action star.

Or maybe he was just losing his mind. Both because the whole world was off its axis, and because he was overwhelmed with how much he wanted Sawyer right then.

Especially when he got to his dick. Sawyer did say he switched, didn't he? Because Bashir definitely wanted to be on the receiving end of what Sawyer was packing. He wasn't huge—Bashir took him easily into his mouth—but he was exactly the right size to rock his world. Big enough to drive Bashir wild, not so long or thick that Bashir would get sore if they fucked for any length of time. Absolutely perfect.

For ages, he licked and stroked Sawyer's cock, reveling in all the moans and curses and the way Sawyer's fingers carded through his hair. When he pushed spit-slick fingers into Sawyer's ass, he almost came unglued at the helpless whisper of, "Oh, fuck, yes." Sawyer rocked his hips, fucking into Bashir's mouth and also riding his hand, mumbling curses in between absolute nonsense.

Bashir was ready to lose his damned mind. He was close to unraveling, and no one was even touching his dick.

Maybe it was time to do something about that.

Good thing he still had condoms. He hadn't needed them in a while, but hope sprang eternal, and he'd kept them around in case one of his rare dates made it this far.

He slipped his fingers free and came back up to Sawyer. Before he could say anything, Sawyer grabbed him, dragged him down, and kissed him hard, gripping his hair painfully tight as his tongue explored Bashir's mouth. When he let him go, he was panting hard, and he pleaded, "Fuck me."

Bashir grinned. "Exactly what I had in mind." He kissed Sawyer again, then reached for the nightstand. "Turn over."

Sawyer did exactly as he was told, presenting that perfect ass while Bashir put on a condom as quickly as he could.

Finally, Bashir was behind him, easing his well-lubricated dick into Sawyer's hole.

Sawyer moaned, pressing his head against his forearms as he rocked back against Bashir. "Oh my God..."

"That good?" Bashir ran a hand up Sawyer's side, carefully avoiding the bruises. "Not too fast?"

"Mmph. No. Not too... Fuck, I want more ." He rocked faster to egg Bashir on. "C'mon, fuck me. I want— ooh , yeah..." His voice trailed off into a choked moan as Bashir thrust in harder. "Jesus Christ. "

Biting his lip, Bashir gripped Sawyer's hips and picked up even more speed. Sawyer pleaded for more, harder, faster, and Bashir fucked him like his life depended on it. Savoring each other and doing things slowly could wait for another time—he needed to be as deep as Sawyer could take him, and he needed Sawyer falling apart, and he needed it all now .

When Sawyer shifted onto his left arm, Bashir swore. He knew what was coming.

Sawyer reached under himself, and Bashir felt the instant his fingers wrapped around his own dick. Sawyer clenched around him, making Bashir's vision sparkle, and they fell into a rhythm together, Sawyer's elbow and shoulder moving in time with Bashir's hips.

"Bashir... fuck. " Sawyer's back arched. "Just like... Just like..."

A shiver ran through Bashir so hard it almost knocked him off his rhythm. "I'm gonna come. I' m almost... I'm—"

Sawyer came with a throaty cry, bucking in Bashir's hands and hauling him over the edge with him. They both shouted, both trembled, and Bashir thought for a heartbeat or two he might even pass out from the sheer intensity. The sheer relief .

Sawyer gave another shudder before he relaxed and slumped over his arms. Bashir kept an iron grip on Sawyer's hips for a moment, staying as deep inside Sawyer as he could until he, too, started to relax.

Together, they sank down onto the bed, Sawyer on his stomach. Bashir came down carefully, without aggravating any of Sawyer's bruises. He managed to pull out, but he was shaking too much to get up.

"Oh my God," Sawyer murmured. "I needed that."

"Me too." Bashir kissed his shoulder.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he was afraid this had been a mistake. That they should've fucked when they wanted to, not when they both needed release and distraction.

But this didn't feel like a mistake. He'd wanted Sawyer, and he was pretty sure that

had been mutual. The fact that they'd finally tumbled into bed after the day from hell didn't change any of that.

Don't overthink it. He closed his eyes and pressed another kiss to Sawyer's shoulder. Just fucking enjoy it .

He would definitely fucking enjoy it.

But he hoped this hadn't been a mistake.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

Sawyer thought for a while that if he could be still enough, he might be able to lull Bashir into thinking he was asleep. That he'd gone under happy, content with his life and everything they'd just experienced together, and not at all thinking about the shitshow that the rest of his day had been.

“What are you thinking about?”

Aaand so much for making a comeback as an actor . You can't even convince your boyfriend you're asleep.

Also, not your boyfriend.

Not yet.

Sawyer sighed. He wanted the answer to Bashir's question to be “nothing.” He wanted to be asleep, wanted to let the euphoria of an orgasm with the guy he had a huge crush on send him off to sleep before he had to reengage his brain. Naturally, given how his life had been going lately, that didn't happen.

On the other hand, if Sawyer was going to be awake, he might as well be talking to Bashir. He'd been dreaming about having more time to spend in Bashir's company, not even necessarily doing...well, this— each other—although that had featured rather heavily in his mind. But just being able to be with him was a gift, and he wasn't going to reject it. Kurt would—

Sawyer swallowed hard. “Some about Kurt,” he said after a second. “Which, trust me, isn't what I want to be thinking about while we're in bed together, but I don't

think I can stop yet.”

“You don’t need to.”

“Mm. I’d like to, though.” He hitched his arm a little farther around Bashir’s waist. “How do you do it? With your work, I mean? How do you keep the things you see during the day from haunting you at night?”

Bashir shook his head. “Years of practice, and even then it doesn’t always work. But this wasn’t exactly a normal day for either of us.”

“No.” Not even close.

“What about you?” Bashir asked. Sawyer tilted his chin up to look at him. “When you were an actor, I mean,” he said. “How did you disengage from the act?”

Sawyer chuckled. “I never quite managed to,” he said ruefully. “I started acting when I was six, and all I heard from my parents—especially my father—over and over again was how important it was to be present. To listen to the director, listen to the other actors, mind my lines, get it right the first time. It became an obsession for me. I got to the point where I was afraid to break character for the entire time filming was going on.”

“Very method of you,” Bashir commented.

“Less ‘method’ and more ‘unhealthy mental fixation’ in a child,” Sawyer said. “I think that’s what broke me, in the end. My last movie was...really hard. I was seventeen, but I was playing a younger kid, and the whole film revolves around the kid’s slow death. It was thirteen weeks of filming, and by the end of it I had stopped eating, I was hardly sleeping...even the director told me I needed a break, but I couldn’t disengage. Not until the film wrapped. After that my dad finally got me

checked out by a doctor, and I ended up being admitted to the hospital for malnutrition and anemia.”

If the way Bashir’s arms tightened around him was any indicator, he disapproved of his father’s methods. Yeah, me too. “Why didn’t your parents do something for you sooner?” he demanded. “Isn’t that—aren’t there laws against that kind of thing?”

“Parents have a lot of leeway when it comes to their minor children and acting,” Sawyer said. “And our family was already a little infamous because my sister had just been admitted to a hospital the previous year for an eating disorder. Plus the fact that my mother had been completely checked out for years at this point, and there was nobody to stop my dad from treating us like the tools he’d made us into.”

Sawyer felt Bashir’s chest rise and fall, his breath regulated despite the speed of his heartbeat. He’s angry for me. It was sweet, if unnecessary. “Why was your mother checked out?”

“This was her blackout-drunk period,” Sawyer said dryly. “Post-kidnapping. She didn’t recover enough to actually engage as a parent until both my sister and I were out of the house. Eventually she separated from my father over it, but by then...eh, it was too late to do any good.”

“I forgot about the kidnapping,” Bashir said.

“It made all the papers for a while.” Sawyer shrugged. “It all worked out in the end. I won an Oscar, quit acting, emancipated myself, and got access to most of my money thanks to having a damn good lawyer. By then my sister was married to another up-and-coming actor, with a baby on the way, so my father accepted that I was a lost cause and focused his publicity machine on Jessica instead. She was actually on a couple of different reality TV shows, and—”

“Wait, wait.” Bashir got up on one elbow and stared at Sawyer. “Back up. You actually won an Oscar?”

“Yep.” Twenty years ago now, but hey, it still counted. “Best supporting actor in a drama. I was the second-youngest person at the time ever to win.”

“Oh my God , you were in—”

“Yeah.” Sawyer cut him off before he could say it—not because he was afflicted by flashbacks anymore, but the title was just...so dumb. One of the most brilliant production teams in the business, and they’d almost shot the project in the foot with that ridiculous title.

“I remember when that came out in the theatres,” Bashir marveled, settling back down beside Sawyer. “I only went to see it so my friends and I could poke holes in the hospital scenes—we were med students at the time, we thought we knew everything—but most of the audience was crying by the end of it.”

“Including you?” Sawyer asked archly.

Bashir chuckled. “Maybe...just a single, manly tear or two.”

“Of course, of course.” They were silent for a bit, and Sawyer thought he might even be able to fall asleep, but then Bashir asked, “So how did you go on to become a cop?”

A logical follow-up. It was also a question that Sawyer had gotten used to ignoring, but for Bashir he’d make the effort. “I’m still not entirely sure how I came around to it. I spent a few years,” more like five, but who was counting, “not really doing much of anything at all at first. I had money, and I was just...tired coming out of acting. It really felt like a retirement, after more than a decade in the business, and I was tired

by it. I bought a condo and lived alone and ignored the world for a while, and then eventually I decided I was done with that. So I went to college.”

“Someplace small where no one knew you?” Bashir asked, and Sawyer grinned.

“Or as close as I could get. Yes. I bounced from major to major for a while,” another five years, but whatever, he’d learned a lot, “and finally got a bachelor’s in Criminal Justice. My first serious relationship was with a cop, too, and I liked hearing about what she did. She was the liaison officer with the local school district, and she did a lot of early outreach with kids, and it was just really interesting to me. So I decided to go that route too.”

“Huh.”

Oh boy. Was Bashir going to ask about Sawyer being with a woman now? Was he going to be upset over the fact that Sawyer was bisexual? Was this going to become a thing? That was the wedge that had driven him and his former boyfriend apart, Marc’s certainty that Sawyer was going to get tired of being with a man and seek something more heteronormative and if Bashir did the same, he might just—

“You dated a cop and you still decided to become one, despite the awful hours?”

Sawyer laughed with more than a little relief. “Well, I was kind of suckered there because she worked in schools, so she had more normal hours than most cops. Once I was on the force, our schedules never lined up, and it just became clear that things weren’t going to work out unless one of us gave up our career. Which didn’t happen, so I moved. ”

Bashir shifted a little, and Sawyer raised his head so his lover could free his arm before Bashir pulled him back down. “Is that when you came here?”

“I worked in a few other places first, but eventually, yes. I moved here, got promoted, and was partnered with the surliest, most standoffish detective on the force.” Sawyer bit back a sigh. “I honestly don’t know that I’d have stuck it out with Kurt if not for Molly. She was great to me—invited me over for dinner, made sure I had a place to go for every holiday that popped up... Eventually Kurt had no choice but to start being friendly or make Molly sad. That was the one thing he never wanted to do.”

A lump rose in his throat, and Sawyer had to swallow hard against it to get his next words out. “I don’t understand why he’s dead. Whether he was murdered or whether he killed himself, there’s just no—it doesn’t make sense. He was already losing everything, and Molly never hurt anyone. Why...”

Bashir didn’t murmur any platitudes about fate or acceptance, which Sawyer appreciated more than he could say. He just bent down far enough to press a kiss to Sawyer’s forehead and said, “We’ll know more soon.” That was the only honest thing he could possibly say, and surprisingly enough, it was calming.

There was one path forward, and that was the path of following the evidence. Bashir would get the evidence, and Sawyer would go wherever it led him. “Yeah.” Sawyer kissed Bashir’s shoulder. “Thanks.”

“You want to try and sleep?” Sawyer could tell Bashir was stifling a yawn.

“Yes.” Even if he didn’t fall asleep, he wasn’t going to keep Bashir up any longer. His...boyfriend? Did they qualify now? Or was this more of a one-night-stand kind of thing? A pity fuck after Sawyer had come to him on the verge of falling apart? Time would tell...but Sawyer chose to hope it was more. He had to. “Let me roll over, though.” His bruised side was loudly informing him that it wasn’t going to take this pressure for much longer.

Bashir let go, and Sawyer rolled over on the bed to face the other direction.

Better...but not really, because now he was cold. He scooted back until he was touching Bashir again, and Bashir didn't push him away, just stroked a hand down his arm before settling into bed. Sawyer listened to him breathe, slow and steady like a metronome, and soon he stopped hearing anything at all and fell asleep.

He didn't dream.

The only problem with sleeping at Bashir's was that Sawyer didn't have a change of clothes with him. His outfit wasn't hopelessly filthy, but it wasn't clean either. Besides, he'd spent part of his time in these kneeling next to the body of his dead partner, which...yeah, it wasn't the sort of memory he wanted to slide back into, especially after a shower. That left borrowing clothes from Bashir, which—

“Why are you so tall?” Sawyer muttered as he tried on a second pair of pants. The cuffs scuffed the floor behind his heels when he tried to walk.

“I'm not,” Bashir said, pulling on a dress shirt. “I just have kind of long legs.”

“You have gorgeously long legs,” Sawyer agreed. “I, on the other hand, don't.” He pulled the dress pants off and looked at the rest of the offerings Bashir had laid out. Sweatpants weren't exactly work attire, but it was early enough that he had time to stop at home before heading into the precinct.

Shit, he wasn't even supposed to be in today, given everything that had happened, but Sawyer knew he needed to be there. They were still short on staff, and if he stayed at home he would just end up being morose and alone, which didn't sound good right now. No, he'd go back to work and keep at it as long as he thought he wasn't hurting their caseload. Nan would tell him if she thought he needed a break.

So. Sweatpants—still too long but at least they had elastic at the bottom—plus a plain black T-shirt, and Sawyer felt better about getting home without crawling out of his

skin. Plus, he had the pleasure of seeing Bashir's eyes darken a little as he stared at him.

"I don't know whether I prefer seeing you in my clothes or taking them off of you."

"We should try both," Sawyer said. "To be thorough."

Bashir sighed. "I don't have time to be thorough right now, unfortunately. I have a lot to do at work today."

Translation: He had Kurt to autopsy this morning. The spark of mischievousness which had lit up in Sawyer's chest snuffed out. "Right. Yeah."

"What are you doing tonight, though?"

Sawyer shook his head. "Probably disobeying my captain and listening to more godawful podcast episodes and scouring camera footage for any additional clues. I know," he added when he saw Bashir make a disgusted face, "I don't want to listen to that asshole either, but it's possible there's a link between some of his old episodes and the killer's methodology. So far we've come up empty, but Nan wants to follow it through to the end just in case."

"Well." Bashir came over, framed Sawyer's face in his hands, and, very gently, kissed him on the mouth. "In case you get a break around seven..." He kissed his cheek. "And I also avoid getting a late call out to a scene..." He kissed his other cheek. "We should have dinner again."

"I'd love to," Sawyer said. "You can come to my place, if you want."

Bashir grinned. "You wouldn't mind?"

“If you don’t mind the fact that I have no clean coffee cups and my sheets haven’t been changed for a week, yes.” Actually, no, he’d change them when he got home. Otherwise that was just rude.

“I can work with that. Want me to bring food?”

“Yes, please.” Sawyer gave him the address, kissed him again, kissed him one more time because fuck it, he wanted kisses and Bashir was ridiculously good at it, and then left Bashir’s house a little after seven.

He felt almost guilty about feeling so...well, good. Kurt had died yesterday; Molly had sobbed her heart out in his arms yesterday . Sawyer shouldn’t feel as if things were going well, and yet he couldn’t help it. Being with Bashir, sleeping in his arms and doing a hell of a lot more there too—it made him happy. Bashir made him happy.

Please , he thought as he ran inside and changed, throwing Bashir’s clothes into his hamper to wash before he gave them back. Please let me keep this. Sawyer wasn’t religious and he didn’t make a habit of trying to extract promises from nothing, but today he was willing to make an exception. Please let me just have time with Bashir. That’s all I want. There was too much he wanted to know to have to wait and push things back over and over, although he knew Bashir would understand.

Sawyer wanted to be worthy of that understanding.

He got to work before Nan this time, and despite his restful night he must still have looked like shit, because almost everybody gave him a wide berth. He avoided his captain, going straight to his desk to figure out where to get started this morning. Officer Doran walked up to him there a few minutes later.

“Detective Villeray,” he said, stiff and sad all at once. “I’m very sorry about what happened to Detective McKay.”

“Thank you.” That was thoughtful of him. Officer Doran didn’t leave, though, so Sawyer followed up. “Is there anything else?”

“Oh, right.” He reached into his pocket and handed over an evidence bag containing a thumb drive. “This has security camera footage from the businesses closest to Bellfield Park. Detective Walker asked for it, just in case something stands out.” He paused. “It’s a forensic copy; the real one is in an evidence locker.”

“Ah.” It probably wouldn’t yield anything useful, but it paid to be thorough. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Officer Doran left, and Sawyer took the excuse not to listen to a morning of bad true crime revelations and instead uploaded the footage to his work computer.

There were feeds from three different businesses, each one on a different approach to the park. Sawyer honed in on the hours just before and after when Bashir had called time of death and fast-forwarded through the empty minutes, checking for anything of interest. At least this late at night, there were few enough cars that he didn’t have to spend forever figuring out that there was nothing to...

To...

Wait.

That was Kurt’s Mustang, right down to the Liquor, She’ll Love It decal on the back window. He had stopped at the light right by the gas station at 12:04 at night. Feeling like he’d just swallowed a lump of burning coal, Sawyer backed the footage up and watched as his partner drive to a careful, controlled stop at the light. He must have gotten drunk after the fact, given his driving here. Or...Sawyer leaned in and looked at the light shining off that shock of short blond hair.

That wasn't Kurt. That was a woman. What was a woman doing driving Kurt's car?

He zoomed in and backed the footage up, then forward, then up again, searching for a better-lit view of the driver. Eventually he found one—it was only a few frames, but the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach told him that he knew who this woman was.

Tami Glen. The M.E.'s assistant. A woman who had every reason to loathe the people who disparaged her crush. People like Kurt.

Fuck. Sawyer felt his happy evening crumble into dust. He needed to confirm this, but once he did...

He would to have to bring her in for questioning in the death of Detective Kurt McKay.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

“Wait, I’m confused.” Tami looked up from the notes she’d been taking, her brow furrowed. “You think he died of anaphylaxis, but you’re calling it a homicide?”

Bashir gazed down at the body in front of him. “There’s no way this was a natural death.”

“Well, no. Not with the strap around his neck.” She shifted on her stool. “But it still looks like a suicide to me.”

Bashir shook his head. “I don’t think so.” He gestured at Detective McKay. “He’s got some older bruises that can probably be accounted for with that bar fight the other night, but there are some marks and abrasions here that are fresh.”

“Signs of a struggle?”

“Not... Not really? More like signs he was thrashing around.” Bashir met his assistant’s gaze. “There are nail marks on his throat, but they go under the strap.”

“He could’ve slid the strap up and down his neck while he was clawing at it.”

Bashir shook his head again. “If the strap was tight enough to be strangling him, there’d be abrasions from it, too. Especially since this kind of strap is pretty rough.”

“So...” She blinked. “Are you saying he was strangled before the strap went around his neck?”

“I’m saying he wasn’t strangled.” He gestured at McKay’s chest, which was closed

but not sutured. “Looking at his lungs and airway, there’s signs that indicate asthma or anaphylaxis. Mucous. Laryngeal edema. Petechial hemorrhaging. And I know for a fact that asthma disqualifies someone from being a police officer in this city.” He looked at Tami again. “So I’m leaning hard toward an anaphylactic reaction.”

“What do you think he reacted to? ”

Bashir shook his head. “I don’t know. Toxicology will probably have to answer that for us.”

“But then what about the strap? I’m guessing you don’t think he got stung by a bee while he was in the middle of hanging himself.”

The irony of such a thing might’ve been funny in that incredibly dark way things were funny to people in their line of work. When the decedent was Sawyer’s partner? Not so much.

He skimmed his gaze over the body, then met hers again. “I think he was dead before the strap ever touched him.”

She blinked. “And you’re calling it a homicide, so... You think someone gave him something to trigger an anaphylactic response, then put the strap on him to make it look like he killed himself?”

“That’s the only way I can explain it.” He gestured at McKay’s neck. “He was probably clawing at his throat because he couldn’t breathe due to the reaction. Then the strap was added postmortem. Aside from the scratch marks, there’s almost no bruising. There’s no Livor Mortis where I’d expect it after something like this, and the blanching on the rest of his body suggests he was moved shortly after he died.” He shook his head. “The skin on his neck is marred from the strap, but those marks and the fingernail scratches didn’t happen at the same time. Just... the more I look,

the less this appears to be strangulation, never mind hanging. Definitely not one that happened while the decedent was still conscious.”

Tami pursed her lips. “Seems like a lot of work to cover something up. Any pathologist was going to put the pieces together. Wouldn’t a killer just let the reaction do its thing?”

“I don’t think it’s a cover-up,” Bashir said. “I think it’s a game.”

“A— what? ”

He took a deep breath. “One body after another, each with an obvious cause and manner of death... until the autopsy.” He stared at McKay with unfocused eyes, recalling what Sawyer had told him about the theory that the killer was toying with investigators. “This is someone playing a game. It has to be. They enjoy seeing if we can figure out the puzzle.”

“Oh my God.” Her voice came out hollow. “That’s... that’s really fucked up.”

“Yeah,” he said absently. “It is.” Again and again he told himself it wasn’t his job to put the pieces together. Just figure out what killed the person, turn the evidence over to the cops, and let them take it from there. Same as always.

But much like he couldn’t help piecing together what led to a death, he couldn’t help doing the same here.

“If this person gets caught,” Tami said, “they’re looking at capital murder charges. It’s all premeditated. Like, hella premeditated.” She chafed her arms. “What kind of sick fucker does... hell, any of this?”

“The kind of person who will murder the husband of a dying cancer patient and dress

it up like a suicide,” Bashir said grimly. “One sick fucker who is absolutely sure they aren’t going to get caught, never mind convicted.”

He’d known for a while now this had to be a serial killer. It was pretty obvious, after all. But there was something viscerally disturbing about getting closer to understanding a person capable of doing shit like this. Not that he knew who it was or understood what was driving them, but he was willing to bet this was a legitimate psychopath and a sadist. Someone who seemed to enjoy toying with the living more than the dead; the deaths had all been relatively quick—even Kurt’s—not the work of someone who enjoyed protracted torture. No, the misery came from the survivors and also—

He jumped as the thought slammed into his mind.

Their killer wasn’t torturing victims and fucking with loved ones. Not as a primary motive, anyway.

They were, as Sawyer had hypothesized, doing this to fuck with investigators.

Specifically...

To fuck with Bashir himself.

The county medical examiner. The only person in a position to find the hidden pieces. The person whose job it was to disassemble the victim and find the needle in the haystack—or the bullet in the spine or the allergen in the detective—and conclude that the cause of death wasn’t what it seemed.

His thoughts whipped through his last few autopsies outside this string of murders. How he’d taken extra time on each. How he’d second-guessed every observation he made and conclusion he drew. How every time he landed on some wild and bizarre

cause of death when another had seemed obvious from the start, he doubted and stressed over all his other conclusions.

Had the excessive number of pills really been the cause of death? Or had there been something else lurking somewhere?

Had that elderly man's heart really given out? Or had one of the many needle punctures in his skin been the means of delivering some obscure, barely detectable poison?

Had that twenty-year-old's blunt force trauma injuries been from the car that struck him? Or had Bashir missed signs of an assault?

The urge to yank open his files and scrutinize every autopsy he'd ever performed was almost overwhelming. So was the anger, because he was sure this was exactly what the killer was hoping for—to screw with Bashir's mind.

How the hell did I get on a serial killer's radar?

His mind was about to go screaming down that road when the morgue's front door opened. Tami hopped off her perch and helped him cover the body. Even when he was mentally spiraling, the instinct to protect the decedent's dignity was strong enough to knock him into motion.

"Bashir?" Sawyer's voice. Bashir expected to be relieved—both that Sawyer was here and that they'd thought to cover McKay—but something about his tone had Bashir on edge.

"Be right back," he said to Tami, and after he'd stripped off his protective gear, he strode up to the front vestibule.

As soon as he reached the doorway, he skidded to a halt .

Sawyer stood there alongside Detective Walker, who Bashir recognized but hadn't interacted with much. Behind them, two uniformed officers.

It was Sawyer's expression that brought him up short, though. Gone was any trace of the affectionate, vulnerable man who'd been in Bashir's bed last night. Gone was the grieving partner. His eyes were hard and his jaw was set—Sawyer was completely in cop mode.

Bashir cleared his throat. "What can I do for you?"

"You're not the one we need to see." Sawyer sounded official but faintly apologetic. "We need to speak to Ms. Glen."

"Ms.—" Bashir blinked. "My assistant?"

Sawyer nodded. "Tami Glen. We have—"

"What's going on?" Tami appeared beside Bashir, eyes wide. "I heard my name."

Sawyer fixed the friendly-but-serious cop expression on her. "Ms. Glen, I need you to come upstairs and answer some questions."

She balked. "Some questions? About what?"

"We'll discuss all that upstairs." Sawyer gestured at the door. "Would you come with us, please?"

Behind him, the officers straightened, their gazes focused on her.

Bashir turned to her.

She'd gone almost as pale as one of the bodies waiting to be autopsied. "What's... I don't understand. Questions about what?"

There were cops who thought that kind of pushback was a sign of guilt, but Bashir knew—and he hoped Sawyer knew—it was a natural fear. Even a kid who'd done nothing wrong was going to get nervous when he was called down to the principal's office. When a homicide detective showed up and wanted to "ask a few questions"—who wouldn't get nervous?

Bashir put a hand on her back to reassure her, and he asked Sawyer, "Is she under arrest?"

"No," came the quiet response. "This is an interview—not an interrogation."

"Can she have a lawyer present?"

The cops behind Sawyer fidgeted, but Sawyer nodded. "Absolutely."

Bashir looked at Tami again. "I trust him, okay?"

Her lips tightened. "I can't afford a lawyer."

"I'll pay for it."

She blinked. "Really?"

"Yes."

Tami chewed her lip. She glanced back and forth between the cops and Bashir, and

finally, she nodded and said in a meek voice, “Okay.”

Sawyer relaxed minutely. To the officers, he said, “Set her up in conference room three. Anything she needs or wants, hook her up.”

The other detective beckoned to Tami. “Would you come with us, please?”

Tami hesitated, but then she followed. A moment later, everyone was gone from the morgue except for Bashir and Sawyer.

As soon as the door closed, Sawyer shut his eyes and pushed out a long breath, letting the mask slip and revealing the fatigue that had been piling on for the past few days. “I’m sorry.” He met Bashir’s eyes. “I really am. I didn’t—”

Bashir shook his head. “Don’t be. You’re just doing your job. ”

Sawyer tensed. “You don’t even know what I’m asking her about or what I have to go on.”

“No, but I trust you. If you’ve got a reason to talk to her, then...” He gestured toward the door.

“Still. I’m sorry.”

“I know.” Bashir exhaled. “You know neither of us should be working on this case, right? We’re way too close to it.”

“I shouldn’t,” Sawyer acknowledged. “But this connection to Tami—it could be nothing, so—”

“She’s not the only problem.”

Sawyer's eyebrows rose.

Bashir explained what he'd figured out while autopsying Detective McKay. When he'd finished, he said, "Maybe I'm just going fucking insane, and maybe I don't know enough about the rest of the case, so I've got tunnel vision. I don't know." He rolled his stiff shoulders. "But I can't help thinking I'm the target. Like... this is all some kind of game to fuck with me."

On some level, he'd hoped Sawyer would dismiss that theory outright. Tell him he was seeing things that weren't there. Show him some cards that debunked any possibility that this had anything to do with Bashir.

Instead, Sawyer gnawed his lip and stared at the floor between them.

Bashir tilted his head. "What?"

"I, um..." Sawyer looked at him through his lashes. "You may be right. Honestly, it's the closest thing we have to a working theory at this point."

Arching an eyebrow, Bashir prompted, "But...?"

"But..." Sawyer took a deep breath. "If that is what's happening here, then it doesn't look good for your assistant."

Bashir's stomach dropped so hard and so fast, he genuinely expected to hear a splat on the floor. "What do you mean?"

Sighing, Sawyer leaned against the reception desk. "We found footage of Tami driving Kurt's car near the location where his body was found. Likely around the time he was murdered."

“Are you...” Bashir shook his head. “No . There’s no way. There’s just—”

“Bashir.” Sawyer sounded for all the world like he was about to collapse under the weight of his exhaustion. “I don’t like it either. I watched and rewatched it a dozen times because I didn’t want to believe it. But it’s her.”

“It’s... holy fuck.”

“I’m sorry.” Sawyer reached for Bashir’s waist, but Bashir straightened and pulled back. Sawyer froze.

Bashir showed his palms. “We really can’t. We shouldn’t have been before, but now... You know we can’t.”

He wanted Sawyer to stubbornly insist they could make it work. That it wouldn’t compromise the investigation or hurt their credibility.

Please tell me we can, he wanted to beg. Because right now, you’re the only thing that makes sense in my world.

But Sawyer retreated half a step. “You’re right. You’re... I’m sorry. You’re right.”

Damn it.

Sawyer ran a hand through his hair, and Bashir’s fingers tingled with the absence of that cool, soft texture between them.

Fortunately, Sawyer was more professional than he was, and he rallied, pulling himself back into cop mode. Clearing his throat, he gestured past Bashir. “Did you find anything on Kurt’s autopsy?”

Well, that chased away any romantic pining he had going on, didn't it?

"Actually, yeah." Bashir shifted his weight. "It, um... It wasn't a suicide."

Sawyer's eyes widened. Horror? Hope? Some combo of the two? "He was murdered?"

"Looks that way, yeah."

"And..." Sawyer cringed a little. "Do you think it's our guy? Our serial killer?"

Bashir nodded slowly. "I would be very surprised if it wasn't."

"Jesus Christ," Sawyer breathed, wiping a hand over his face. "It never fucking ends, does it?"

"Tell me about it."

They exchanged looks. Bashir wanted so, so badly to reel Sawyer in and pretend none of this existed for a moment or two. They didn't even have to get frisky—just hold on to each other. Maybe a kiss, but that seemed like it might be too much.

Sawyer broke eye contact first, and he cleared his throat. "I need to go talk to Tami."

Bashir nodded numbly. "Okay. I need to finish up down here."

The shudder that went through Sawyer said he'd read between the lines— I need to finish autopsying your partner.

With one more shared glance and not another word, Sawyer left the morgue.

Alone, Bashir sagged harder against the doorframe. He might have to call in Boyce today. Tap out and let his colleague do the other waiting autopsies. God knew he wasn't in any shape to do it.

Tami was a person of interest. Quite possibly a suspect. Sawyer and Bashir, out of necessity, had stepped back to a professional distance. Bashir was second-guessing every autopsy he'd ever performed. Hell, every incision he'd ever made.

More and more, he was believing this serial killer's entire mission was to mentally wreck him.

And goddamn them, they were succeeding.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

The hard-ass, bad-cop version of interviewing people had never been Sawyer's strong suit. He wasn't the sort of person who enjoyed pushing his version of events and breaking someone else's will; in his experience, those people had been the worst kinds of directors, and they made pretty bad detectives too. He preferred to take a cooperative approach: show the suspect certain pieces of evidence, tell them the conclusions being drawn, then give them time to explain. It worked way more frequently than he'd first expected it to, especially given that so many people lawyered up in an effort to prevent just those incautious explanations.

Sawyer hadn't expected Tami to be a challenge in the interview room. She didn't like him, that much was plain, but she also didn't seem to be a very good liar. While Nan showed her the video of her driving Kurt's car, Sawyer watched Tami's face carefully. He waited for the spot where they got a good look through the window, and—there. The tiny furrow in her brow, the way the corner of her lip trembled .

That was her, all right.

"You can see why we had to bring you in," Sawyer said once the video ended. "It's very clear that you're driving, Ms. Glen."

"I..." She shook her head. "No, that's not me."

"It is, though." Sawyer tapped his left ear. "Even if the look at your face wasn't enough, those earrings are definitely yours." The video was grainy but the earrings she'd been wearing—and was wearing now—were big and distinctive.

She gave him a half-hearted shrug. "Anyone could wear hoops like that."

“But we’re not talking about anyone. We’re talking about you.”

Tami shook her head again and shifted in the chair. “It wasn’t me. I’ve never driven that car in my life. I didn’t do anything.”

Sawyer leaned a little closer, tilting his head and affecting curiosity. “What is it that you think we’re suggesting you did?” He gestured at the screen. “All we’ve shown you is footage of you behind the wheel of a car.”

Tami opened her mouth to speak, but froze, her eyes wide and some color slipping out of her face. The oh fuck was plainly evident. She rallied quickly, though, and she crossed her arms as she sat up. “You wanted to talk to me about—”

“We never told you why we wanted to talk,” Nan jumped in. “Only that we had some questions.”

Tami’s eyes flicked back and forth between them. “But it’s... Why else would...” She swallowed hard as if trying not to throw up.

Now that she was off-guard, Sawyer pressed. “Ms. Glen, you already stated that you don’t have an alibi for last night. ”

“I told you I was at home—”

“We know you weren’t at home,” Nan snapped before Tami could start lying to them again. “We got access to the Ring camera from—”

“You can’t do that!” Sawyer was a bit surprised by her sudden flare of temper. This was more like the Tami who’d snarked at him every time he entered the morgue, rather than the quiet, subdued version he’d seen so far today. “You can’t access the cameras in my home without a warrant!”

“If you’d let me finish,” Nan said through gritted teeth, “you’d know that we were given access to the Ring camera that belongs to your neighbor . She got clear footage of you leaving your home at ten p.m. last night and not returning until after two.”

Tami shivered but didn’t quite lose her newfound spine. “You’re lying. Cops are allowed to lie to get confessions, I know that. I’m not stupid though; I’m not going to fall for it. Ring cameras don’t record all the time.”

“They do if you’re security-conscious and pay for an upgraded policy,” Sawyer said, already pulling up the video from Tami’s neighbor. Getting this footage had been a lucky break; the neighbor had been more than willing to cooperate once they learned that Tami Glen was a person of interest in a case. Apparently, she never picked up after her dog.

Sawyer pushed play, and they all watched in silence as the camera showed Tami exiting her front door, heading down to the car on the street in a hurry, and driving off faster than was legal. “That’s you leaving.” He skipped ahead to where Nan had already keyed up the next part of the recording. “And here’s you coming home at two.” And she was staggering in this footage, either incredibly drunk or incredibly exhausted .

If she’d been hauling Kurt’s body around, the exhaustion would make a lot of sense.

Stop it. Sawyer couldn’t let himself focus on that part of things. If he thought in terms of what had been done to his partner, if he thought about the sheer terrible unfairness of his death and the breakdown it had caused in his wife, he wouldn’t be able to keep his temper in check. He shouldn’t have even been here. He shouldn’t have been involved in this at all. But this was his case, damn it, so he’d stay until someone physically dragged him away from it.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Tami said after a moment, but her fire was fading

now. “So I went out for a drive. That’s not a crime.”

“It’s a crime when you’re driving the car of a police detective who’d just been murdered .” Nan crossed her arms over her chest. “That’s the assessment of your friend Dr. Ramin, isn’t it? Don’t you trust his judgment?”

Tami scowled. “Bashir has nothing to do with any of this.”

“I didn’t say he did,” Nan agreed, which—good, because Sawyer wasn’t happy with the direction she was taking things. “But unless you’re going to argue with his skills as an M.E., then the verdict stands—Detective McKay was murdered.”

“We’re not saying you killed him,” Sawyer said in a calm voice. It was important that one of them stay calm. “All we want to know is how you came to be in his car last night, Ms. Glen.” He leaned forward slightly, placing his elbows on the table. “Sometimes things happen that are outside our control,” he said, doing his best to project trustworthiness. Tami Glen didn’t like him...but Sawyer knew how to seem like someone that she could trust. “Sometimes life goes off the rails. I know you’re not a killer, Tami. I trust Bashir’s judgment, and I know that he likes you.”

That brought a sheen of tears to her eyes, which gave Sawyer a surge of satisfaction. There was a hook. Now he needed to pull.

“Bashir thinks you’re a good worker, a good person. He was stunned when we had to take you in earlier. I think he’s right about you, Tami. I think this is a case of you being forced to do something you clearly didn’t want to do.” He lowered his voice a bit. “Who made you take part in this? How did they get you to do it? Whatever they have on you, we can help you.” Confidence, assuredness, comfort. “We can make sure they leave you alone. Everything you’re afraid of, all the consequences of your actions—the things you had no choice in—all that can be mitigated. You can get through this with a clean conscience, Tami.”

“I—my conscience is fine.”

Oh, it wasn't though. Sawyer knew the signs of someone who was on the verge of losing their shit, and Tami was getting there. If he could get her there before her lawyer showed up and she remembered not to talk...maybe it was time for another pivot.

“I called up Felix Daughtry this morning.” He waited to see if she would react, but she was looking down at the table, her hands passive in her lap. “He runs the Stab in the Light podcast. Do you ever listen to it?”

For a second he thought she was going to deny it, but then... “Yes.”

“Mm.” Sawyer nodded. “You know, that podcast has been a real puzzle to me. The things Felix knows about the murders, all the details that he's been able to put in there—it's stuff he shouldn't have access to. I figure he's got to have an accomplice, either on the police force or at the morgue, who's been feeding him information.”

Tami raised her eyes defiantly. “I've never spoken with that man in my entire life. You're fishing with bad bait, Detective Villeray, and I'm not going to bite.”

“We don't need you to,” Nan said, venom in her voice as she grinned across the table. “See, that's the thing about a conspiracy—it takes everyone being equally able to shut their damn mouths to make it work.”

Tami frowned. “What are you talking about? There's no conspiracy, I'm not—I mean—”

“No, really, I want you to shut up for this part,” Nan said. “I listened to a lot of fucking podcast episodes and endured a phone conversation more aggravating than talking with my ex for this, so I'm gonna lay it out for you, okay? Over the past three

months, Felix has made sure to thank a ‘special researcher’ on many of his episodes. In fact, he thanked this person on every episode that involved analysis of a body in some way. The sort of thing a medical examiner or one of their assistants might know about.”

Tami was going to twist her fingers into knots at this rate. “I—I’m serious, I’ve never talked with him. Ever.”

“Maybe you haven’t talked to him face-to-face,” Nan allowed. “But as soon as I told Felix that we had a member of the staff at the city morgue in custody, he was suddenly more than willing to share, of his own volition, a string of emails between himself and—well, I’m sure you can see where I’m going with this.” Nan brought up a new screen on the computer, with an email selected that bore a familiar, very formal byline. “You really shouldn’t have used your work account for breaking the law,” she said with faux-commiseration .

“I didn’t!” Tami’s eyes were wide with horror as she looked at the email. “I didn’t—I—it’s not me!”

“Then who is it?” Sawyer asked, coming back to the fore as Nan effortlessly read his cues and ceded control of the interview to him. The ease of it gave him a little secondhand guilt when he remembered how hard it could be to do interviews like this with Kurt. “Who’s making you do this, Tami? Who’s forcing your hand? I know this sort of thing isn’t like you. You’re not the kind of person who would break the rules at work like that.”

“Especially not when it could reflect badly on your supervisor,” Nan chimed in. “You wouldn’t want Dr. Ramin to get in trouble on your behalf, would you?”

Sawyer stiffened. Wait, what?

“Of course I don’t want to get Bashir in trouble!” Tami protested. “This has nothing to do with him!”

“So who does it have to do with?” Nan asked. “You want us to leave your boss alone? Then you better give us another name—someone else to focus on—or Dr. Ramin could be brought up on charges just as easily as you.”

That was...no, that absolutely wasn’t true. Sawyer turned and looked at Nan, who was still staring at Tami, unflinching.

“Think of the damage you could do by not speaking,” Nan said. “The damage to his career. You think he’s ever going to forgive you for that?”

“Nan.” That was Sawyer’s knock-it-off tone of voice. He hoped she listened to him.

Tami’s hand shook as she pressed it against her mouth. She didn’t speak, but tears spilled from her eyes and down her cheeks, then onto the table. “Can I have some water?” she asked in a tiny voice. “I really need some water.”

“You get water when we get answers, you— ”

“Sure,” Sawyer said. He felt the heat of Nan’s glare against the side of his face but stood up without acknowledging it. “We’ll bring you some water in just a minute, okay?” He left the room and Nan followed, slamming it shut behind them.

“What the fuck was that?” she demanded as soon as they had some space. “That woman knows way more than she’s letting on—she’s on the verge of giving her contact up! You don’t stop a successful interrogation for a water break!”

“First, it’s an interview, not an interrogation,” Sawyer said. “And either way, we don’t have any reason not to give her water. She needed a chance to regain a little

equilibrium. Not to mention, you—”

“No,” Nan insisted. “You don’t give murder suspects—people who are suspected of murdering your damn partner—a chance to regain their goddamn equilibrium! You push them until they break, then you mop up the pieces well enough to keep the DA from breathing down your neck about police brutality. You think we’re going to get the chance to apply that kind of pressure once her lawyer shows up?” Nan narrowed her eyes. “Wait. Is this about what I said about Dr. Ramin?”

Sawyer was thrown. “Excuse me?”

“Are you going easy on her because she works for him? I swear to God, Sawyer, if you’re throwing this just because you’re sleeping with her boss—”

“This has nothing to do with Bashir,” he said firmly. “A break gives her a chance to contemplate her options, that’s all. She knows we have her on camera in Kurt’s car, she knows we can charge her with unauthorized disclosure of classified information—”

“A decent lawyer can argue circumstantial evidence with the first one, and the second carries a max of five years. And no judge I’ve ever heard of has bothered with sentencing someone for that long without priors.” Nan pointed a finger at him. “You’re fucking this up, and if she ends up getting away because of your soft hand and hard dick, we’re going to have problems.”

Right, because you’re doing such a brilliant job.

The hell of it was, though, Nan was kind of correct. She was within her rights to push Tami in her soft parts, and Bashir was clearly a soft spot for her. Still... “Let me handle it now,” he said. “Text me when her lawyer shows up.” He filled a small plastic cup at the water cooler, then headed back into the room before Nan could do

more than throw up her hands.

Tami was wiping her eyes clear as he came in. “Thanks,” she said when she saw the water. “Do you have a tissue? My mascara has to be a wreck.”

Wrong foot, wrong foot.

Sawyer needed to regain some ground. “No tissue, sorry. We need to—”

“Please? It’s running into my eyes, I can barely keep them open.”

“Use your shirt,” he advised.

Tami scowled at him. “I thought you were nice! Why won’t you do one little thing for me?”

Because you’re trying to delay me, and it’s working.

“I can’t do anything else for you until you do something for me, Ms. Glen.”

“What, like confess?” She snorted. “No way. I didn’t kill anyone, and I’m not talking about the car thing. For all I know, you used a computer to fake that. Cops will do anything to get a confession, but you can’t prove it’s me or you would have already charged me.”

Shit, Nan had been right. They should have pressed harder when she was low. “We don’t have to charge you to maintain you as a person of interest in the case.”

“Do that, then.” She stood up. “If you’re done, I’m leaving.” She mustered a little smirk from somewhere. “Bashir won’t be happy with you when he hears about what you’ve done today.”

“You think he’s happy that you’re fucking around with his work?” Sawyer asked coldly. “Sit down, Ms. Glen. We’re not done yet.”

“But you haven’t charged me. You said I was free to go.”

“I did and you are,” he said calmly. “But that could change. I can hold you for forty-eight hours without charging you if I want to.”

Her eyes widened. “You can’t do that!”

“I don’t want to, but I absolutely will if you don’t sit down right now.” He was treading on thin ice, but he didn’t apologize for it.

She sat, a wary look coming across her face once more. “This is pointless,” she muttered.

“I agree. I think you’re absolutely capable of murder, myself.” Sawyer leaned in a bit. “I just don’t think you’re smart enough to pull off something like this.”

“I’m smart! You don’t get where I am without being smart!”

He shrugged. “Sure, you’re smart, but you’re not dedicated. The way your engagement fell apart speaks to that.” He watched her start to go red. “You tried to trade up and failed. Your fiancé left you, and you’re still working for the man you confessed was not only the reason your engagement failed, but he also turned you down. You’re probably furious.”

“I—what—”

“I get it. I might be mad too, if I drove my life off a bridge for no good reason. No husband, a boss who doesn’t trust you...yeah, you’d definitely try to pin these

killings on him if you were good enough.”

“How dare you!”

“But you’re not. All you’re doing is making it look like someone smarter is pulling your strings. Are you so desperate to ruin Bashir’s career that you’ll sit here in silence instead of telling the truth?”

Now the tears resurfaced. Sawyer didn’t care this time. “Do you hate him that much?” he continued. “So much that you want to see him ruined at all costs? So much that you’ll smile when he’s investigated and mistakes are found in his files—mistakes that you yourself put there?”

“I didn’t!” Tami insisted.

“How you can hate a man you once loved enough that your engagement ended over it is just...it’s appalling on so many levels. And now you’re going to get his license to practice medicine pulled for no other reason than—”

“ Stop it! ” she shrieked, standing up and hitting her hands on the table. “Stop saying that! I don’t want Bashir to be hurt! I love Bashir! I would never let him—”

The door burst open. “What is going on here?” Tami’s attorney rounded the table to put a quelling hand on his client’s shoulder. “This is absolutely disgusting! Is this how the police conduct their interviews in this department? My client is giving you the courtesy of her time, and you treat her like this?”

Sawyer glanced over his shoulder at Nan, who grimaced and mouthed “Too fast to text.”

“I ought to sue the department!”

“Suing us won’t make your client any less guilty,” Nan said, taking over the argument. It ended in mutual threats but none actually triggered, with the lawyer leading Tami out and into the lobby...where Bashir was waiting.

Tami wailed and ran forward, throwing herself into Bashir’s arms. “They’re saying such terr—terrible things about you,” she got out. “Terrible things!” She wept long black streaks across his camel-colored coat, and when Bashir looked over at Sawyer with betrayal on his face, a cold knot began to grow in the pit of his stomach.

Shit. Things were about to get really fucking complicated.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

There were a lot of reasons why Bashir didn't, as a rule, date cops. Erratic, demanding hours made it impossible to see each other. Conflicts of interest could arise if they were both involved in the same case (not that he'd had any experience with that recently). There was a high probability of a violent and untimely death.

And, in Bashir's experience, cops were often shockingly ruthless about doing whatever it took to solve a case. That could be a good thing—some criminals were only busted because of extraordinarily tenacious and creative policework—but it could also raise some serious red flags about a cop's morals and ethics.

Such as, say, when a cop faced down a terrified young person and lied through his goddamned teeth in order to wring a confession out of her. That Sawyer had apparently lied to Tami about Bashir was just the dog shit icing on this garbage fire cake.

Resting a hand on her back while she cried on his shoulder, Bashir glared hard at Sawyer. "What the fuck is going on?"

Sawyer put up his hands and presented his best there's-been-a-misunderstanding face. "It's not what it sounds—"

"You fucking liar!" Tami whirled out of Bashir's arms and stabbed a finger at Sawyer, very nearly hitting him in the chest. "You both told me I had to talk—confess to shit I didn't even do—or Bashir would lose his job. Don't even try to tell me you didn't, you lying pig."

Bashir narrowed his eyes at Sawyer. "Seriously?"

“I... That’s...” Sawyer stammered. “Look. I can explain the—”

“Sure you can,” Bashir growled. “You can feed us only the information we need to know for you to get information out of her.” He tsked and shook his head. “I know you have to pull shady crap to solve cases, but I didn’t think you’d drag me into it.”

Sawyer’s features hardened. “So you think I should handle things differently because I’m involved with you? Let our relationship affect my investigation?”

Okay. Yeah. He made a valid point.

But so did Bashir.

He let Tami go and stepped around her, putting himself between her and Sawyer as he stepped up into Sawyer’s face. “I understand you have to be unbiased. I understand you have to do whatever it takes to find this goddamned killer. But if you have to weaponize my job and my professional reputation to manipulate one of my subordinates into a bullshit confession, then maybe I’m not the one whose professional reputation should be called into question.”

Sawyer’s lips parted.

Bashir didn’t wait for a response. He turned, wrapped an arm around Tami’s shoulders, and herded her down the hall .

All he heard behind him was the other detective murmuring, “Let them go.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he said to Tami.

She leaned into him and sniffled. “They really think I killed those people. I... You know I’d never kill anyone, right?”

“I know.”

Deep down, he was more conflicted about that than he wanted to be. Not because he actually believed Tami was capable of murder. No, it was because he'd been doing this long enough to know that most people who killed were exactly the kind of people everyone assumed were incapable of doing so.

But this wasn't a crime of passion. This wasn't the one-time incident that had shellshocked people telling cameras that “He was always so quiet” or “I never imagined she could do such a thing.” This was a serial killer. Most of them had tells. They were “off” in a way that had people keeping their distance and wondering how long until that creepy weirdo's name was in the headlines.

Then again, he thought as he led Tami into an empty conference room, some of the people who knew Ted Bundy were shocked when he was arrested.

Still, Bashir had a hell of a time believing she could be behind these terrible killings. It just didn't make sense.

In the conference room, he sat her down with a cup of coffee and some tissues. Her attorney joined them a moment later, and Bashir stepped out to give them some privacy.

In the hallway, he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. Was this just the universe getting back at him for thinking it was simpler to work with the dead than the living? Maybe. It really did have a fucked-up sense of humor sometimes.

Footsteps approached. Dress shoes, but not Sawyer's. No, this was the clomp of thick heels.

Bracing himself and hoping this was just someone passing through, he opened his

eyes and turned his head. Detective Nan Walker was coming up the hall, and she was laser-focused on him.

Damn.

She stopped in front of him and gestured at the door. “Is she...?”

Bashir nodded. “She’s talking with her lawyer.”

“Good.” She stared at the closed door for a moment before turning to him. “Listen, I don’t want to put my nose where it doesn’t belong. This thing between you and Sawyer—it’s none of my business, and I’m not getting involved.”

He pressed his lips together, biting back a retort that there wasn’t a thing between him and Sawyer. Not after today. Fuck that guy.

Detective Walker must’ve seen the anger rolling across his face, because her expression softened. “I was part of that interview, Dr. Ramin. It... I don’t think Sawyer is quite as much of a villain here as it sounds.”

He cocked a brow. “How so?”

“The thread Sawyer and I were pulling was that someone put Tami up to some of the activities that have her under suspicion. We may have laid it on thicker than you would have liked, but our point was that if she didn’t come clean about who was behind it, then it was quite possibly going to fall back on you.” She shrugged. “And... I mean, we’re not wrong.”

Bashir’s blood turned cold. “How in the world could any of this fall back on me? She works for me, but that doesn’t mean I dictate her life outside of the morgue.”

“Of course not. But there are emails between someone in the morgue and that podcaster, Felix. Someone who used a morgue computer.”

“What?” Bashir leaned against the wall for balance as his knees tried to wobble out from under him. “The leaks—they’re coming from the morgue?”

“Yes. And when we have footage of Ms. Glen driving the vehicle of a victim on the night of the murder when she has no connection to him...” Another apologetic shrug. “You can see why we’re concerned about her involvement.”

Bashir swallowed. “So you and Sawyer tried to get her to either tell you I put her up to it, or admit she’d done it herself.”

Walker nodded. “Or tell us who did.”

He closed his eyes again and sighed. It was an underhanded tactic, but he could follow the logic. As much as he didn’t like them backing Tami into a corner like that, dangling his potential guilt over her head to convince her to crack, he saw what they were going for.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Ramin,” Walker said gently. “We have to follow where the evidence takes us, and right now, the evidence is leading us to Ms. Glen.”

He met her gaze. “It can’t be her.” God, he sounded like a family member in denial, insisting the person had to be innocent despite the mountain of reasons to believe otherwise. “That isn’t...” It isn’t who she is? She isn’t capable? She’s not a killer? How many people have said that about how many murderers? “Fuck.”

“I know. This isn’t easy for any of us.” She paused. “Including Sawyer.”

Bashir winced. “Yeah. I’m sure it’s not. But I’ll take it as a pretty unmistakable sign

that us being involved with each other is just going to cause problems.”

Her eyes widened. “I’m sure you can both learn to navigate—”

“No.” He shook his head and shouldered himself off the wall. “There’s no working around a job where one of us has to...” He made a face. “Just no.”

She looked like she was going to argue, but then she murmured, “Well, that’s between you and Sawyer. Not me.”

He was about to say there was nothing between him and Sawyer anymore.

But of course that was the moment the man himself swept around the corner, locked on to Bashir and Walker, and strode toward them. There was no escape, and damn it, professional considerations meant Bashir should try to escape.

Sawyer gave Bashir a wary look, but then cleared his throat and gestured with a manila folder in his hand. “We’ve, um... We’ve got some more information.”

Bashir and Walker watched him silently.

Sawyer shifted a little as he opened the folder. “We’ve had some officers doing more digging. Looking for any connections between Ms. Glen and the other victims.”

Bashir’s gut clenched.

Sawyer flicked his eyes toward him, and the uneasiness in his expression didn’t help Bashir relax at all. It might’ve been because of the new and alien tension between them, but Bashir doubted it very much.

“There’s CCTV footage of her at or near three of the crime scenes around the times

of the murders.” Sawyer slid out a couple of glossy black-and-white images. One showed Tami entering what looked like a supermarket through a rear Employees Only door. The other caught her on the sidewalk near the park where McKay was found. Yet another entering the parking garage where the victim had been found in the stairwell.

After both Walker and Bashir had taken a look at the images, Sawyer put them back in the folder and pulled out another, this one showing Tami walking past the front desk of a gym. “This is her usual gym, but it turns out it’s also the usual gym of our drowning victim, Christopher White.”

Bashir breathed a couple of curses. Denials wanted to tumble off his lips. How this was all circumstantial and meant nothing. On their own, no, the images weren’t incriminating. Put together, though? Not good. Not good at all.

And Sawyer wasn’t done.

“There aren’t any cameras near the first two crime scenes.” He shuffled some photos. “But there are traffic cameras near them.”

Again, the images were benign and not at all incriminating on their own. But Bashir recognized the timestamps. He also recognized the street names printed on each image. Highway 72 was the last major thoroughfare before the county road leading to Gilroy Upworth’s residence. And Morris Boulevard was the only way to get from downtown to Parson’s Creek Road, where Christopher White—who apparently went to the same gym as Tami—had been found.

Bashir sagged against the wall again, rubbing the back of his stiffening neck. “Fucking hell.”

“I know,” Sawyer whispered. “And it, um...” He thumbed the folder and chewed his

lip. “You’re not going to like this one, Bashir. I’m sorry.”

Bashir searched his former lover’s eyes. Behind the practiced mask of empathetic cop, there was genuine sympathy and regret. Wasn’t there?

Maybe. It didn’t matter. Sawyer was another cop now. A detective looking to break a case, not the man who’d been steadily convincing Bashir to drop his defenses and give him a chance.

Of course he got me to let down my guard. That’s literally his fucking job.

Bashir’s mouth suddenly tasted sour. “Okay. What have you got?”

“I sent an officer by her apartment building with a warrant for records of packages received by the front desk.” He grimaced and pulled some images and printouts free. “Bashir, she got a package from a company that distributes snake venom.” Shaking his head, he whispered, “I can’t overlook that.”

Bashir took the papers.

A photo of a package log with Tami’s distinctive loopy signature beside a tracking number.

A screenshot of a shipping website with the tracking information entered.

A return address to Fangz Direct.

And an emailed receipt from Fangz Direct showing a successful credit card payment from one Tamara Lynn Glen for one vial of black mamba venom.

Bashir pushed out a breath and shoved everything back at Sawyer.

There was no way. Tami wasn't a killer. She wasn't .

But he couldn't deny the connections Sawyer was making. Sawyer and Walker were professionally obligated to pull every thread they found, and to keep pulling them until they solved the case. It was their job. Like Bashir, they owed it to the victims and their families to leave no stone unturned, no matter what ugliness they found underneath.

And no matter what tactics they had to use to crack through the killer's defenses.

"I'm sorry, Bashir," Sawyer said again. "I really am."

"I know," Bashir whispered without looking at him. He meant it, too. He didn't think Sawyer was being malicious to him or to Tami. "Let me know if you have any more updates."

With that, he brushed past both of them and headed up the hall.

And for the second time today, he heard Walker murmur, "Let him go."

Regardless of what was happening with Tami, Bashir had a job to do. Usually, he could throw himself into his work and ignore anything else, but that was a tougher task today because there was no separating that work from what was happening. His assistant was gone. His own autopsies and forensic reports would quite possibly be what sealed her fate.

No, Bashir, he reminded himself as he went through the motions of a routine autopsy, she sealed her own fate when she killed all those people.

He swallowed hard behind his mask. He rarely got queasy during an autopsy anymore—though everybody got a little green when the body had been bloating in

the August heat for a couple of weeks—but today, he may as well have been back in med school. Back when that first cadaver had sent his stomach into his throat and kept it there for the whole semester .

It had nothing to do with the body in front of him, though, and everything to do with the trail of corpses his own assistant had left behind. He wanted everything to go back to normal. He wanted her here, perched on her stool, taking notes for him, and sometimes helping out when he needed an extra pair of hands.

Her musical voice echoed in his ears: “I love watching you work, Bash.”

He’d chuckled, glancing up at her. “You love watching me take apart a body?”

“No, no.” She’d actually giggled at that. “I mean watching your mind work. It’s just... You see things, you know? The little details that anyone else would miss.”

In the present, Bashir froze, the decedent’s liver heavy in his hands.

Other moments flickered through his mind like a film highlight reel, zeroing in on moments when Tami had been assisting him.

“No other pathologist would’ve caught that. No way.”

“The way you think is mind-blowing.”

“It’s like watching someone figure out the world’s most complicated puzzle!”

He lowered the organ back into the abdominal cavity and leaned his hands on the exam table as the world rocked beneath him. Another conversation—this one much more recent—lurched into the forefront of his mind like his breakfast wanted to lurch up into his mouth:

“Seems like a lot of work to cover something up,” Tami had said. “Any pathologist was going to put the pieces together. Wouldn’t a killer just let the reaction do its thing?”

“I don’t think it’s a cover up,” Bashir remembered saying over Detective McKay’s autopsy. “I think it’s a game. ”

“A— what ?”

“One body after another, each with an obvious cause and manner of death... until the autopsy.” He’d stared down at the body. “This is someone playing a game. It has to be. They enjoy seeing if we can figure out the puzzle.”

“Oh my God.” She’d sounded genuinely horrified. “That’s... that’s really fucked-up.”

“Yeah. It is.”

“If this person gets caught,” Tami had mused, “they’re looking at capital murder charges. It’s all premeditated. Like, hella premeditated.” She’d chafed her arms. “What kind of sick fucker does... hell, any of this?”

That’s a good question, Tami, he thought in the present. A really fucking good question .

Jesus, how had he been so stupid? So oblivious? He’d known for a long time that she had a crush on him, but it had always seemed fairly innocent, even after it led to her broken engagement.

Maybe that crush wasn’t so innocent after all. Maybe after he’d gently rejected her playful flirtation over the years, she hadn’t gotten the message like he’d naively

thought. Maybe she'd been stewing this whole time, waiting to exact revenge.

Or worse, obsessing. Clinging. Looking for ways to get more of him and what she wanted.

"I love watching your mind work," she'd said hundreds of times and hundreds of ways. "You're amazing, Bashir."

He shuddered as that green first-year med student feeling intensified, threatening to send him looking for something to puke in.

What if she really was obsessed with him, and all these people were dead just so she could get some sick thrill out of watching him figure out how they'd been killed? What if this—

The morgue's side entrance banged open, startling Bashir so bad, he was definitely glad he'd put down the liver. Otherwise he'd probably be peeling it off the ceiling.

A moment later, Dr. Boyce came into the room, his pissy mood written all over his face. "Are days off just not a thing anymore?" he demanded. "I wasn't even supposed to be on call today."

Bashir blinked, but then recovered. "I'm sorry. We, uh... We're going to be short-staffed for a while."

Boyce eyed him. "Yeah? Who'd you fire this time?"

"No one. But something came up for Tami. She's going to be... indisposed."

He fully expected an eyeroll followed by a tirade about how she was an assistant and he was a pathologist, so he shouldn't have to fill in for her. And yeah, he was right,

but the morgue's workload was what it was—everyone had to do grunt work and paperwork sometimes.

To his surprise, though, Boyce just tilted his head. “Indisposed? What does that mean?”

“It means she’s unavailable,” Bashir said coolly.

Boyce’s features hardened, but only a little. Then he chuckled and continued toward his office.

Bashir watched him go, not sure what to make of the man’s reaction. But hell, what else was new? His entire world had flipped on its ass since this morning.

He couldn’t wait to see how much worse things would get.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

If someone had asked Sawyer what was on his mind at this point, he could have given a lot of different answers. Many of them revolved around Bashir and the fact that Sawyer had probably torpedoed his best shot at a personal relationship with him. The idea of continuing to work together, of seeing him at crime scenes, of forcing himself to be cool and professional when all he wanted was to beg for forgiveness...that was a special kind of torture. To go from what they'd experienced together to distant acquaintances would be awful, and while it wasn't a completely foregone conclusion at this point, Sawyer couldn't see how he was going to salvage it. Because the thing was...

Someone at the morgue had to be the killer. They simply had to be. There was too much evidence that centered around their facility for the facts to be otherwise. It had to be someone with a level of authority that would give them access to crime scenes, case files, and the bodies themselves, which left out the secretarial and janitorial staff, but that was still a lot of people to comb through.

That was just what Sawyer was doing, though. He'd pulled personnel files on everyone who worked at the morgue, as well as everyone who had worked there over the past few years who still might have access. He couldn't afford to take anything for granted at this point, up to and including his own partner being a help instead of a hindrance.

That's not fair, he told himself as he sat through another reading of the top five files laid out on his desk. She was doing what she thought was best for the case. She just wants justice for Kurt.

But she could have done it without the accusations. She could have taken over the

interview if she was so fucking concerned with Sawyer's ability to put his head before his heart. She didn't have to yell at him , and she definitely could have done more to help with Bashir.

That Nan felt guilty was clear from the way she'd been treating him in the days since that disastrous interview—bringing good coffee in the mornings, asking about how he slept, whether or not he'd heard from Bashir. Which he hadn't. That, coupled with no new bodies to derive clues from, had meant that Sawyer was obsessing over the cases they had to the point of forgetting to eat or sleep.

He needed to fix this. He needed to find the killer, to prove it was them beyond a shadow of a doubt, and that would be how he showed Bashir he was sorry for...well, not for telling the truth, because it looked like Tami was in a shit-ton of trouble whether she was a murderer or not, but for disrupting his life like he had.

Sawyer was going to fix it. He would find the truth, he'd catch the killer, and he'd explain everything to Bashir and then maybe...just maybe, Bashir would take him back.

Nobody's going to take you back looking the way you do.

Sawyer sighed. His internal nagging voice used to sound like his sister; now it sounded like Nan. You look like a raccoon who went on a trash bender, the voice went on. Clean up your desk, go home, and get some actual sleep instead of driving around after potential suspects. Are you insane? Because that's what insane people do.

Ha, no. That was what smart people did, and Sawyer was fucking smart, because it had already paid off.

He'd narrowed the field of suspects down from a pool of twenty to just four. Tami

was still on the list, because she had to be, but there was so much that didn't resonate there. Sawyer was almost certain that, while Tami was involved, she wasn't the one doing the actual killing, if for no other reason than the sheer physical labor required would have been beyond her. Tami was a petite woman, and the largest of the victims had more than six inches and a hundred pounds on her. She could never have dragged Kurt up that trail, that was for certain.

Carlos Huerta was another suspect. He was smart enough to plan murders like this, Sawyer was certain of it, and he had the strength to do the physical labor involved. But Carlos, Sawyer had discovered over the couple of evenings he'd spent shadowing the guy, was a man of very strict routines. He did his job whenever it was required of him, including the emergency calls, but the rest of the time he spent in his favorite coffee shop or at home, playing on his computer. Coffee shop, home, home, coffee shop. He basically went back and forth between those two places, stopping occasionally for groceries or gas. That was it.

That didn't make it impossible that Carlos was behind the killings, of course, but it did make it less likely. Sawyer couldn't write him off, but his personal habits combined with footage from a YouTube channel that a friend of his posted of them doing an in-game raid together during one of the murders bumped him down to a second-tier suspect. That left two real potential masterminds.

Bashir and Boyce.

Of course, the very thought that Bashir was behind any of this was ludicrous. Apart from Sawyer being able to alibi him out for at least one murder, he just didn't have the mind for it. He was incredibly smart, yes, but there wasn't a sadistic bone in his body. This was a physician who worked with the dead because he had too much empathy for the living. Bashir was kind, understanding, charming, clever...he was great at his job, too. He was the whole reason they'd figured out these were murders in the beginning, in all honesty. Without his suspicions about the chainsaw

“accident,” Sawyer and Kurt might not have looked for more evidence to support the murder theory. So, no, there was no way he was the killer, despite the intricacy of the kills, Bashir’s easy proximity to the bodies, and Tami’s obsession with him.

Which left Doctor Boyce, and quite honestly, he was the one Sawyer would have picked from the outset if he’d been left with nothing but these personnel files and none of the actual evidence.

The man had the bedside manner of a sociopath and the interpersonal acumen of a sea urchin. He was prickly, unpleasant, and entitled. He wasn’t well-liked at work, and he didn’t seem to have much of a personal life outside regular trips to the country club. He was a social climber without the ability to be, well, social . But he was smart enough to become a pathologist. He was tall. Fairly fit, too. He could be the one behind it all...but Sawyer had zero evidence of that.

So go find some evidence.

Sawyer hid his yawn behind his hand as he stood up. He stared at the files spread out across his desk. He ought to put them away, but he was so fucking tired already...he stacked them into a pile and tucked them into a drawer instead. It was eight o’clock on a Friday; Boyce was probably at the country club by now. They had theme nights every Friday at the bar, which he seemed to attend religiously if the valet Sawyer had discreetly spoken to was any indicator. Sawyer would go and verify that Boyce’s car was there, stay in the shadows long enough to watch him leave, and then follow at a safe distance to check into what he did next. If Sawyer was lucky, Boyce would go and attempt to commit a heinous crime that Sawyer could catch him in the middle of.

Now who’s the sociopath?

Sawyer sighed and poured himself a final cup of coffee from the office percolator before turning off the machine and heading out. His heart didn’t need this much

caffeine, but his brain wasn't going to last the next few hours without it. He sipped it desultorily as he walked out to his car.

His phone pinged. Sawyer checked it eagerly, but—not Bashir. It was Jessica instead. She was either trying to bury the hatchet or bury it in Sawyer's back, but either way he didn't want to talk to her right now. Honestly, the only person he wanted to talk to was Bashir, but he'd already texted the man twice with zero effect. He wasn't going to persist and make him uncomfortable, especially when he had no new information to offer him. Speaking of...

Sawyer sighed but reluctantly sent a message to Nan letting her know his plan for the evening. He sent a quick text to Molly, too; she was trying to schedule a funeral for Kurt, but thanks to the open nature of the case, his body hadn't been released yet. She'd asked him earlier for an update on when she might be able to lay her husband to rest before she passed away herself, and Sawyer promised her he'd look into it asap.

Huh...it might be a good enough reason to go see Bashir in person. Surely he wouldn't turn him out of the morgue for checking on the body of his dead partner.

Wow, using Kurt as an excuse to get close to your crush. You're a terrible person.

Sawyer sighed and turned on the engine, then turned the music way up to drown out the recriminations flooding through his brain. It was like a script he'd memorized but couldn't let go of once the project was over.

You could have fixed it. You should have fixed it. You should have done better, been better—a better partner to Kurt, a better potential boyfriend to Bashir. Now you're driving off, alone, to legally stalk one of the worst people you know in the middle of the night, and if it feels like just the right level of Hell for you, it's because it probably is.

Sawyer turned up The Beastie Boys and sang along with no care for his awful pitch until he got close to the country club. There was a gate, but it was open, so he drove right through and made a few circuits of the parking lot until he spotted Boyce's bright red Porsche 911. A two-hundred-thousand-dollar car, it stood out even in the midst of all the other expensive rides. At least it verified that the guy was here.

Sawyer parked at the far side of the lot where he could keep an eye on the car without being too conspicuous and settled in to wait. Thirty minutes passed, and he ran out of coffee. An hour passed, and he was yawning again, eyes watering as he struggled to stay awake. Five days of evening stakeouts and early mornings meant about four hours of sleep each night, and it was catching up with him now.

If this was a television show, this is the moment when you'd get killed. Guard down, tired, sitting alone in the dark... Someone would have snuck into the back of your car, and they'd reach around the headrest with a garrote or a knife and cut your throat.

Sawyer watched the scene play out in his mind's eye. Mm, no, not a garrote, his headrest was too big to get around easily. A knife...or maybe shot through the back of the seat with a suppressed pistol. He pictured himself jerking with the force of the bullet, slumping down over his bloody steering wheel as he quietly gasped his last breaths with no one to appreciate them except his killer.

Ugh, he was going to freak himself out if he kept this up. Reluctantly, Sawyer checked the message from Jessica.

Chloe was fired from set today. I hope you're happy.

Shit. Sawyer pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead as hard as he could. Of course he wasn't happy that his niece had been kicked off one of her shows; he knew how tough it was to stay relevant in Hollywood. He also knew that giving his sister classified information so she could produce a show about active fucking cases was a

bad idea.

I'm sorry to hear that , he texted back, then put his phone on silent. All he wanted at this point was to make it through the end of the night and fall into his bed. Screw going to work tomorrow; he'd tell Nan he was sick and stay at home for one goddamn day.

It took another hour for Boyce to appear, just as Sawyer was beginning to wonder if the pinches to his thigh were going to be enough to keep him going. He perked up when he heard the engine rev, as obnoxiously loud as the man himself. He let the bright red car pull out ahead of him, then headed down the inclined driveway to follow it.

Don't head straight home, for once. Make it worth my damn while .

Sawyer got his wish...kind of. The car didn't head in the direction of Boyce's gated community, which unfortunately Sawyer couldn't get access to without revealing his badge and the fact that he was looking into a community member. No good; he didn't want to get reported. This was unofficial surveillance for now, and if he spooked his best guess at the murder suspect into going quiet, he'd never be able to face Bashir. No, he needed information, he needed more data, he needed a fucking conviction. Then he could face Bashir again, with the air finally cleared between them, and...and...fuck.

Fuck, why was Boyce going so goddamn fast?

Sawyer picked up the pace, doing his best to keep the Porsche in sight while trying to keep from appearing as though he was tailing the car. It was easier said than done—this late, the only cars on the road were either being driven by people heading into or off of the nightshift somewhere, or people driving slow enough that they were almost certainly inebriated and trying to keep the police from pulling them over.

None of them were speeding except for Boyce, and now Sawyer.

“Damn it,” he muttered, wishing he could turn his lights on. That would make this all so much easier. Pulling the guy over for speeding wasn’t the game plan, though. He followed him down the road that led east from the country club—the same road, come to think of it, that Mr. Upworth’s farm was located on.

Another connection Sawyer hadn’t considered before.

Adrenaline surged through him as the Porsche rounded a corner two hundred feet ahead of him, vanishing from sight. Oh no, he fucking didn’t. Sawyer pushed down the gas pedal, making his reliable little Toyota whine as he forced it to a speed it wasn’t equipped for. He took the corner too fast, nearly losing traction with the tires. The wheel wobbled for a moment under his hands before firming up again, and he exhaled hard.

It was fine. There was Boyce’s car up ahead; he could make out its obnoxious, skinny taillights from here. This particular road was a straight shot all the way to the middle of town, except for a few bridge crossings and an irritating roundabout with turn-offs into two more rural neighborhoods. He’d be easier to follow once they were in town and he had lights and other cars to help slow this fucker down. Speaking of, Boyce was about to hit the roundabout. Sawyer watched with a sense of satisfaction as the lights swerved around the right side of the circular menace. Then—

Shit. Where were the lights?

Had Boyce cut his headlights in the middle of a turn?

His headache pounding in time with his pulse, Sawyer fought the urge to speed up and instead approached the roundabout at a speed that wouldn’t send him flying off the road. He craned his neck left and right as he went around it, looking for any sign

of the car.

Nothing. Fuck. Fuck , Boyce was either drunk or he knew he was being followed. It was the first time Sawyer had ever held out hope for a DUI.

He had a choice to make. He could either go straight, or he could turn into one of the neighborhoods and see if Boyce had parked somewhere in an effort to hide. Which way would he go, though? Which way made the most sense for him?

None of them did, if Sawyer was honest. They all led away from his house, not toward it, and he'd be stuck downtown, likely on camera, if he kept going straight. Boyce didn't seem the sort to like being on camera if he could help it .

Fine, so he was in one of the neighborhoods. But which one? Sawyer, for all that he'd lived here for a while now, hadn't learned this part of town very well. There were only a few suburban sections out here—the rest of it was still farmland, although the neighborhood on the east side butted up against the country club's golf course.

Huh. Boyce was a golfer. He'd probably had a chance to eye this neighborhood from the course before. That would increase his familiarity with it, and that meant a higher comfort level.

Eh, what the hell. It was worth a try. Sawyer turned into the east neighborhood and slowed to fifteen miles per hour as he drove down the central street, where a few nondescript cars were parked with no lights on. The street had three turn-offs, each one leading into a short road ending in a cul-de-sac. Honey Circle. Honey Lane. Honey Court. God, this place must be hell on GPS.

And no red Porsche. Fuck. Fuck , he'd gone one of the other ways. Sawyer had almost certainly lost him now, but at least he could try the other neighborhood before giving it up as lost.

He turned back onto Beehive Drive—wow, who had done the naming out here?—and went thirty feet before slamming on his brakes. Because there it was, just ahead of him on the other side of the road. The red Porsche. All the lights were off, and when he rolled his window down, all he heard was the sound of his own engine, nothing from the Porsche.

What the hell was going on? Had Boyce abandoned it for some reason? Why, though? He could have gotten away clean—there was no way Sawyer had missed this car on the drive down. All he'd seen here before was the beat-up old pickup and the hulking black SUV that —

Had moved. It was farther down the road than it had been before. Someone had moved it.

All the hairs on the back of Sawyer's forearms stood at attention. Screw this, he needed backup. He reached for his phone, bending slightly to grab it off the seat next to him.

Then he punched his foot down on the gas, making his car—and his phone—leap forward as he narrowly avoided getting the rear of his car smashed by that fucking SUV. It had raced forward from a standstill with no lights on, and only a vague sense of motion in Sawyer's peripheral vision and a healthy dose of paranoia had been enough to keep it from taking out his car.

His phone was on the floor now, too far away to grab. Sawyer had never wished so hard for Bluetooth in his life. He ignored it and kept his foot down, racing back toward the country road that would take him to town. He needed to get some space, but that wasn't happening—the SUV was already in pursuit, and it was moving a lot faster than he was. Sawyer turned as fast and tight at the roundabout as he could, then shifted into high gear once he was back on the straightaway. He needed to get space between them. There was no shoulder on this road, no good place for him to turn off.

All he could do was run.

And running wasn't working. The SUV was catching up, fast. Sawyer tried to swerve back and forth, make himself harder to hit, but the driver just surged ahead and rammed the right side of his rear bumper. Sawyer heard the bumper crunch— ouch—but he was still moving. It wasn't fatal yet. He raced over a bridge that spanned an irrigation ditch from the nearby river, then took another hit to his car again, hard enough to knock his bumper clean off this time, if the awful noise and brief spray of sparks was anything to go by. Damn it, all right, one more bridge crossing coming up fast, this one over a pretty substantial river, and then he'd be in sight of downtown and—

BAM. BAM. BAM.

Each hit snapped Sawyer's neck forward, and the wheel began to wobble again as one of the back tires became unstable. Shit, he wasn't going to make it to town. He wasn't going to make it anywhere. He was going to get run off the road by a murderer and left as a grisly corpse for Bashir to have to examine, and—

No. Fuck that. Sawyer wasn't going to die tonight, and even if he was, he was not going to be turned into a serial killer's calling card. There was still a bridge coming up.

All he had to do was miss it.

He didn't let himself think. Just as the SUV surged ahead again, Sawyer jerked the wheel to the right and slammed on the brakes. His car slowed some as he started down the embankment ahead, but not enough. Just as the nose of his car hit the water, he saw a wheel bounce off toward the road.

Then he was upside down, and then...

Then he was in darkness.

The wheel meandered back along the road a ways, past the SUV that had skidded to a stop, finally rolling past a beat-up Ford Focus whose driver was confused when she saw it.

When she noticed damage at the edge of the bridge's guard rail, she slowed down to look at the water as she passed. A second later she stopped and smacked on the car's emergency lights, swearing as she fumbled for her phone.

The SUV was gone before she got there.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

On the one hand, Bashir wasn't being called out to a death scene. As he drove like hell toward the hospital, he kept reminding himself of that. Detective Walker had told him to come to the emergency room. He wasn't being summoned in any official capacity as the medical examiner. All of those were better than the worst-case scenario.

On the other hand, he was getting called into the emergency room because someone had tried to kill—and almost succeeded in killing—Sawyer.

He was alive. That much Bashir knew. Stable, too, but Bashir knew more than a lot of people how quickly that could change. All the way to the emergency room, he mentally relived moments in his ER and ICU rotations when people had been seemingly stable—or didn't even have life-threatening injuries or conditions—and then crashed.

As he whipped through city streets, he remembered the man who'd brought his teenage son in after a car accident. The boy had broken his arm and needed to be seen. Dad had insisted he was fine. Then everyone was scrambling into the son's room because Dad had collapsed on the floor, and it was only much too late that everyone learned he'd hit his head at some point. There was nothing anyone could do, and the kid left the hospital with a broken arm, a devastated mother, and some emotional trauma that Bashir hoped he'd received some good therapy for.

Sawyer was stable... for now. He'd been stable when Detective Walker called.

Who was to say that in the twenty-one minutes since they'd hung up, Sawyer hadn't coded? Who was to say they weren't doing CPR on him right this minute? Or that

Bashir wouldn't walk into the lobby, only to be intercepted by a grim-faced Detective Walker telling him he and Sawyer would never resolve their problems?

Bashir had a reputation for being even more calm and level-headed in the face of death than most of the cops on the force, but there was nothing calm or level-headed about him as he sprinted into the ER. He clipped his shoulder on the automatic door because it didn't open fast enough, and he stumbled a couple of steps before righting himself and hurrying up to the front desk.

"I'm looking for Detective Sawyer Villeray." The words tumbled out in a panicked, breathless rush. "I was told he was—"

"Are you a relative?" the woman asked with all the unflappable chill of an ER nurse. "I need your name and—"

"He's with me." Detective Walker appeared, her expression grim and eerily calm. "This is Dr. Ramin. I called him in."

The nurse scowled, but then signed Bashir in and gave him a visitor badge. The process took about two minutes, every second of which Bashir was losing his damned mind, especially while Walker's expression didn't change. She offered nothing to let him know either way about Sawyer's condition, and the longer she went without saying, "For the record, he's fine," the more sure Bashir was that Sawyer wasn't fine.

Fuck. He's dead, isn't he?

Bashir was two seconds away from throwing up when he and Walker stepped away from the desk and into the hallway. She was striding up the hall like a woman on a mission, and he finally couldn't take it.

"Detective." He halted. When she faced him, he asked, "Is he okay or not?"

The pained expression that crossed her face almost dropped him to his knees, but just before his balance was going to give out, she said, “He’s in rough shape, but he’ll be okay.”

All the air rushed out of Bashir so fast, he had to lean against the wall and let the room slow down. He wasn’t usually this reactive to anything. Situations like this usually had him doubling down on the calm, shutting out all the emotions until logistics were dealt with and he could finally collapse. This time, he’d shot right past logistics and into full-on uncharacteristic panic, and realizing his biggest fear hadn’t played out...

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered. Then he glared at her. “Do you think you could’ve led with that? Maybe not let me think he was fucking dead or something?” His own outburst startled him, and clearly Walker wasn’t expecting it either.

“I... sorry?” She tilted her head. “I didn’t think the two of you were...”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t care about him!” He barked. “For fuck’s sake.” He pushed himself off the wall. “Can we just—can I see him, please?”

She stammered a little, then started walking, slower this time. “I’m sorry, Doctor.”

He grunted in acknowledgment. “What happened, anyway?”

“He was staking out someone.” She glanced at him. “Your, um... Your colleague.”

Bashir nearly stumbled again. “What? He was following Tami around?” Fuck, Sawyer had made his point. He hadn’t needed to stalk her, especially since she was still in custody, and—

“No,” Walker said flatly. “Dr. Boyce.”

Bashir's lips parted.

"Sawyer had a hunch about him," Walker barreled on. "So he followed him. And apparently someone—we don't know if it was Boyce or someone else—decided to run Sawyer off the road. Deliberately." She stopped outside a room and met Bashir's gaze. "This was an attempt to kill him, Dr. Ramin. There's no doubt in my mind."

Ice water slithered through Bashir's veins. Road rage happened. So did accidents and DUIs. Not everyone getting run off the road was murder or attempted murder. Bashir didn't want to believe someone would try to kill Sawyer—never mind that they'd come anywhere near succeeding—but he also needed to be objective about all of this.

He squared his shoulders. "Were there witnesses?"

"There was one, but she didn't see much." Walker took a breath. "What she did see was an SUV hitting Sawyer's vehicle repeatedly. She didn't see him go off the road, but her dashcam did, and from the looks of it, Sawyer deliberately went off an embankment into the river."

"Went off—deliberately? Why would he do that?"

"You'll have to ask him." She gestured at the closed door beside her. "But I reviewed the footage myself, and..." Walker nodded. "It looks to me like Sawyer either lost control or deliberately went off the side."

Bashir swallowed. "What, um... What kind of SUV was it?"

"A Lincoln Navigator. Black."

His guts wound themselves into knots.

“How the hell can you afford one of those things?” he remembered Tami asking Boyce a few months ago. “Especially on top of a Porsche?”

Boyce had gone off on a long soliloquy about investments, Bitcoin, and getting alimony from “that cheating skank,” though Bashir had tuned most of that out as his usual bragging nonsense. It echoed in his mind now, that was for sure.

In the present, Walker gently said, “I need to go chase down some leads.” She tilted her head toward the door. “You just be with him for a while.”

Numbly, Bashir nodded. “The, uh...” He cleared his throat. “Boyce has a Navigator. Just... Just FYI.”

No surprise registered on her face. She was likely ten steps ahead of him, and she’d just been waiting for him to arrive so she could go investigate. She probably hadn’t wanted to leave Sawyer alone.

Reaching for the door, Bashir whispered, “Thanks, detective.”

She gave a sharp nod and left.

Bashir steeled himself, then pushed open the door and slipped inside. As soon as his gaze landed on Sawyer, his heart dropped into his feet all over again.

His time as a med student had desensitized him a little to the hospital environment. All the wires, leads, monitors, and machines weren’t nearly as scary after learning what they all did. Seeing someone surrounded by all that in a hospital bed didn’t alarm him as much anymore because he understood that most of the equipment was just keeping an eye on the patient, and half of it wasn’t even turned on—it was just there because it happened to be in the room or on the same pole as a necessary monitor.

But when it was Sawyer lying there on the semi-reclined gurney, dressed in a snowflake-sprinkled hospital gown with bandages on his face, an IV in his arms, and an army of monitors looming over him... it fucked with Bashir's head. This wasn't a patient. This was Sawyer.

Bashir carefully closed the door behind him, then crossed the room to the side of the bed. There were glued and stitched cuts along one side of Sawyer's face and neck. From broken glass, most likely. The bruising on his face had probably come from the punch of the airbag. Hopefully the plastic collar around his neck was just there out of an abundance of caution and not because something had fractured. His left arm was wrapped in thick bandages and draped across his stomach. The right seemed no worse for the wear except for the IV in his hand and a small contusion on his forearm.

He looked like shit, but his chest was rising and falling and all the readouts on his monitors were... not normal, but not in any dangerous ranges.

Sawyer's eyelids fluttered, and he gazed up at Bashir. He was obviously on some hefty drugs, but after a second, his focus sharpened, as if he'd suddenly recognized who'd come into the room.

"Bashir." He started to sit up, but gasped and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Hey." Bashir touched his more or less uninjured arm. "You're supposed to be getting some rest. "

Pain kept Sawyer's expression contorted for a moment. Then, slowly, he started to relax back against the pillows. "I'm sorry." He sounded miserable. "Tami. I didn't... You know I wasn't—"

"Sawyer. Don't worry about that right now."

“No. I need to.” Sawyer shifted, wincing again, and he held Bashir’s gaze. “I fucked up. I thought it—all the evidence was pointing to—”

“Sawyer.”

That shut him up, and he stared up at Bashir, his battered face full of fear and worry.

Bashir swallowed. “The important thing right now is that you’re okay. Everything else—”

“But I accused your assistant of—”

“The evidence accused her.” Bashir’s voice came out full of resignation. He’d been angry with Sawyer, and he hadn’t wanted to let go of that anger, but as he’d spoken the words, that anger died away. Sawyer’s job was to follow the evidence. That evidence had pointed straight to Tami.

With a sigh, Bashir pulled a chair over to the bed and sat down. “The evidence accused her,” he repeated, “not you. And I... I know you were doing your job.”

“But I still...” Sawyer trailed off, and Bashir couldn’t tell if the pain in his expression was physical, emotional, or a miserable mix of both. “I shouldn’t have used you to leverage her.”

Bashir winced, some of that anger flaring up again. “Did you, though?”

“I...” Sawyer gazed up at the ceiling. “I had to push her. And at that time, all we really knew was the evidence said it was someone with access to the morgue. We...” He looked at Bashir again, eyes pleading with him to understand. “I have to use whatever angle I have. Find a vulnerability and exploit it. I’m not asking you to like it. I’m just asking you to understand that my only goal in that interview was to find

and stop whoever's killing these people.”

Bashir stared down at his own wringing hands. He wanted so, so badly to insist the end didn't justify the means and that he was still pissed at Sawyer over it. On some level, he was still pissed. But he had the same motive Sawyer did—people were dying, and the two of them needed to do everything they could to find the killer before more people died. Sometimes that meant saying and doing things they didn't like. Especially in Sawyer's position.

That wasn't to say Bashir would've let truly shady or dirty shit slide. He would never have forgiven Sawyer for bullying or threatening Tami into giving a fake confession, which more cops did than people realized. There was a fine line between that and cornering someone into giving up information. It wasn't something Bashir could've done. It was one of many reasons he gave cops a wide berth in his personal life.

But he just couldn't spin what happened with Tami into anything other than Sawyer wanting the truth. When Tami hadn't given him the truth he was looking for—the truth it turned out she didn't have—he'd gone digging elsewhere.

And now... here he was.

Bashir moistened his lips and met Sawyer's pained gaze. “I get it. I... In your shoes, I honestly don't know if I would've done anything different.”

Sawyer watched him silently. The question in his eyes was impossible to miss: You understand why I did it, but is that enough for us to go back?

Exhaling, Bashir took Sawyer's hand, making sure to avoid the IV. As they laced their fingers together, Sawyer also released his breath.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered.

“You were doing your job.”

“Still.”

Bashir nodded. “I know.” He watched his thumb running alongside Sawyer’s hand. “What did you find on Boyce?”

Sawyer shifted again, which of course made him wince. “Not a whole lot, honestly, apart from the fact that someone tried to kill me.”

Bashir thought about what Walker had told him. “When you went off the bridge—was that deliberate? Or did you lose control?”

Without looking at him, Sawyer murmured, “Deliberate.”

“Why?”

“Because he’d rammed my car a few times, and I didn’t know what he’d do if I gave him the opportunity to do it again.” Sawyer’s right shoulder lifted in the ghost of a shrug. “Figured I’d take my chances with the river.”

Bashir couldn’t help it—he laughed. “You do realize how bugfuck insane that sounds, right?”

“Yeah. But let’s see you make rational, calculated decisions when someone’s roped you into a high speed game of bumper cars against your will.”

Bashir cocked a brow. “They’re giving you some good drugs, aren’t they?”

“Eh. Not really.” He scowled up at the bag of fluid hanging over him. “Pretty sure that’s just... goldfish water or something.”

“‘Goldfish water’?” Bashir gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “I think there’s more drugs in there than you think.”

“Not enough.”

Yeah, enough, because Sawyer’s lids were obviously getting heavy. Bashir didn’t try to keep him awake. He needed all the rest he could get. That, and Bashir knew from his own experiences that there was nothing more miserable than someone trying to keep him focused while drugs were trying to pull him down. Better to just let him go to sleep, and they could talk more when he was lucid. Hell, Sawyer was probably exhausted just from forcing himself to be that awake and coherent for a few minutes to talk to Bashir.

As Sawyer slept, Bashir kept a gentle grip on his limp hand.

They had their work cut out for them. With the case, yes, but he was giving himself a reprieve from that for tonight. Detective Walker was working on it. If Bashir was needed, he’d respond. Right now, all Sawyer needed to do was recover. All Bashir needed to do was be here and support him. For a little while, they could tap out and let the other adults handle the case.

But this thing between them—they’d need to do some work on that once they had enough breathing room. Bashir had been so sure he was done being personally involved with Sawyer. He was also usually the type who could remain objective enough to know that one crisis didn’t negate another problem. He wasn’t the kind of person who would suddenly put aside an interpersonal conflict because the other person was injured or sick. His whole family was still shocked he’d stuck to his guns and refused to visit his dying uncle. That he’d meant it when he said that the man’s health issues didn’t erase his homophobia, and he wasn’t interested in pretending otherwise.

A few years ago, Bashir had been in the process of breaking up with an old boyfriend, Tim. Tim had decided he didn't want to stop cheating, and Bashir had decided he didn't want to put up with that. Then Tim had been seriously injured snowboarding. Bashir had come to the hospital to advocate for him until his family arrived, and he'd helped Tim get home after he was discharged. But then, to Tim's astonishment, Bashir had continued moving out.

"You're just going to leave me?" Tim had sputtered from the couch. "When I'm all fucked up like this?"

"I was leaving you anyway. Do you think being laid up cancels out cheating on me?"

So, no, it wasn't remotely beneath Bashir to stick to his guns.

But Sawyer's accident had rattled him.

He didn't think it was because Sawyer's brush with death made him a saint. Rather, it directed a very unflattering light onto how unforgiving Bashir had been over this situation. He'd known why Sawyer did what he did. He'd known the evidence was, whether he liked it or not, pointing squarely at Tami.

Yet he'd cold-shouldered Sawyer anyway, and now he was just relieved beyond words that Sawyer was still here. Still willing and eager to talk to him, and... still here. Still alive.

He gently brought up Sawyer's hand and kissed the backs of his knuckles.

We're going to have a lot of work to do when this is all over.

But I'm in if you are.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

The most awkward thing was deciding who to go home with.

There was no doubt Sawyer was going to need some help for a few more days, especially after being in the hospital for five. He felt like that was too long—that infection had sucked, but it hadn't been that bad. Or at least the drugs had made it seem less bad. And it wasn't like his neck was actually broken, just strained. The only thing that was broken was his left arm—a compound fracture of the radius and ulna that was going to take way too long to heal. But it would heal, he was told, and that was the important thing. It would heal, and so would the rest of him.

Not if he had to live with his sister, though.

Sawyer stared at the tenth message from Jessica just this evening. She'd found out about his accident—not because he'd asked anyone to call her, screw that, but through her local contact, who was probably Felix. Rather than being dismayed by what had happened to him, she was weirdly enthusiastic about it.

“Just think!” she'd said during the one conversation they'd had after her first flurry of texts. “You're the ultimate insider in this case now! Targeted by the killer himself...seriously, it's gold! You can't make this stuff up! I have to be there to see how it all ends. And to take care of you, of course,” she added at the end, like that helped.

“No.”

“Who else is going to sit around with you all day?” The sarcasm in her voice had been cutting, and Sawyer didn't like that it found its mark. The truth was...he wasn't

sure.

The second Molly heard he was in the hospital, she'd reached out of course. She'd offered up a place in her home, or one of her sisters if he preferred to stay in his own place. "I'd love a break from them," she'd said in an honest and tired tone of voice. "And they both know how to care for someone who needs help."

"I appreciate that," Sawyer told her, "but I'm not really comfortable with a stranger coming into my house, and I don't want to put you in danger." Not after what happened to Kurt.

"Oh, honey." Sawyer heard forgiveness and compassion in her voice, neither of which he really felt like he'd earned, and he'd ended the call soon thereafter.

Nan was pushier and hard to say no too, especially because she felt guilty for, as she put it, "fucking up your life more than I needed to," but there was no way Sawyer was going to take her away from her wife and kids. Besides, one of them needed to be working the case, and it wasn't going to be him for the next mandatory two weeks of leave.

The one person Sawyer was interested in spending more time with was, ironically, the one who hadn't said he'd be available. It wasn't because Bashir wasn't interested, Sawyer was pretty sure, although the space between them was quieter than it had been before, and not just because Sawyer was too tired to talk a lot of the time. It was because Bashir's morgue was currently extremely understaffed.

Tami was under house arrest since she was a person of interest, and she wasn't fighting it anymore. Once she'd seen that Bashir was done believing her—Sawyer hadn't been there for that confrontation, but from what Bashir had described, it was a hard necessity—she'd gone into a sort of fugue state, pulling away from everyone and everything and shutting herself up in her house. A cop monitored her door and

checked every package she received, but apart from that she had retreated from the world.

The fact that Andy Boyce had fucked off on vacation didn't help matters either.

That was another fight Bashir hadn't recounted in specifics, but he hadn't needed to. Sawyer could imagine it perfectly. "Your staffing issues aren't my problem. I'm owed this leave—figure the rest of it out on your own." He was away for two weeks on an island or something off the Carolina coast, something that Nan had objected to strongly but, without charging him, they couldn't hold him. And they couldn't formally charge him yet; there just wasn't enough evidence.

So Bashir was working his ass off and could only visit randomly, Sawyer was fielding desperate complaints and entreaties from his sister, and the case had stalled. At least no one else had been attacked over the past week.

Yeah, because the killer is on fucking vacation.

"Sir?"

Sawyer looked up at the nurse who'd appeared in his room's doorway. "Yes?"

"I've got the wheelchair for you."

He wanted to snap that he didn't need a wheelchair, but honestly...he kind of did. It was a long walk down to the first floor of the hospital. "Thank you."

"Are you all ready to go?"

Sawyer forced a smile. "Yep." He had a single bag with some clothes, toiletries, and the stuff they'd managed to salvage from his very busted car, but apart from that there

was nothing but him.

“Great.” The nurse offered his arm, but Sawyer was able to sit down in the chair by himself. He wasn’t that decrepit, damn it. “Do you have someone waiting to pick you up?” the nurse asked as they rolled toward the elevators.

“Ah, no.” He’d texted his expected release time to Bashir, but he wasn’t sure the man had even seen it yet. He’d offered to take him home, but the job came first. “I’ll get an Uber, it’s fine.”

The nurse, maybe sensing that now wasn’t the time for making polite conversation, fell silent. Sawyer focused on his hands, staring at the visible bruises, the thick end of the cast on the left side and the spots of blood in the back of his right hand. His nails needed trimming, too. Great. Something he could handle once he was home...on one side, at least. He wasn’t sure his left hand was going to cooperate that much.

They got outside, and Sawyer was about to get up and fish his cell phone out of his pocket when he realized someone was calling his name. He looked up and—

Oh huh, he wasn’t hallucinating. That was Bashir. He was running across the parking lot and got angrily honked at a few times on his way over, but then he was at the entrance to the hospital and beaming. “I’m so glad I caught you,” he said as he held up his phone. “The battery ran out while I was at work and I didn’t even realize—and then I called your room, but no one answered. ”

No, because the sound of the ringer on the hospital phone was enough to drive Sawyer crazy, not to mention kick up a vicious headache. “You...”

“You must be his ride!” The nurse beamed at Bashir. “I’ll let you take the chair to get him settled, if you like.”

“That’s all right,” Bashir said, staring intently at Sawyer. “I think we can make it.”

“All right, then.” Sawyer barely noticed the nurse leaving, he was so fixed on staring right back at Bashir.

“You thought I wasn’t coming.”

“I thought you were busy,” Sawyer corrected. “And we didn’t really talk about what would happen when I was released. I think the last time we tried, we both fell asleep.”

“Yeah.” Bashir ran a hand through his dark, messy hair. “Work has been...terrible, basically, but I always meant to come and pick you up. You could have called the office line.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt things.”

“I want you to interrupt things,” Bashir pointed out. “I want you to be my whole focus when I’m with you.”

Sawyer laughed. If it sounded a little bitter, well, anyone would understand that his acting skills weren’t up to par right now. “But that’s not how our lives work. We’re both so career-focused, and you know I respect that. I’m not about to get between you and your work.”

“I know.” Bashir nodded. “That’s why I’ve taken the next week off.”

Sawyer stared. He knew his jaw had dropped, knew his eyes were wide by the way the stitches on his forehead pulled, but he couldn’t help it. “You took...a week off?”

“I did.”

“While your other pathologist is off on vacation?”

Bashir shrugged. “I called in a few favors and got coverage from a couple of pathologists from the next county.”

“What about support staff?” He knew Tami wasn’t working, and without her—

“Covered as well. It turns out a few of my retired staff have gotten pretty bored sitting at home just reading about all the weird stuff coming through the morgue lately. It was easy to convince a few of them to step in and help out for a while.” Bashir closed the distance between them and, very gently, took Sawyer’s right hand between his.

“We have things to talk about,” he said. “Serious things. I know that, and I respect that, but for now I really just...I want to take care of you.” He sounded completely honest, almost heartbreakingly so. Sawyer blinked a few times to clear his eyes.

“Okay.” He gave a half smile. “It’s been a long time since anyone’s tried to take care of me. I’m not sure I’ll be very good at letting you, but I’ll try.”

“I’ll remember that when you’re mad at me for not brewing coffee.”

“Never mind, I hate you.”

That got enough of a laugh to lighten the mood, and when Bashir looped his arm around Sawyer’s waist, he leaned into him instead of forcing himself to stay upright like he would have with anyone else. It seemed as though it ought to feel strange to be alone with Bashir like this, out of the hospital—if just barely. Like it should feel more awkward than it did. He was grateful for the sense of ease instead. “So where are we staying for the next week?” Sawyer asked.

“I assumed your place, but maybe I shouldn’t have.” Bashir glanced at him as they headed across the parking lot. “What do you think? ”

He grimaced. “I think my place has been sitting around without anyone to check on it for five days. Some of the stuff in the fridge was already iffy. I don’t know if it’s going to be very nice. Plus...” He went to shrug, then stopped himself. “It’s a townhouse. A lot smaller than your home. You might not be comfortable there.”

“I’m going to be comfortable wherever you are.”

“Spoken like someone used to sleeping on an expensive mattress.”

“Let’s check it out,” Bashir said, “and if it’s going to take some work, we’ll go to my place tonight and fix yours up tomorrow.” He opened the door for Sawyer, who slid gingerly into Bashir’s very nice Mercedes-Benz SUV. “Who usually looks after your place when you’re gone?”

“Kurt,” Sawyer said. “Or Molly if we were both working crazy hours.”

“Oh.” The conversation paused while Bashir came around to his side of the car and got in. “I can see why that’s not happening this time around.”

“I’ve got a neighbor collecting my mail and grabbing any packages,” and being a nosy busybody, no doubt “but she’s not someone I trust enough to let into my home.”

“I understand.” He headed for the address Sawyer gave him, and for a while the car was silent. Sawyer let his eyes fall closed and shifted in an effort to make his back feel better. Weird how he could break his arm, then carry all the pain and tension in his back.

Or maybe it was just because this was the first car ride he was conscious for since his

accident, and he was as stiff as a board because of it. Maybe he should just give in to the impulse to look behind them to check and make sure a black SUV wasn't following, just in case. Maybe—

“Hey.” Bashir's hand found his leg and rested there, comforting and warm enough to make Sawyer's spiral of paranoia stutter for a moment. “Breathe.”

Damn it, when had he stopped? But when Sawyer drew in a shaky, unstable breath a moment later, he knew Bashir was right. Spots flickered in and out of his vision, and he took a few deep breaths to get himself past the moment. “I'm okay,” he said at last.

“I know.”

That was heartening to hear.

“It's fine if you're not, too.”

“Are you also a psychiatrist?” Sawyer had meant it to be snarky, but it just sounded tired to him.

Bashir shook his head. “I don't have to be to realize that this might be difficult for you, after what happened before.”

After you drove yourself into a river.

Actually, Sawyer couldn't feel bad about that—it had seemed like the best way to deal with the situation at the time. “I'll be okay,” he amended. “It's not the first time I've had a bad reaction to a situation, and I always get over it pretty fast.”

Bashir was quiet for a second. “I know we're still getting to know each other, but I

feel like this might be important to talk about.”

Sawyer grinned. “It’s honestly not as bad as you’re thinking.” And it wasn’t as bad as he remembered either, now that he was getting into the old memory. “For a long time when I was a kid, I suffered from a fear of clowns.”

Bashir’s pretty brown eyes opened wide. “Okay, that’s not what I was expecting at all.”

“I know.” He’d probably anticipated it having to do with the movie business, or his mother’s kidnapping. Ha. Way weirder than that. “Coulrophobia,” Sawyer continued, enunciating it with relish. “And it’s not even a really good story, either. When I was a kid, I went to a birthday party where the entertainment was a clown, but he also told stories, and when he went into a different character’s perspective he held a picture of the lower half of their face in front of his. He told one story that had a lot of animals in it, and as soon as he put a picture of a dog’s muzzle in front of his own mouth, I freaked out. I couldn’t stop imagining this clown with a mouthful of sharp dog teeth.”

“That would be terrifying.”

“It was to me. I screamed so much my mother had to come and pick me up early. It took me years to get over it, too.” Sawyer glanced at him. “Okay, I shared. Now you. Tell me a phobia you have.”

“Hmm.” Bashir thought about it. “I don’t know if it’s a full-blown phobia, but one summer a few years ago I decided to learn to scuba dive. It didn’t hurt that the instructor was really hot.” He went on to talk about the sensation of being underwater, and how it turned out that he didn’t really like not being able to hear things clearly. By the time they got to Sawyer’s house, he was laughing hard enough to hurt his injured arm.

“Oh my God.” He wiped his eyes with his good hand. “That’s...”

“I know. Needless to say, I never went on a date with that guy again.” Bashir came around the car and helped Sawyer get out. “How about I tackle the fridge while you put together an overnight bag? We can come back tomorrow morning to air things out and make you comfortable.”

“Thank you.” Sawyer fumbled for the keys in his coat pocket, then climbed the steps to the front door and let them in.

It didn’t smell terrible, but there was an undertone of something sour that made his stomach turn, like old garbage. Of course, because he’d missed garbage day. Ugh.

“I’ll get the trash, too,” Bashir said. “Which way is the kitchen?”

“Right over there.” Sawyer let him brave it and headed back to his little bedroom. Night clothes, socks and underwear, and toiletries all got put into a backpack that he didn’t even try to get over his shoulder. He just carried it to the front door, then turned around to go help in the kitchen.

Ding dong.

Or nope, he’d just answer that. He knew who it was anyway. “Hi Jane,” he said once he’d opened the door. His neighbor to the left, whose house was connected to his, smiled for a moment, then looked concerned.

“Oh my, you look like something the cat dragged in.”

“I know.” Shorter answers were better when it came to handling Jane.

“Well, I saw a car pull up and I figured I’d bring over your mail!” She held out a

huge pile of what looked like mostly junk.

“Thank you.” Despite the awkwardness, Sawyer took it, because he knew if he invited her in she’d be almost impossible to boot out. “I appreciate it.”

“It was my pleasure,” Jane simpered. “Anything to help out. I—”

“I think I got it all,” Bashir said as he rounded the corner of the kitchen.

Jane glanced at him with interest. “Oh my!” she said again, then turned a sly smile on Sawyer. “I didn’t know you were entertaining gentlemen tonight. Is the other one still around?”

Other one? Sawyer sighed. He didn’t have time to get into it with her right now, not with a headache creeping up on him. “I’m sorry, we’ve got to go,” he said, grabbing his backpack and stepping out onto the porch. That forced Jane to step back and make room for Bashir, who came out with a rank-smelling bag of trash. “Thanks again for your help, I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome,” Jane replied, wrinkling her nose as Bashir headed over to where the trash cans were placed on the side of the building. “I hope you feel better soon.”

“Thanks.” With that, they made their escape, leaving Jane staring after them with a speculative expression on her face.

The rest of the evening was a blur. He was too tired to think clearly and too sore to move any more than he had to. He ate what Bashir presented to him—some sort of lemony chicken and rice soup, it tasted delicious—and, after getting his cast wrapped, took a shower with him in his oversized stall. It was his first real shower since going into the hospital, and felt incredible. Bashir washed his hair, peppering his face and shoulders with little kisses as he did so, and if Sawyer hadn’t been so damn tired he

would have happily started something right then and there. But he was so damn tired, so he let Bashir lead him to bed instead.

He woke up in the morning with Bashir flush to his back, warm and comforting, and the sound of his ringing phone doing everything in its power to eliminate that comfort. Sawyer eased his good arm over to the bedside table and grabbed for his phone, groaning when he saw it was Nan. Damn it, he couldn't just ignore her. "lo?"

"Sawyer?" Nan sounded worried. "Are you at home?"

"Mm...no." Not that it should matter, as he was off-duty for the foreseeable future. "Why?"

"Because we just got a call a few minutes ago for your neighbor's place. A Mrs. Jane Simmons? Apparently her carbon monoxide monitors went off this morning—she was pretty sick by the time she realized something was wrong. She's in an ambulance on her way to the hospital, but nothing in her house is leaking. Did you leave the stove on?"

"No," Sawyer said numbly. Carbon monoxide? "I didn't. But someone should go into my place and check anyway. There's a spare key under the flower box."

"Okay, I'll let the firefighters know." She paused. "Did anyone else have access to your house while you were away from it?"

"Just my neighbor, but she didn't go inside." And anyone who could have found your key. Didn't Jane say something about entertaining gentle men at your place? She had. Shit.

"I didn't know you were entertaining gentlemen tonight," she'd very clearly said. "Is the other one still around?"

The other one? Oh. Fuck .

“Tell the firefighters to be careful,” Sawyer said. “I’ll be in soon.”

“No, you’re absolutely not coming in. I’ll update you as soon as I have something to tell you. Got it? Stay where you are.” She ended the call, and Sawyer turned his head to look at Bashir, who was awake and clearly apprehensive.

“What was that about?”

“I think someone tried to kill me. Again.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

In retrospect, maybe lying to Sawyer hadn't been such a good idea.

Bashir and Nan—they were on a first-name basis now—had convened outside Sawyer's room on day one and agreed that they needed to keep as much as possible out of his sight. Everything was need-to-know, they decided, and a battered, hospitalized cop didn't need to know a damn thing. The less he knew, the less he'd try to claw his way back to work when he needed to be resting and recovering. And he was on just enough painkillers that he readily accepted the stories they fed him, especially while that infection had been kicking his ass.

So Sawyer believed that Tami was effectively on house arrest—that she'd agreed to stay in town and was being heavily surveilled—because that raised fewer questions than telling him she'd been booked and denied bail. She was currently sitting in the county jail, having been charged with accessory to murder and obstruction of justice.

Withholding those details meant not having to explain the reason she'd been charged with accessory and obstruction rather than murder, which further meant not having to explain that she'd saved her own ass by pointing the finger at... Bashir.

He was the one who'd blackmailed her. He was the one who'd put her up to ordering and receiving the snake venom. He was the one who'd tasked her with stashing bodies and weapons and victims' cars.

Her story sounded incredibly convincing even to his ears, but she couldn't back it up with anything concrete. At the moment, her statement was the only thing connecting Bashir to any of the murders, and the D.A. had made it abundantly clear that he was not to leave town while the investigation was underway. He'd had to surrender his

passport, and every Consulate General of Canada in the U.S. had been notified that he was a person of interest in a string of murders, just in case he tried to use those channels to get his home country.

And Sawyer was doped up and concussed enough that he didn't question how Bashir was able to take vacation time right in the middle of all this chaos. That saved Bashir from explaining that he was suspended from his duties as Medical Examiner until the investigation was complete, that all of his autopsies in this case were now under severe scrutiny, and that his license was on the line.

Bashir didn't feel too bad about keeping all of that off Sawyer's radar. The sleight of hand was deceptive and dishonest, but it kept Sawyer from wasting energy stressing about the situation when he needed to focus on healing. And he couldn't lie—it bruised the shit out of his ego to be under this microscope. He wasn't even sure what rankled more: the part where they thought he was a murderer, or the part where they were questioning his work ethic. Let Sawyer in on that if he didn't absolutely have to? Fuck that. Fuck this entire shitshow.

So, no, he generally felt okay about feeding Sawyer some heavily modified versions of what was going on.

The one place where he worried now that he'd misjudged the play, though, was when it came to Boyce.

Believing Boyce was on vacation had allowed Sawyer to sleep last night. Okay, so had the hefty dose of Percocet, but believing the man who'd likely tried to kill him was out of state probably helped, too. If nothing else, it would keep the nightmares at bay; painkillers caused vivid dreams under the best of circumstances, and believing there was a murderer lurking just outside could only make that worse.

"Sawyer." Bashir sat down at his kitchen table and pushed one of two cups of coffee

toward him. “There’s... I need to level with you about something.”

Sawyer wrapped his good hand around the mug but didn’t drink. “Do I want to know?”

“Probably not, but you didn’t become a cop to only hear things you wanted to hear.”

His lips quirked. “I can’t argue with that.” He brought up the coffee for a cautious sip. “Go on.”

Bashir drummed his nails beside his own untouched coffee. “I already texted Nan, and she’s on top of it. But, um...” He swallowed. “The person who caused the carbon monoxide leak in your apartment is probably the same person who tried to run you off the road.”

Sawyer’s eyebrow rose. “So... Dr. Boyce.”

“Yeah.”

“Great.” Sawyer made a face and sat back. “He’s back in town, then.”

“Well...” Bashir chewed his lip.

Sawyer inclined his head. “What?” Then he narrowed his eyes. “Wait, you needed to level with me? Are you—what’s going on?”

“What’s going on is that Dr. Boyce never went on vacation. As far as we know, he never left town.” He exhaled. “To tell you the truth, no one’s been able to get eyes on him since the night you got hurt.”

Sawyer’s lips parted. “Wait, so he’s just—he’s been running loose here in town this

whole time? Why the fuck did you tell me he was on vacation?"

"So you wouldn't worry." Bashir shrugged apologetically. "Would you have been able to sleep knowing he was—"

"You can't just keep me in the dark!" Sawyer snapped. "What if he'd—"

"We had your hospital room under guard around the clock," Bashir said as evenly as he could. "And there's cops outside my place, too."

That wasn't a lie, but it was somewhat of a half-truth. They were partly there to monitor anyone coming and going in case someone made a move on Sawyer... but also to monitor Bashir and make sure he didn't try anything cute.

Sawyer rubbed his hand over his face and sighed. "God, what a shitshow."

"I know. And I'm sorry. Nan and I—we've just been trying to let you heal without freaking out. We made sure you weren't vulnerable, though. I promise."

"I know," Sawyer whispered. "I just hate feeling..." He chewed his lip.

Bashir could imagine what he was trying to say. It sucked, being scared. Being targeted.

Being lied to.

His own thought made him wince. Maybe Sawyer deserved some more honesty .

"They're, um..." Bashir cleared his throat. "The cops outside—they're not just there to keep an eye out for Dr. Boyce and protect you."

Sawyer's eyebrows climbed.

Bashir squirmed uncomfortably. "They're also keeping an eye on me."

"What? Has he threatened you, too?"

"No." Bashir scratched the back of his neck. "No, it's, um..." He sighed heavily and dropped his hand to the table. "Tami's pointing the finger at me."

Sawyer straightened. "She what? "

"She's claiming everything that—she says I put her up to it all to help hide the fact that I was killing people." He filled Sawyer in on that part, including the parts where she claimed he was choosing increasingly elaborate ways of killing people in order to make himself look like the hero at the autopsy table.

"That..." Sawyer furrowed his brow, which seemed to hurt. "That doesn't even make sense. After all the noise she made about how I was trying to make it sound like you did it? And... It..." He exhaled. "Am I just really badly concussed, or does this make zero sense?"

"It makes zero sense," Bashir admitted. "I have no idea why she's suddenly pointing the finger at me."

"Unless she's being compelled to by an outside source."

Bashir tilted his head. "Go on."

"I mean, she knows something ." Sawyer sat back against his chair, idly tapping his fingers on the side of his coffee cup. "Whether she actually killed anyone or even knew what was happening, she's involved somehow. And she knows we know that."

“So... what? She’s trying to do damage control?”

Gazing at the table between them, Sawyer pursed his lips. After a moment, he shook his head. “Not in the way you’re thinking. Like I don’t think she’s trying to take the heat off herself.” He flicked his eyes up to meet Bashir’s. “I think she’s covering for whoever’s had her doing the dirty work.”

“And you think that’s Dr. Boyce.”

Sawyer’s shrug was slight, as if the movement hurt. “I know you don’t like the idea, but all roads keep leading back to him.”

“No, I don’t like the idea, but I’m hard-pressed to think you’re wrong.” Bashir sighed. “The problem now is that we can’t find him.”

Sawyer shuddered, then winced. He shifted again in his chair.

“Do you want to move to the couch?” Bashir asked softly. “Might be a little more comfortable.”

A mix of stubbornness and pride clearly tried to keep Sawyer where he was, but then he sighed and nodded. “Yeah. Good idea.” Pushing himself to his feet, he groaned. “God, I don’t know what I’m more sore from—the crash or that fucking hospital bed.”

Bashir laughed softly. “They still haven’t installed those Sleep Number things, have they?”

Sawyer made an unhappy sound, and he shuffled into the living room with Bashir on his heels. After they’d settled onto the couch with a pillow under Sawyer’s broken arm for some extra support, he exhaled. “Ugh. This is some bullshit. The pain, and

your colleague trying to fucking murder me. Again. ”

“I know. But you’re safe, okay?” Bashir gently encouraged Sawyer to rest his feet across his lap. “We’ve got cops outside. Everyone and their mother is looking for Boyce.” He patted Sawyer’s ankle. “All we have to do is lay low and wait for them to find him.”

“Assuming he hasn’t already skipped town,” Sawyer muttered into his coffee cup. “Dude’s obviously got some serious money.” He peered at Bashir. “How the fuck does he afford all that, anyway? Are they paying you guys in the seven figures or something?”

Bashir barked a laugh. “Yeah, right. It’s not a bad living, don’t get me wrong, but there’s no way in hell I could afford a Porsche, a Navigator, a country club membership, or any of the other shiny toys he’s always showing off. Not even if his parents paid for medical school, which they did.”

Sawyer cocked a brow. “So are Mom and Dad loaded? Or did they just save a fuckload of money to send him to school?”

“I’m... I don’t actually know, to be honest. He doesn’t talk about them much, and I don’t exactly ask. I, um... haven’t made much of an effort to socialize with him. At work or otherwise.”

Sawyer’s focus seemed to sharpen a bit, as if he’d caught a scent. “Is that just you with coworkers? Or you with Boyce specifically?”

“Boyce specifically.” Bashir twisted toward Sawyer and draped his arm across the back of the couch. “I’ve been friendly with most of my colleagues, but he and I...” Bashir shook his head. “We never clicked.”

“Why not?”

Bashir tried not to squirm. Sawyer wasn't interrogating him. Digging for something, yes, and Bashir could guess what it was, but it wasn't suspicion of Bashir himself. Holding Sawyer's gaze, he said, “He didn't like me from day one. He hated that I was brought in to be the county medical examiner even though he was right there. ”

“Right, right, you told me about that.” Sawyer wiped his uninjured hand over his face. “So he started before you. In this county.”

Bashir nodded. “About eight years. Fifteen since he'd finished medical school. And then here I come, five years out of medical school and already stepping into that position over his head. He's never let me forget that.”

“Sounds like someone who's highly motivated to discredit you, ruin your career and your reputation, and get you sent to prison. Probably so he can ‘I told you so’ everyone who made him subordinate to you. And make a play for your job.”

A chill ran through Bashir. That thought had been floating closer and closer to the surface in his mind for a while now, ever since they'd figured out the killer was likely fucking with him specifically. “He has to know we're on to him now, though. Otherwise he wouldn't have gone to ground.”

Sawyer nodded slowly. “And if he knows I survived his attack, he's going to do everything he can to shut me up.” He paused. “Does he know where you live?”

The chill turned even colder. Bashir's first instinct was to say no, because God knew he'd never had any reason to give Boyce that information, but the man wasn't stupid. He was probably smart enough to access county employee data.

“I, um...” Bashir swallowed. “Maybe we'd be better off staying in a hotel. Or a

safehouse.’

Sawyer’s eyebrows climbed. “Wait, so he does know where you live? And we’ve just been sitting here the whole—”

“He shouldn’t know.” Bashir gently nudged Sawyer’s legs off his lap and rose. “And like I said—we’ve got cops outside. But if he’s that motivated to shut you up—or both of us—then maybe we should find a more secure location.”

“Good idea.” Sawyer pushed himself to his feet with a wince. “I’m still mostly packed.” He gestured toward the front of the house. “You want to let the patrol officers know?”

“Will do.”

As Sawyer went down the hall toward the bedroom, Bashir started toward the front door. He stopped with his fingers on the deadbolt, though.

What if Boyce had figured out where he lived? Was it really a good idea to go sauntering out into the open? Even pulling the car out of the garage would be a risk, but it seemed safer than walking into plain sight.

He took his hand off the door and instead sent a text to the officer outside.

We need to move someplace safer, he wrote . We’ll let you know when we’re ready to roll out.

Then he called Nan and passed the information on to her.

“Good idea,” she said. “I’ll have an officer set something up at a secure location, and we’ll text you with an address. Give me about ten minutes.”

“Thanks.” Ten minutes seemed like a painfully long time, but that was just how these things worked sometimes. It was better to be cautious and methodical while things were still reasonably calm and non-emergent. If shit hit the fan... Well, then they could make decisions on the fly.

As he started toward the bedroom, he checked his text messages. No response from the officer outside.

And the message hadn't been read, either.

That seemed... off.

He called the number he'd texted. It rang several times, then kicked over to voicemail. Then he tried the other officer. No answer.

Okay, not good.

He switched to the feed from his Ring camera.

In an instant, his heart dropped into his feet, and he sprinted up the hall to the bedroom.

“Get away from the windows!” he called out to Sawyer.

“Get—what?”

Bashir whipped into the bedroom, and though Sawyer was clearly confused, he'd taken Bashir's warning to heart. He'd pressed himself against the wall beside one of the windows, even pushing his injured arm back as much as he could to be as flat as possible.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

Bashir beckoned him out into the hall, where there were no windows at all, and he spoke fast. “The officers aren’t responding to calls or texts, and my Ring camera’s feed has been cut off.”

Sawyer blanched. “Are you serious?”

“Uh-huh. So we need to get the fuck out of here.”

“Agreed.” Sawyer took out his phone. “I’m going to have dispatch send some units out here. Do you have a gun?”

“Yeah. Let me grab it.” Bashir’d had mixed feelings about obtaining a firearm, but a previous mentor had said it wasn’t a bad idea.

“There are some messed-up people out there,” she’d told him. “And you’re going to be the reason a lot of them end up in prison. You don’t want to be unprotected if one of them comes looking for you.”

Words to live by, it turned out.

Staying low as he passed by the windows, he moved to his bedside. There, he retrieved the .45 from his nightstand drawer along with a pair of spare magazines. Between those and the mag in the gun, that gave them twenty-four rounds to work with. Bashir’s experience as a medical examiner said that would be more than sufficient to neutralize Boyce as a threat. His growing fear of his deranged colleague made him wonder if it was enough.

“Thanks, Nan,” Sawyer was saying as Bashir returned to the hall. “Let me know if you get anything from them.” He ended the call and faced Bashir. “She’s sending

more units our way, and she's going to do a radio check with the patrols outside."

Bashir nodded. Being thorough made sense, but his gut told him the radio check wouldn't result in any news, never mind good news. The patrol officers outside were, more than likely, dead.

"So what do we do now?" he asked Sawyer.

"Well..." Sawyer thought for a moment. His eyes flicked to the gun. "You can shoot that, right? You've trained with it?"

"Of course."

"Good. Good. You'd be surprised how many gun owners don't— anyway . I can still use my dominant hand, so I can shoot in a pinch, but with my left arm out of commission..." He shook his head.

"Got it."

"Two hands on the weapon!" his instructor had barked. "This isn't Hollywood, folks!"

Sawyer was again quiet. Then, "Do you have Boyce's cell number?"

Bashir nodded as he took out his phone. "Yeah, I've got it."

"Okay. I'm going to have Nan try to ping the GPS data and get a location on him."

"Is that, uh..."

"Legal?" Sawyer shrugged as he sent the call. "I'll take that up with a judge when

we're not dead after this is over."

"Fair enough."

"Hey, it's me again. I've got Dr. Boyce's cell number. Can you try to ping his location and see if he's near here?" Pause. "Okay, here's the number." Bashir showed him the screen, and Sawyer read the number out to Nan. After they'd hung up, he blew out a breath. "We should move toward the garage. If he makes a move, that'll be our best chance of escaping. Assuming he hasn't barricaded the door or something."

"Christ," Bashir whispered. "Being a criminal sounds exhausting. Way too many logistics to consider."

Sawyer laughed as they started up the hall. "Most get around it by being stupid, lazy, or both."

"Isn't that how they get caught?"

"It's exactly how most of them get caught."

Bashir chuckled, but then muttered, "Too bad Boyce is too smart to slip up like that."

"Not necessarily." Sawyer halted at the end of the hall and scanned the living room. "Stupid and lazy are only two of the reasons criminals fuck up. Panicked or pissed off are two of the other big ones. And I don't know about you, but I think Dr. DoEvil is at least one of those things right now."

Bashir couldn't argue with that. He knew Boyce well enough to believe he was thoroughly pissed off, and it was possible—if they were lucky—he was also panicking.

One of the smaller windows in Bashir's living room had a decent view of the driveway and the garage door, but it was impossible to get a good look without making themselves visible through the other windows.

Bashir had an idea, though. He handed the gun off to Sawyer, then crawled across the floor to the window. He turned on his phone's camera, poked it up above the sill, and snapped a photo of the driveway. Then he returned to where Sawyer was waiting in the arch between the living room and dining room.

The photo wouldn't win any photography awards, but it showed them what they needed to see: a clear driveway and an unobstructed garage door.

"What do you think?" Bashir asked. "Take the car and bolt?"

Sawyer chewed his lip. "I... My instincts say yes. It's our best bet to get out of here. But if he's waiting outside, then..."

Bashir chafed his arms. "So we either stick our necks out, or we stay in here and hope he doesn't try to burn the place down with us in it."

"Basically, yeah."

"Well, fuck. My vote is for the car, then." He'd autopsied enough people who'd died in housefires that there was no way in hell he was staying inside a potential deathtrap. "Let's get—"

Glass shattered.

It was somewhere else in the house—maybe even in the basement—but Bashir and Sawyer both dropped as if a window in the living room had blown out.

“Car!” Sawyer herded Bashir toward the garage. “You have the keys?”

A bolt of panic made Bashir stumble. Then he doubled back, snatched his keys off the ring in the kitchen, and rejoined Sawyer. “ Now I have the keys.”

Sawyer nodded sharply, and they continued toward the garage.

Once they’d slipped through the door, Bashir locked it behind them, but before he could hit the garage door opener, Sawyer stopped him. “Get the engine running first. I’ll keep an eye out for Boyce.”

Bashir hesitated. “Maybe you should be the one to drive. Then I can...” He held up the pistol.

Sawyer nodded, and Bashir handed over his keys. He wasn’t thrilled about Sawyer driving under the influence of painkillers, but right now, that seemed like the least of their concerns. Once they were away from the house, they could switch.

Right then, Sawyer’s text tone chirped. He glanced at the screen and laughed humorlessly before shoving it back into his pocket. “Boyce’s phone pinged as being near this location. Nooo shit.”

“Thanks for the info,” Bashir muttered.

“Right? All right. Let’s do this.”

Bashir gave Sawyer a head start while he hung back to listen in case any noise came from inside the house. Not that he could hear much over his own pounding heart. Sawyer at least had training for scenarios like this. Becoming a forensic pathologist didn’t include courses on escaping hostile forces inside one’s own home, though he was starting to think maybe that should be at least offered as an elective.

Sawyer carefully moved between Bashir's car and workbench. He peered down as he walked, and Bashir realized he was checking the tires.

Jesus. It hadn't even crossed his mind that Boyce might slash the tires or something. What else could he have done? Cut the brake lines? Put sugar in the gas tank?

Oh, fuck. They weren't getting out of here in his car, were they?

Unaware of Bashir's mind spinning out, Sawyer opened the driver side door and got in. With the door still open, he started the engine. It came to life as normal. No sputtering. No exploding. No—

Someone tried the doorknob.

Sawyer revved the engine. "Let's go!"

Bashir started toward the car, but then something slammed into the door. Something hard and solid. A chair, maybe. The door was, like most of the house, well-constructed, but it was only going to be able to withstand so much. And Boyce was a big dude with an even bigger temper; he was the reason one of the morgue drawers had a dent in its stainless steel front.

Bashir glanced back and forth between the car and the door.

His fingers curled around the gun in his hand.

He could end this now. All of it. Boyce probably wouldn't even know what hit him.

"Bashir!" Sawyer called. "Come on!"

Bashir swallowed. Then he hit the button for the garage door opener and leveled the

gun at the door Boyce was trying to break down.

Two things registered at once:

First, the garage door opener's motor was still dead silent.

Second... the doorframe was dangerously close to giving way.

"The garage door isn't opening!" he called over his shoulder. "You're going to have to ram through it!"

Would that even work? Or would the car hit it and—

The middle of the door to the house burst open, sending splinters flying in all directions.

Bashir squeezed off a shot, firing blindly, but he didn't realize until too late that Boyce had used a kettle ball to smash through the door... and that he'd thrown it through the gaping hole. It was a big one—probably the thirty-five pounder Bashir's trainer made him use for some of his more diabolical workouts—and it collided with Bashir's chest. He staggered back, clipped his shoulder on a post, and then stumbled over his lawnmower, momentum sending him sprawling onto his back on the concrete.

The gun clattered across the floor.

The rest of the door shattered off its frame and hinges.

And just like that, Boyce had them trapped and unarmed in the garage.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

“Throw your phones inside the house.”

That voice...it didn't sound like Boyce, but that was because it was obviously being manipulated. It wasn't supposed to sound anything other than deep and intimidating, which it was doing a good job of. Sawyer had to fight down his panic when the bulky, indistinct form of the man stalking them came into view in the broken doorframe.

It had to be Boyce. He didn't remember the man being that damn big , but layers could cover up a myriad of tells.

“Phones,” the man said, sounding annoyed. “And keys. Now.” He raised an arm, and now Sawyer could make out the handgun—it was big, the kind that would put a hole in someone that couldn't be fixed by the best doctor.

And they had no gun—Sawyer had seen Bashir's fly out of his hand. It could be anywhere now. Even if Sawyer saw it, he was in no condition to dive for it. And Bashir didn't have the kind of garage where everything doubled as a weapon. There were no hammers hanging on the walls, no random handsaws or prybars or even a screwdriver that Sawyer could see. They had no weapon at all...except for the obvious one. Or maybe it wasn't so obvious, since Boyce hadn't even mentioned it yet.

Fuck it, it was worth a try.

“Give us a second,” Sawyer said as calmly as he could manage. He pulled the key out of the ignition, turning the car off, then fiddled with the fob for a moment. Come on,

get off, get off...

“Hurry the fuck up!”

“I’m sorry.” Sawyer knew better than to antagonize the man with the gun. “I’m moving slow since my accident.” He finished his little modification then got out, holding his phone and the car key up in his good hand. “I’m going to toss these into the house.”

“Do it.” The enormous gun swung his way. “And if you try to throw them at my face, I’ll shoot you in yours.”

“Don’t,” Bashir gasped from behind them, and he wheezed as he struggled to get to his feet. Sawyer just nodded, resisting the urge to turn and make sure Bashir was all right.

Of course he’s not fucking all right, his house has been invaded and he took a weight to the chest and fell down on concrete. He’s probably still seeing stars.

But there was nothing Sawyer could do about that; all he could do was draw Boyce’s attention to himself.

“It’s okay,” he said, not specifying to either of them who he was speaking about. He tossed his phone and the car key through the door back into the kitchen, and then Bashir was beside him and trembling so hard Sawyer worried a little that he was going to fall down.

Of course he was nervous. This was so far outside everything he had ever trained for, how could he not be? Sawyer was lucky he was just too fucking tired for his nerves to be in control. “Where’s your phone?” he asked Bashir gently. Bashir looked at him, clearly not wanting to say, but that wasn’t going to get them anywhere good.

“Hang on,” Bashir finally said, reaching back and—

SMASH!

The bullet hit the windshield of the car just beside Bashir’s face, shattering the glass into thousands of pieces that thankfully held together instead of spraying all over the floor. The noise was deafening though, and they clung together for a few seconds in the aftermath of the gunshot. Sawyer took the opportunity to shove the thing he’d separated from the key into Bashir’s back pocket as he took his boyfriend’s phone out, then threw it into the house as well. “He was just getting his phone.”

“He was trying to be smart,” the man replied, his eyes vicious behind his dark, full-face mask. “The two of you think you’re so clever, don’t you. Ramin with his big degree and you with your little theories, huh, detective? But that’s where both of you fucked up. You didn’t realize that you weren’t the smartest people in the room anymore.” His grip on his gun tightened. “And after today, everyone else will realize it too.” He stood a little straighter. “I’m not even sure who I want to kill first, but—”

Sawyer gripped Bashir as hard as he could with his good hand as Bashir jerked forward, horror and rage fighting it out on his face. “Me,” Sawyer said before Bashir could speak. “You want to kill me, of course. Finish what you started. Besides, how is Bashir going to really understand just how badly he’s been outplayed if you don’t leave him to suffer the consequences?”

“You can’t kill Sawyer,” Bashir said almost as quickly. “Police officers are already on their way here. They could arrive at any second. You need to get out of here while you can.”

No, that wasn’t going to work. If they made Boyce desperate, then he would just kill the both of them and be done with it. “It’s okay,” he said to Bashir, smiling, hoping that he understood what Sawyer was trying to convey. “It’s going to be okay, let me

just...I'll talk to him, okay?" He turned back to Boyce, who was glancing between the two of them like he was watching tennis. His eyes were moving too fast, his pupils were dilated—was he on something? "Let's talk inside, just you and me. He doesn't have to see this."

"What if I want him to watch?" Boyce asked in his metallic voice. "What if I want him to suffer right along with you?"

"Then you'll make it too easy for him to figure out the puzzle," Sawyer said. "You like puzzles. You're good at them. Don't make my death that easy for him."

Boyce stared at him for a few interminable seconds before motioning at the door with his gun. "Inside, then. And you, stay here." He waggled the gun again. "If I see your face in that fucking frame, I'm going to blow his off."

"Sawyer." Bashir wasn't even looking at Boyce. His gaze was all for Sawyer. "Don't do this. Please, don't—"

"It's okay," he said again, hoping Bashir got it this time. "We'll be right inside the door." He risked a quick kiss to Bashir's lips, patting him gently with his good hand, then turned fast and headed into the house. He stepped through the busted frame, wincing at the sight of the destruction that had already been wrought. It was fixable, though. This was all fixable, if they got lucky enough.

Boyce followed him in, his eyes still darting to the door even as he finally moved past it and into the kitchen. Sawyer stood as close to the exterior wall as possible, silently urging Boyce to move in a bit. "How do you want to do it?" he asked, hoping—praying—that Bashir didn't do something rash like follow them in. "Just shooting me would be so dull."

"I already had my fun with you," Boyce pointed out, but there was a note of interest

in that awful voice.

“You did, and that was...it was a pretty incredible ride,” Sawyer admitted. “I was so scared. I don’t think I’ve ever been that scared in my whole life.”

“I could tell,” Boyce said. “You tried to take the easy way out, but there’s no easy way now, detective. If I had enough time...” His eyes went a bit glazed. “If I had enough time, I’d drug you...maybe just give you a paralytic, so you’re awake for it, and then throw you into the junkyard lot off Sixty-Third. The guy there has a whole pack of mongrels watching the place at night, and they’re absolutely savage to intruders. Even if they didn’t outright kill you, you’d be unrecognizable after a little bit.

“Or maybe...” He took a step closer, and Sawyer had to resist the urge to tell him to stop moving in. A few more feet and this wouldn’t work. “Maybe I’d bury you alive somewhere. Leave you with a camera that showed the outside world what you were going through, but without any hope that they’d be able to find you before you suffocated to death.”

“I think Quentin Tarantino did that already,” Sawyer said, his voice shaking a little.

“Yeah, but the person lived when he did it,” Boyce said. “You wouldn’t.” He took another step. Shit. “Maybe a different kind of poison. Something agonizing, something that left you bleeding on the inside, and then a mundane death like running you over with your own car. Whoops, he was doing maintenance and forgot the parking brake.” He chuckled, then shook his head. “But there isn’t time for that, I’m afraid. I’m just going to have to make the most of shooting you and knowing that it’s going to be Bashir who has to scoop your brains off the wall.”

Fuck. Fuck , Sawyer had been counting on drawing this out longer. “But don’t you think—”

“No,” Boyce snapped, raising his gun. “I don’t. And after this, you won’t either, detective.” Sawyer’s mouth went dry, and he readied himself to lunge even though he knew it was going to be hopeless, there was no way he could cross the distance between them before Boyce had time to shoot him. He was going to be murdered in Bashir’s kitchen and then Boyce would go after Bashir, and holy shit he couldn’t let that happen, he couldn’t, fuck —

A roar from the garage turned both their heads. Boyce brought his gun up, but a second later the wall between the kitchen and the garage collapsed inward as Bashir rammed his SUV through it. A piece of drywall smacked into Sawyer and knocked him off his feet, but the car hit Boyce and threw him onto his back in a shower of plaster and insulation before he was caught under the front right wheel.

“Back up!” Sawyer shouted as blood burst out of Boyce’s gaping mouth. “He’s being crushed!” He looked at the driver’s seat and saw Bashir sitting there, gripping the wheel tight, staring straight forward like he wasn’t really seeing anything. “Bashir!” Sawyer staggered to his feet and tripped over the debris to where his lover sat. “Babe, you’ve got to back up,” he panted. “You’re killing him.”

Bashir turned and stared at him. “You have plaster in your hair.”

“Bashir! You need to—”

“Are you okay?”

“Honey.” Sawyer reached in through the window and pressed his good hand to Bashir’s cheek. “You’re amazing, you just saved my life and I love you so fucking much, but you’ve got to back the car up. Right now, before he dies.” If he wasn’t dead already. “We need him alive.”

“We—” Bashir looked down and swore. “Fuck, right, hang on.” He put the car into

reverse and backed up, and a second later he was out and crouching down beside Boyce, who appeared to be unconscious. He ripped off the face mask, and—

Sawyer breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it was Andy Boyce behind the mask. He'd known it ought to be, it had to be, but there had been just enough doubt in his mind to make him wonder whether they were doing the right thing. Now, though...

Now he wasn't wondering anymore.

His ears rang as he sank down next to Bashir, forcing his fatigue back in an effort to help Bashir keep this worthless asshole alive. They rang and rang...and then the room was filled with cops, and there was Nan, and Sawyer realized that it wasn't ringing in his ears, it was sirens.

"What the fuck, " Nan exclaimed, and Sawyer chuckled as he let her pull him away from Boyce.

Then the room went dark, and he sank into that darkness gratefully.

Sawyer opened his eyes, focused on a familiar water stain on the ceiling, and groaned. Shit, he was back in the hospital again .

"We ought to just put your name on this door from here on out," Nan said from somewhere close by. Sawyer grimaced as he turned his aching neck to look her way. She was sitting in a chair beside his bed, a cup of water with a bendy straw in her hands. She held it out to him. "Drink. Slowly, though."

Sawyer did so, grateful to get the taste of dust out of his mouth. Dust...plaster, the kitchen, Boyce, Bashir , oh shit —

"Whoa, it's okay!" Nan put a hand on his shoulder and pressed him back down onto

the bed when Sawyer made to get up. “You need to calm down. You’ve still got an IV attached, Sawyer.”

“Is Bashir okay?” he demanded. “What happened to Boyce? Is he alive?”

“Dr. Ramin is fine,” Nan assured him. “He’s a little bruised from the confrontation in the house, but he’s going to be just fine. He’s actually here in the hospital, but he’s filling out paperwork in the cafeteria.”

Paperwork? What paperwork? “I’m so confused,” Sawyer confessed.

“Yeah, I bet.” Nan sighed and sat back. “The short version is this: Dr. Boyce is alive, but in critical condition. It’s too soon to say whether or not he’ll live. And Dr. Ramin isn’t under any sort of arrest, so get that look off your face,” she added. “The evidence against Boyce is overwhelming now that we got a warrant to search his home, not to mention he tried to kill the two of you and is undoubtedly responsible for killing the cops we had stationed outside Dr. Ramin’s place.” Nan closed her eyes for a second. “The son of a bitch cut their throats.”

“I’m sorry,” Sawyer said softly.

“Me too, but we’re not the ones who did it, so.” She stared blankly at the wall for a second, then refocused on Sawyer. “Anyhow. We’ve got Tami Glen back in interrogation, only she refuses to talk until she can see Bashir, and Bashir refuses to leave the hospital until he can see you, which you’d think we’d be able to argue about but the man is vicious when it comes to hitting soft spots. So, we called a compromise: as soon as you wake up he gets to see you, and then it’s back to the station to talk to Glen.”

“I can go with him,” Sawyer said.

“Bullshit you can.”

“I’m fine!” Her glare could have peeled paint. “I’m not perfect, but I’m no worse off than I was before.”

“You collapsed on the scene, and you expect me to believe that?”

Sawyer sighed. Sure, he might have gotten a little dehydrated, maybe a little out of balance with electrolytes or woozy from compounded head trauma, but he really didn’t feel worse now than he had the last time he was let go from the hospital. And there was no way he was leaving Bashir to handle seeing Tami on his own, especially after what Boyce had done to them. “I’ll check myself out if I have to.”

“Sawyer...”

“Don’t tell me not to. I don’t care. I’m going with Bashir.” He smiled. “In fact, if you could let him know I’m ready to go, that would be great.”

Nan rolled her eyes but got to her feet. “Fine, but when he tells you you ought to stay here, I hope you listen to him. ”

“I will.” I absolutely won’t.

Sawyer managed to detach the IV and monitoring equipment, use the bathroom, and soothe his irate nurse in the time it took Bashir to join him. He was sitting on the edge of the bed brushing tiny remnants of plaster out of the nooks in his cast when Bashir came in, looking like he’d just run up from the cafeteria. He’d changed into different clothes, but judging from the dark circles beneath his eyes, he hadn’t gotten any sleep in the—Sawyer glanced at the clock on the wall—four hours since his home had been invaded by a maniac .

“Hey.”

Bashir blinked at him. “You’re up.”

“Yes.”

“Ah.”

That was too many monosyllables for Sawyer. He walked over to Bashir and took his hand. “Are you okay?” he asked, squeezing gently.

“I—” The distance left Bashir’s gaze, and he shuddered a little as he sighed. “No. I’m not, but I could be worse. I mean...”

“I get it.” Sawyer nodded.

“What about you? Why are you out of bed?”

“I’m fine.”

Bashir shook his head. “You exacerbated one of the breaks in your arm when you fell, and the doctor on call had to reset the bone. You’ve got to be in incredible pain. You should stay here.”

Sawyer sighed. Yes, his arm hurt. Yes, it would be nice to lie down again, even if it was on a hospital bed, but the truth was... “I can’t.” He leaned his forehead against Bashir’s shoulder. “I’m not going to be able to get any more rest without you. I know I won’t, so please don’t ask me to try. Just let me come with you to the station to talk to Tami—I don’t even have to be in the room, I’ll wait outside, but I want to be with you.” It felt awkward, almost painful to let himself be so blatantly honest about what he wanted, but it was the truth. “Don’t leave me in the same hospital as Boyce,” he

added, and that got a little chuckle.

“Okay,” Bashir said. “Okay. But you have to take it easy, all right?”

“I will,” Sawyer promised. “Uh...whose car are we taking? ”

“Well, mine is officially evidence for the time being, so Nan will drive.”

Great. Greeeeeat. Maybe if she was driving, she’d be less inclined to tell Sawyer he was an idiot.

Not likely.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

“Sawyer.” Nan shook her head as she started the car. “You’re an idiot.”

From the slightly reclined passenger seat, Sawyer offered a subtle shrug. “Eh.”

Nan tsked and pulled out of the parking space.

In the backseat, Bashir suppressed a chuckle at the interplay. Mostly because he was too fucking sore to risk a laugh. Though he’d done his level best to keep his discomfort out of Sawyer’s sight, the truth was that Bashir hurt from his hair all the way down to his toenails.

Somewhere in the process of being hit by a weaponized kettle ball and then crashing his car through the wall, he’d fractured two ribs. Hairline fractures, fortunately, but they were going to be a pain in his ass—well, his upper back—for the next couple of months. And then of course there were the three impacts. The kettle ball hitting his chest. His body hitting the floor. The car crashing. Even though he hadn’t been able to gain much momentum to crash the car, it still fucking hurt.

Whiplash. Fractured ribs. Bruises every-goddamned- where. A nasty scrape on his hip that he couldn’t even remember acquiring. And how the fuck had he sprained the ring finger on his right hand? Well, whatever. He was a mess, and he was going to be down for the count for a while. The brass had already told him he was on paid leave for the next thirty days minimum, both because of the investigation into Boyce and because he was a mess.

“That would be a huge liability,” the police commissioner had told him. “If one of your injuries were to get worse while you were performing your job, the city could be

on the hook for an enormous lawsuit.”

Nice to know it was his physical and mental well-being they were so concerned about, but he’d take it. A month off from work was a month off from work, even if he was going to spend most of it wishing for drugs. Strong drugs. Really strong drugs.

A few blocks away from the hospital, Nan took out her frustration with Sawyer on the brake, stopping harder than was necessary at a yellow light that she could have made.

“Seriously?” Sawyer asked.

She shrugged unrepentantly.

Meanwhile, Bashir gritted his teeth, trying like hell to breathe as the sudden stop aggravated every pissed off cell in his battered body.

Fuck it. He was going to spend the next month wishing for illegally strong drugs.

When the pain subsided enough for him to slowly release his breath—well, fuck exhaling hurt, too. Of course it hurt. Everything hurt. Existing hurt. God, this was bullshit.

Nan’s eyes flicked up to meet his in the rearview. “You okay back there?”

Despite his best efforts, the pain made it into his voice as he croaked, “I’m good.”

Sawyer gingerly twisted around, his forehead lined with deep, worried creases. “Are you okay? How bad did you get banged up?”

Bashir lifted one shoulder in a half shrug. That was a mistake, because it pulled on muscles that were near the cracks in his ribs, and his breath hitched again. Still, he

gritted out, “I’m good.”

Worry shifted to skepticism. “Bullshit.”

Bashir rolled his eyes. Somehow that didn’t hurt. Miracles never ceased. “I’m fine .”

Sawyer’s lips quirked. Then he returned to his seat, muttering to Nan, “Maybe go easy on the stops?”

She huffed something Bashir didn’t catch. To her credit, though, the stops and starts were a lot gentler for the rest of the relatively brief ride.

At the precinct, Bashir steeled himself for a world of pain, and he was still surprised at how much it hurt to get out of the damn car. Could he just go downstairs to the morgue and sleep on one of the slabs for the next few weeks? The stainless steel was cold, so it would be almost like an icepack, right?

He hadn’t even straightened up completely—well, as completely as he could under the circumstances—when Sawyer appeared in front of him. He reached for Bashir’s arm but hesitated as if he wasn’t sure where he could touch without causing pain.

Voice soft, he asked, “How bad is it?”

Bashir grimaced. “You ever broken ribs before?”

Sawyer’s eyes widened and his jaw went slack. “You have broken—what? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“What difference would it make?” Bashir swung the car door shut, which instantly had him wheezing because, hello, Dr. Ramin—twisting motion plus broken ribs equals fuck fuck fuuuck .

Sawyer touched his shoulder carefully. “If I’d known, I’d have taken you—” He paused. “Okay, I guess home is kind of out of the question right now. Back to my place or something. You need to rest!”

“Says the guy who literally just got out of surgery.”

“I’m fine .”

Bashir shot him a point look. Sawyer met it with a stubborn one.

“Jesus Christ, you two are disgusting.” Nan tsked. “Can we please go inside and deal with this situation so both of you can take your carcasses home?”

That sounded like a good plan to Bashir. He took Sawyer’s good hand and laced their fingers together. “Come on. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we’re sitting on a couch with a pizza and a couple of beers.”

Sawyer fell into step with him, both of them moving slowly on the way across the parking lot. “Are we supposed to drink with painkillers?”

“Eh. No. We’re not.” Bashir scowled. “Fine. Pizza and a couple of non-alcoholic doctor-approved beverages.”

“And painkillers?”

“And painkillers.”

Nan rolled her eyes as she opened the door for them. “Seriously, you guys are disgusting.”

“Haters gonna hate,” Sawyer chirped as they walked past her.

She flipped him off. Bashir laughed. Which hurt.

By the time they reached the interview room where Tami was being held, all traces of humor and banter were gone. Bashir was worried sick about his assistant, and God knew she'd been through the wringer lately. Maybe not physically like they had, but mentally? Absolutely.

He just hoped there was a way out of this for her. She was an accessory to multiple murders—the investigators had spelled that out very clearly—but it was possible there were extenuating circumstances that could earn her some leniency. The problem was that she wouldn't talk to anyone until he was there, so no one could predict her fate right now.

Another cop who Bashir had met over the years—Detective Yang—had been trying to get her to talk, and he met Bashir, Nan, and Sawyer outside the interview room.

“Have you had any more luck with her?” Nan asked.

Yang shook his head. “She's clammed up. Her attorney is in there with her, and even he advised her to talk, but she won't until Dr. Ramin is present.” His eyes flicked to Bashir. “I appreciate you coming down.”

Bashir nodded. “I'm happy to help.” He also wanted to get eyes on Tami just to make sure she was okay. Something told him that whatever was going on, she'd gotten in way over her head. Or maybe he was just gaslighting himself into believing she wasn't capable of being part of a serial killer's plans. Because for every murderer out there who creeped people out and gave them all a gut feeling that something was wrong, there really was another who was “so quiet” and “never seemed like someone who could do such a thing.”

“What do you need from me?” he asked the detective.

“Right now?” Yang gestured at the door. “Just come in and let’s see if she talks.”

Bashir nodded again. “All right. Let’s do this.”

Yang stepped into the interview room. Bashir glanced at Sawyer, who gave his hand an encouraging squeeze, and then he followed the detective.

The room was empty except for some chairs and a table with a tape recorder on it. Tami sat in a plastic chair against the wall, hugging her knees to her chest. There were heavy circles under her eyes, and she was alarmingly pale even to someone who was used to the sight of corpses.

She gave Yang a bland glance, but then her eyes landed on Bashir, and she jumped to her feet. “Oh, thank God!” She crossed the room in an instant and, before he could warn her not to, threw her arms around him, nearly bowling him over.

Bashir grunted, “Fuck!” as his vision went blurry. He staggered back a step, and for a split second, he was afraid he was about to crash into the wall, broken ribs first.

A strong hand on his shoulder steadied him. “Whoa, easy,” Sawyer said.

Tami jerked back with a yelp. “Oh my God. Are you okay?” She looked him up and down. “Are you hurt?”

Bashir wanted to feed her the same bullshit he fed everyone else—that he was good—but he was still trying to remember how to breathe with that knife in his back. Fuuuck broken ribs.

“He’ll be okay,” Sawyer said, still holding Bashir’s shoulder. “It was a, um, eventful morning.”

Bashir wheezed a laugh. “Understatement.”

Tami’s eyes got even bigger. “But... you’re okay?” Her hands went to her lips. “Andy did this, didn’t he? It was him.”

Bashir wasn’t sure if he should volunteer any information under the circumstances, so he just leaned against Sawyer and let his obvious pain shield him from any obligation to answer. As much as everything hurt, Sawyer’s arm felt nice around his shoulders. Best thing he’d felt all day aside from the relief that Boyce was neutralized and Sawyer was still alive.

Eventful morning indeed.

“Ms. Glen,” Detective Yang said. “If you could have a seat, we still have some questions for you.” He tipped his head toward Bashir. “Now that Dr. Ramin is here as you requested.”

Tami turned uneasy eyes on Bashir.

He gave her a nod.

Someone found some extra chairs, and at Sawyer’s insistence, Bashir took the soft one with the most back support. It even had one of those ring-shaped back rests, which conveniently kept all the pressure off his bitchy ribs.

Sawyer pulled up another chair and stayed conspicuously close to Bashir. They weren’t hiding their relationship. Not now. Bashir was grateful for the hand gripping his, and he had to wonder if Sawyer was also seeking reassurance that they were both okay.

We’re fine. We made it through. We’ll be all right.

It repeated like a mantra through Bashir's head while Detective Yang updated Nan and Sawyer on what little Tami had said. She'd refused to give up much at this point, only indicating that she was absolutely sure Dr. Boyce was behind the murders, and that she had proof.

Detective Yang leaned against the wall opposite Tami and gazed down at her, arms crossed over his button-up white shirt. "Ms. Glen, what can you tell us about Dr. Boyce's involvement in these murders?"

Tami chewed her lip. She glanced at Bashir, and for a moment, he thought she might not show any cards after all.

But then she started talking.

And she held nothing back .

After a deep breath, she stared down at her wringing hands and began, "Andy hated that Bashir was his supervisor. The thing is, he always regretted that he never pursued being a forensic pathologist. He was burnt out on school at that point, and... Anyway." She ran a shaky hand through her hair. "When he started here, he was working for the old M.E. Dr. Hanley. And he was okay with that because Dr. Hanley was like seventy." She flicked her eyes toward Bashir again before refocusing on her hands. "After Dr. Hanley retired, Bashir started, and Andy was... He just wanted the M.E. position and couldn't handle a younger doctor being in charge. And not only being charge, but being an expert who everyone in the county—in the state, honestly—came to for the toughest cases, you know?"

Bashir shifted gingerly in his chair. He was aware of all that. He'd suspected it, anyway; it was unsettling to hear that Boyce had vocalized it to someone.

Tami went on, "The first year I was here, he said a few times that he wouldn't be

brokenhearted if he came in and found Bashir on a slab.”

That... caught Bashir off-guard.

Beside him, Sawyer stiffened, fingers tightening in Bashir’s hand, and they exchanged wide-eyed looks.

Tami’s chair creaked as she shifted nervously. “But then he’d go off on this tirade about how Bashir would just be replaced by someone even younger, and...” She sighed. “It just escalated over time, you know?”

Yang studied her intently. “How did it escalate to murder? And how exactly did you get involved?”

Her face turned beet red, and she glanced all around the room except in Bashir’s direction. After a painfully long moment, she exhaled. “He knew I didn’t work well under pressure. That’s—I mean, that’s why I dropped out of nursing and pursued becoming a forensic autopsy tech. I couldn’t handle the fear of making a mistake and killing a person. Autopsies—they require a lot of attention to detail and stuff, and if you fuck—if you make a mistake, they can screw somebody over. But it’s not the same as ‘if you don’t make this decision correctly in two-point-five seconds, the patient will die and it’ll be all your fault.’”

Bashir couldn’t help nodding. There were a lot of reasons he’d elected to forego working with the living, and the split second literal life-or-death nature of it was on the list.

Tami moistened her lips. “So Andy knew about that. And he’d mess with me over it. Like he was always making me second-guess everything I did. Suggesting I made a mistake until I went back and checked, and then when I saw that I hadn’t made a mistake, he’d act like he was just helping me learn to be thorough. It was...” Her

shoulders dropped. “It was a lot. I couldn’t work like that, you know? That’s why I was happy to just be an assistant while he and Bashir took the more complicated cases and testified in court.”

“All right,” Yang said. “But... the murders?”

Tami again turned red, and she stared so hard at the floor, it was a wonder the dirty white linoleum didn’t start to curl into flames. “I, um...” She gulped. “I had a crush on Bashir, okay?”

Bashir’s own face burned. He’d known about that, too, but it wasn’t something he’d ever wanted getting out of the morgue. She’d probably felt the same way.

“My fiancé got super jealous about it,” she continued sheepishly. “He was an insecure manbaby, but he was also convinced I was sleeping with Bashir. To the point he confronted Bashir about it and...” She grimaced. “He told him. About... About my crush.”

All eyes except for Tami’s were suddenly on Bashir. He nodded to acknowledge that she was correct. He just hoped she didn’t mention the part about “Listen, pal. I’m not interested in either of you, but if I was, it wouldn’t be her. You feel me?” Bashir didn’t regret shutting down the idiot’s bullshit like that, but it wasn’t something he needed all the cops in the precinct to be reminded about. Those who knew had hopefully forgotten, and he didn’t need the rumor mill starting back up. Cops were the worst gossips on the planet.

“Things got really weird in the morgue for a while,” Tami went on. “Andy found out from one of the other techs about Bashir and my ex having it out, and that’s when Andy started kind of... I don’t know, getting really friendly with me, I guess?” She chafed her arms and squirmed. “He was always in my business and just... very, very friendly.”

Bashir swallowed bile. This part, he'd had no idea. They'd never even looked at each other when he was in the morgue.

"Last summer, we hooked up." She squirmed in her chair, lip curling in disgust. "It was only one time, and—I mean, I won't go into detail, but when he wanted to do it again..." She grimaced, shaking her head.

"Was this consensual?" Yang asked.

"Oh, yes. It was awful, and I still don't know what the hell I was thinking, but... yeah. I consented. For some reason." She fingered the hem of her T-shirt. "But as soon as he realized I wasn't going to touch him again, he changed. He kept telling me that if anyone found out, we'd both lose our jobs. I'd never find work in law enforcement ever again, and his career would be over, and it would be my fault."

Bashir ground his teeth. That sounded on-brand as hell for Boyce, but Jesus fucking Christ. If he'd known about any of this, he'd have fired the jackass in a heartbeat.

"Then he started really nitpicking my work," she went on. "Making me think I'd messed up even though I hadn't. Going absolutely apeshit on me when I did fuck up. It was..." She chafed her arms again and squirmed. "It was really hard to work. And he told me not to let Bashir even catch a whiff of any of this—that we'd slept together, or the mistakes I was making—because I'd be gone."

Everyone in the room was silent for a long moment. Bashir wished like hell he'd crashed the car just a little bit harder or pretended not to hear Sawyer when he called him off. Yeah, the ideal situation was Boyce going to prison for all these murders, but in this moment, Bashir was too angry to want anything other than that son of a bitch crushed under his tire.

Tami swiped at her eyes. "A few months ago, I made a really big mistake on an

autopsy, and Andy caught it.”

“What mistake?” Yang asked.

Deflating, Tami said, “I screwed up the chain of custody. On some tissue samples being sent to the lab. It...” She shook her head and sighed. “It was a stupid, stupid mistake. And it almost cost the defense their case because... Anyway, it was a huge error, and I just got really lucky that Andy caught it before the body was released to the funeral home. So, we were able to get another sample, and fortunately it hadn’t degraded enough that the evidence was lost.”

Fury swelled in Bashir’s sore chest. He’d had no idea this happened, and he could’ve gone down right alongside them if it had come out. Any report either of them submitted, he’d had to sign off on, which meant he could be implicated if it turned out something was hinky. Dr. Boyce should’ve reported the error to him immediately, and they should’ve disclosed the issue to all interested parties. Something like this could call an entire autopsy—hell, an entire case—into question and get the verdict overturned on appeal.

“He started blackmailing me after that,” Tami continued, her voice shaky. Her lawyer offered her a box of tissues, and she took one. Dabbing her eyes, she said, “He’d ask me to do all kinds of weird stuff—stuff that didn’t seem normal or ethical—and he’d threaten to report me for the chain of custody thing. He showed me this log he’d compiled of all of my errors, including some that I know for a fact didn’t happen, but he’d managed to create this history of write-ups and disciplinary action that didn’t exist.” Her composure was dangerously close to breaking apart. “He just had to email it to the powers that be, and both Bashir and I would be gone .”

Bashir’s stomach dropped.

Yang shifted his weight. “Why would Dr. Ramin have been gone?”

She swallowed hard as she flicked an apologetic look toward Bashir. “Because all the disciplinary action, all the reports, everything—he’d done it all through Bashir’s account. In his name. And there was so much stuff— major stuff—that he told me Bashir would be fired for keeping me in the morgue after doing all those things.” She dabbed her eyes some more. “I don’t even know if he had proof, or if... I don’t know. I was just so scared of losing my career and of being the reason Bashir lost his...” A sob escaped, and she added a quiet, “I couldn’t do that to Bashir.”

Guilt made Bashir queasy. All this had happened right under his nose, and all because Boyce had found Tami’s weakness— him .

“When did it shift to murder?” Yang asked.

“I’m...” Tami chewed her lip as a few more tears rolled down her blotchy cheeks. “He started having me receive packages for him and run errands for him. Most of it, I had no idea what most of it was. I still don’t. It wasn’t until I’d ordered the snake venom for him and had it come to my apartment that I figured out he was sending—God, he’d sent me at least one murder weapon, so who knew what else there was, you know? And like... I didn’t know he was killing people. I really didn’t. Not until...” She dropped her gaze, digging her teeth so hard into her lip, it was a wonder it didn’t bleed.

“Not until what, Ms. Glen?” Yang prodded.

She took in a deep, shuddering breath. “It was after the guy who everyone thought drowned at first. After Bashir had finished the autopsy, and I’d signed off for the body to go to the funeral home. Bashir wasn’t in the morgue right then, and Andy came in. He was mad that Bashir had figured out the cause of death, and then he was ranting about how it was insane that Bashir had found the bullet holes in the guy who’d been cut up with the chainsaw. Like, at first I thought he was just mad because he’s always jealous when Bashir figures out the cases no one else can. But then...”

Her eyes lost focus, and she slowly shook her head. “Then he just said, ‘He won’t be able to figure them all out. I promise you that.’ When I asked him what he meant, he said he had an errand for me. That was the night he sent me to the grocery store. He wanted me to meet someone out back, but he was really insistent that I had to go through the store and out the employee entrance so the person would know to come find me.” She groaned with frustration and covered her face with both hands. “God, I’m so stupid. I didn’t even think it was so he’d have me in front of the cameras and so everyone would think it was me.”

“So he sent you there to make it look like you were behind the store at the time of the murder,” Yang said.

Tami nodded without looking at anyone. Then she started falling apart again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was him until—even when I did know, I was scared. He was going to ruin Bashir’s career, but when I realized he was killing people...” She broke down, shaking her head. “I’m sorry.”

Her lawyer touched Tami’s shoulder and looked at everyone else. “I think my client needs a few moments, if you all don’t mind.”

Bashir definitely didn’t mind—he needed to step outside himself, even if it hurt like hell to push himself up out of the chair.

Out in the hall, everyone exchanged wide-eyed looks.

“So what happens now?” Bashir asked. “Is she going down for this?”

“That’ll be up to the D.A.,” Yang said. “And without any evidence to support her claim, it’s easily his word against hers.”

Bashir wanted to argue, but how many murder trials had he been involved in? How

many people insisted they were innocent right up until Bashir's own testimony connected them to the body? Like the guy who'd shouted from the rooftops that he hadn't killed his business partner—his brother and best friend, for God's sake!

“But if the defendant didn't kill the victim,” the prosecutor had said to the jury, “then how did a contact lens matching his prescription wind up under the blood on the victim's body?”

Was there going to be a metaphorical dropped contact lens this time? Some irrefutable piece of evidence putting Tami at the crime scenes and her hands on the bodies? Some unforeseeable weirdness that would be on-fucking-brand for this case?

Yang exhaled. “We'll still need to get a written statement from her. And have her tell us everything she knows about Boyce's involvement with each murder.” His gaze shifted to Sawyer, then Bashir. “And what she might know about his attempts to kill both of you, not to mention murdering a pair of officers this morning. I also want to dig a little deeper into the connection to the podcaster—apparently Boyce used her official email to leak details to the guy. I guess he wanted the cases to be getting a lot of attention and have a ton of people thinking something was shady. Then it would be an even bigger sensation when it eventually blew open that you”—he nodded toward Bashir—“were fucking them up.”

Bashir's stomach knotted. How was it possible to be so simultaneously surprised and... not? Boyce was insane.

“I don't suppose he's the reason the podcaster started reaching out to my sister?” Sawyer asked dryly.

“We're not completely sure yet,” Yang said. “Tami wasn't privy to that part, but Felix did indicate that his morgue contact was the one pointed him toward her. Said with her brother involved in the investigation, she'd jump all over it.”

“Of course she did.” Sawyer rolled his eyes. “Anyway, the rest of your questions for Tami—do you still need us for that?”

Bashir wanted to insist he could handle it, but if he was honest, the pain was ratcheting up by the minute. He was exhausted, sore, and ready to collapse .

“Let me see if she’s willing to talk without the two of you.” Yang stepped back into the interview room.

Nan cleared her throat. “I’m going to go get some coffee. I’ll be back in a few. Either of you want any?”

Bashir and Sawyer shook their heads.

When they were alone, Sawyer faced him, and the fluorescent lights did nothing to add any color to his pale face. “How are you feeling?”

“Like one of the slabs downstairs sounds like an appealing place to take a nap.”

Sawyer laughed softly. “Yeah. Same.” He squeezed Bashir’s hand. “Think anyone will hold it against us if we take the rest of the day off?”

“I don’t really care if they do.” Bashir rubbed his thumb along Sawyer’s. “We’re going back to your place, and—”

“Uh, actually my place is still cordoned off, too. Carbon monoxide.”

“Oh. Right.” Bashir’s shoulders dropped. “Fine. We’re getting a hotel room. A fucking expensive one with a comfortable bed. And we’re going to take drugs and watch TV for the rest of the day.”

Sawyer laughed with some actual feeling this time. “Sounds like doctor’s orders to me.”

“Damn right it is.”

Thank God, Tami was willing to talk without Bashir in the room now. Yang had hours ahead of him, getting her full statement and everything she knew, but Bashir and Sawyer were done for the day.

And by the time Nan came back with her coffee, Bashir had already booked a room at the fanciest hotel in the city.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:25 pm

Sawyer awoke before Bashir the next morning. He wasn't surprised—it had taken way too long for Bashir to find a position comfortable enough for him to sleep in, and even then every little shift had woken him up until he could take another round of the really good painkillers. Those had been enough to knock him out, and he looked almost like his usual self as he lay there with his head turned toward Sawyer, arms carefully down at his sides, back propped up with a few extra pillows. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm, and Sawyer smiled to see it.

Bashir was hurt and he wasn't going to be healed for a long time, but he was alive. That was the important thing. He was alive, and he was going to get better. They both were, as miraculous as that seemed. Sawyer hadn't been taking their mutual survival for granted anymore by the time Boyce found them.

Stop staring and let the man sleep in peace.

Sawyer's body tugged at him to just shut his eyes and lay back down, but his brain was too busy to let it happen now. Instead he got up, easing out of their gigantic, super comfortable bed so that he didn't jostle his broken arm or sleeping boyfriend, and headed for the oversized zip-up hoodie on the coat rack. That plus pajama pants and his shoes would be enough to get him downstairs to the hotel's in-house café for some coffee. He wrote out a quick note for Bashir, left it in plain sight on the bedside table, grabbed his wallet and phone, and headed downstairs.

There weren't many people moving around in the lobby, but the few who were there invariably stared at him as he exited the elevator. Sawyer resisted the urge to snap at them to “mind their own damn business” and kept going straight for the café. They could stare all they wanted; he knew he looked like shit. There was no helping it after

the week he'd had.

“Hi there!” the bubbly young man behind the counter in the café said as Sawyer walked up. “What can I get for you today?”

“A large coffee, black. And a caramel latte with whole milk to go,” he added; he could always reheat it for Bashir when he woke up.

“Sure! Anything to eat? We have all sorts of pastries and breakfast sandwiches.”

Sawyer hesitated, then said, “Okay” and picked out a couple of pastries to bag up and take back to the room as well. Bashir was sure to want another painkiller when he woke up, and they went down easiest when you'd had some food. Sawyer would know.

He paid, thanked the chirpy barista, and gathered his purchases awkwardly into one arm before heading for the café door.

Then his phone went off.

“Shit,” Sawyer muttered. Hands, hands, he needed extra hands... He deposited everything on the first table he could get to and grabbed his phone. “Hello?”

“Oh my God, Sawyer!”

He winced. “Jesus, Jessica, can you be a little quieter?”

“Quiet? Quiet? When I've just found out that my brother was almost murdered by a serial killer, again ? And you want me to be quiet about it?”

Oh, for fuck's— “How did you find out about that?”

“Oh please,” his sister scoffed. “Between getting transcripts from the police scanner and listening to the morning shock-jocks in your area going off on all the ‘nobody left to handle the dead bodies!’ at the morgue jokes, it’s not hard to put it all together. You and the M.E. were attacked by the other coroner or whatever, the same one responsible for the other mysterious murders that have been happening there lately.”

Holy crap. “Why are you getting transcripts of all this information?”

“Well, it’s not like you were going to tell me anything, is it?” His sister paused, then sighed. “Look, it was unfair of me to ask you to break the law for the sake of my pitch, I understand that now. My contact in the area—”

“Felix Daughtry, I take it—”

“My contact told me not to push it anymore, and so I stopped, but that doesn’t mean I stopped altogether! I couldn’t! I have a meeting with executives at two different studios today based on the work I’ve already done, so it’s really convenient that you and Dr. Ramin wrapped things up yesterday.”

Sawyer’s mouth compressed into a flat, straight line. “Well. How nice for you that my boyfriend and I surviving almost being murdered by a psychopath provided you with a convenient ending to your story. ”

“Oh, don’t be upset,” Jessica said. “It’s not personal, Sawyer, you know that. It’s just...just business, honey. That’s how it is out here.”

“I know.” He knew it all too well. That was the whole reason he didn’t want to play the game anymore. “So, now that you know I’m alive and you’ve got your happy ending worked out, you better put the finishing touches on your pitch.”

He could practically hear his sister pout over the phone. “Aren’t you going to wish me luck? This is your niece’s career on the line, after all.”

The silence stretched out before Sawyer finally said, “Break a leg.”

“Thank you!” Jessica chimed, and then ended the call.

Oof. Now his headache was worse than ever. Sawyer paused to take a long drink of his coffee. He put it down, then picked it back up, drained it, and brought it back to the counter. “Can I get a refill?” he asked.

“Sure,” the barista said, his eyes very wide as he took the cup. “Um. Did you really just survive being murdered by a psychopath?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

The young man nodded. He went over to the coffee machine, filled the cup up to the brim, then snapped the lid onto it and brought it back. “On the house,” he said when Sawyer got out his wallet to pay. “Congratulations on being alive, sir.”

A little of Sawyer’s frustration eased. “Thanks.”

He made it back upstairs without his phone going off and eased into their room, setting the coffee and pastries down on the table in the kitchenette. He’d planned to go out on the balcony so he didn’t wake Bashir up, but in the end, he just sat down on the suite’s couch, cup warming his good hand, and stared at the bed.

You almost didn’t get to have this. This was almost impossible.

Imagine what could have happened. Imagine how badly it could have gone.

Nightmare scenarios tore little chunks out of Sawyer’s composure, taunting him with what-ifs.

What if Boyce had taken them out in Bashir’s house? What if Bashir had had to

watch Sawyer die, messy but fast with a shot to the head or slow and awful with one to the gut? What if they'd suffocated on carbon monoxide together? Shit, what if Sawyer hadn't survived the car accident he'd thrown himself into? Bashir would have been fucked up, he knew that beyond a shadow of a doubt now. And Boyce would have had the leisure to pick his time to finish off the man whose abilities he hated so much.

Sawyer's hand shook as he raised his coffee to his lips and sipped. Damn, he probably didn't need this caffeine, not how he was feeling in that moment. He was jittery, desperate to go stand over Bashir like some kind of lunatic and watch him breathe and maybe shake him awake so he knew that he was all right, and—

Nope. Not okay. Breathe. Breathe. Calm down and breathe...

It took longer than Sawyer was used to, but he managed to talk himself down off the lover-or-stalker" ledge and stay seated. Bashir needed his sleep. And Sawyer needed...

Well, he needed this. This was enough, it really was. He wanted to be with Bashir, to watch over him and make sure he was okay, and to be watched over in return. He wanted to be with him. Not just for now, though—from here on out. They had gotten together under circumstances that were practically incompatible with romance, but Sawyer wanted to keep it. He just wasn't sure how.

After a second, he grabbed his phone again and tapped out a message to someone he actually wanted to talk to. After making sure Molly was updated on the case—she was, thanks to Nan—and knew he was all right, Sawyer wrote, How did you stay together for so long? What made it work? God knew that his parents were only still married for tax reasons—they hadn't even lived in the same house for the past decade—and his sister's marriage had dissolved before the two-year mark.

We worked at it, honey. Some days it was hard work. Very, very hard. Molly added a

gif of a weightlifter struggling to lift a chest press bar, and Sawyer smiled. But we loved each other. No matter what else was going on, we loved each other and we listened to each other. That's what made it work. Listening, respect, and love.

The funeral is this Saturday, by the way. I hope you and Dr. Ramin can come but I understand if you can't.

Sawyer sighed. We'll try, he wrote back, and then I love you. Because he did. Molly was the second sweetest person in his life after Bashir.

He looked up from his phone to see the first sweetest person in his life gazing over at him with bleary eyes. "Sawyer?" he asked around a cough, then winced.

"Hey!" Sawyer got up and came over to the bed, carefully helping Bashir into a sitting position. "Easy," he murmured. "We don't want to hurt your ribs."

"That's for damn sure," Bashir muttered, rubbing one hand down his face. He looked—well, he looked awful, honestly. His eyes were puffy, his hair was a mess, one shoulder was hiked higher than the other, probably in an effort to ease the pain in his chest and back, and his breath was...not great. But all Sawyer could think as he stared at Bashir was how much he adored him.

"Let me get your pain pills," he said instead of blurting all that other stuff out like a weirdo. He brought the pills and the coffee over, and once Bashir got them down Sawyer grabbed the pastries as well.

"We should go to the table," Bashir said.

"We're in a hotel," Sawyer replied. "We can get new sheets without having to do it ourselves."

"Still, if we don't need to make a mess for someone else to clean up..."

Sawyer grabbed a towel out of the bathroom, spread it out under the food. “There. Picnic blanket.”

Bashir laughed—very carefully, but he laughed. “I guess that works.” He squeezed Sawyer’s hand. “Thanks for getting food.”

“You’re welcome.” They had a quiet meal with their phones on silent, and Sawyer watched with satisfaction as the lines on Bashir’s forehead got lighter as his pills kicked in. A shower—separate showers, damn it, but Bashir was right when he said neither of them was really up for anything other than getting clean—and some clean clothes later and Bashir joined him on the couch with a sigh.

“I’m a little surprised I slept so late.”

“You needed it, Sawyer said.

“I know, but...” Bashir shook his head. “I’ve got so many things going on in my brain right now, I’m surprised it’s not coming out my ears.”

Sawyer knew the feeling. “What are you thinking about?”

“Mostly? How I don’t think I can live in my house again.”

Oh...huh. Sawyer hadn’t even gotten that far, there had be en so many other awful things to think about, but he could see how it would be uncomfortable for Bashir to move back in after his sanctuary had been so thoroughly violated.

“I bought the house even before I moved here,” Bashir went on. “It was the first thing I took care of once I signed the job contract. I loved it from the first time I stepped inside the door, and now all I can think of is that we almost died in my fucking garage.”

“That sucks,” Sawyer agreed, then added, “I can’t imagine my neighbors are going to be thrilled with the fact that I almost got a couple of them poisoned, either.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” Bashir said.

No, it wasn’t, but... “So many people died,” Sawyer said. “So pointlessly. Just because a psychopath got a bug up his ass.”

Bashir hung his head a bit. “I know. Honestly, I wish I hadn’t come here. If I hadn’t taken the job—”

“No.” Sawyer was moving before he registered it himself, turning toward Bashir and tilting his chin up so they were looking into each other’s eyes. “If it wasn’t you, it would have been whoever else was hired above him. Boyce did this, not you. We wouldn’t have figured it out without you.” He took a deep breath, then said, “And I wouldn’t have fallen in love either, so I’m grateful for you. That you came here, and that you’re so amazing.”

Thank God he didn’t blush easily. It was still hard to look at Bashir in the wake of hurtling his feelings into the space between them like they belonged there, but Sawyer did his best. Love is work. “And it’s fine if you’re not there yet,” he added, “or if you don’t—if you want to move on, or leave, I get it. I do.”

Bashir reached out and took Sawyer’s hand in both of his. “I don’t want to leave. Ever.” Then he leaned in and kissed Sawyer, and it was the sweetest thing he’d ever felt in his life. No urgency, no fear, no worry about the rest of the world. Just a tender press of their lips together, warm and soft, a reminder that they had each other.

Sawyer prolonged the kiss as long as he could but eventually had to let Bashir go so he could straighten his torso out with a grimace. “Sorry to ruin the moment,” he said. “Ribs take forever to heal. I wonder how—”

He stopped before he said it, but Sawyer knew they were thinking the same thing. Boyce's entire ribcage had been turned into kindling. The last he knew, it was touch and go whether the man would live through the night, much less last long enough to be tried and convicted for his crimes.

Bashir glanced toward his phone. "Should we—"

"No." Nan would text if something important came up. Otherwise, she was doing a great job giving them their privacy, and Sawyer wanted to preserve it. "He's in custody, and I honestly don't care whether he lives or dies. Andy Boyce is immaterial to the rest of my life, as far as I'm concerned. You're not." He leaned in and kissed Bashir again quickly. "And you didn't ruin the moment."

"Good." A smile was so much better on his face than the worried frown he'd been sporting a moment ago. "I hope we have more of them."

"Yeah." If Sawyer could get a lifetime of moments like that last one, he'd die happy—hopefully many, many years from now. "Me too."