

FIRST WEEK

A strange sound invaded the music she was exercising to on her elliptical. Unsure of the noise, she stopped, took out one of her earphones to determine what the sound was, and glanced at the clock on the wall. It was only 6:05 a.m.

There it was, that buzzing, which became clear was the intercom. *It's way too early*—she put her earphone back in, ignored the buzzer and continued her workout. The repairman coming to fix her microwave wasn't due for another 55 minutes and she hadn't yet received the call confirming his arrival. She wasn't expecting company, nor was she interested in finding out who was wanting to be let in.

The incessant buzzing annoyed like pests circling her head. Without missing a beat, she increased the volume of her earphones in an attempt to drown it out. For a few seconds, she heard only her music, which had become too loud. In effect, she turned the music down, assuming whoever was at the door had gone, only to be disappointed as what followed was a barrage of fevered buzzes. She intensified her steps, as much to blow off steam from the nuisance as for the sake of her workout. The noise was throwing her routine off-kilter.

The pesky buzzing began to fray her nerves. She could no longer contain her irritation. "Shit," she spat as she reluctantly got off the elliptical. Without checking who wanted in, she pressed the button to open the building's door, went to fetch a sweater from her room and put it on as she strode to the kitchen to get a smoothie going in the blender.

In a minute, there was obnoxious banging on her door. Wondering if it was the repairman, she checked her cell phone first to see if he'd called to tell her when he'd arrive. Seeing the voice mail notification, she listened to the message. It was from Yves at Ivy's Appliances saying he'd be there at 6:45 and according to the time on her phone there was another half an hour before his arrival. She curiously peeked through the peephole to see who the person was. Seeing the unfamiliar, unexpected guest, she left the door closed.

There was more urgent knocking on the door as she turned to go to the kitchen. She sighed as she stopped then did a 180 to find out what this tiresome person's urgent need was this early in the morning. Just as she got to the door, her phone rang. "Yes?" Her voice was terse without intention. She opened the door as far as the chain guard allowed.

"Hello, Aimee?" She heard the caller say, but before she could reply, the door burst open.



Captain Brad Lewis, NYPD Gramercy Precinct, Homicide Division, received a morning call alerting him to a murder at lower Chelsea. It had been quiet for some months; he'd counted on it remaining so until he could finally retire to walk away from dealing with homicides.

With confidence, he was leaving the department in the best shape he could. He'd replaced the recently retired lieutenant with the highly adept, newly promoted, Julie Bradford. His only immediate concern was the lack of investigators. In the slack, Homicide had been reduced to operating on a skeleton crew of only three detectives, including the lieutenant. While it was possible for them to work together to handle incoming cases, he didn't want Julie to be overburdened— not just yet. Not until she was full throttle into her responsibilities. She'd only been at her new desk a week.

At six-foot-two, Lewis was an imposing figure with an average build, sporting a slight belly. His mostly salt than pepper hair had not lost its volume, though it aged him over his 61 years. The accumulated stresses of a career as a homicide detective were creased on his fretful face, giving his deep-set, cocoa eyes a perpetual sadness. His Nubian nose seemed as though it was on a constant track of something foul. To make matters worse, he'd been asked to extend his tenure until a suitable replacement was recruited— more than a year ago. He was beyond ready to pass the torch.

While his enthusiasm for solving homicides had waned, his dedication to his responsibilities had not. He grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair then walked over to the lieutenant's office. "Bradford, duty calls."

"I'm ready, Captain." The petite, five-foot-six-inch Julie leapt from her chair. Her full lips awkwardly curved under a small, slightly turned-up nose, revealing perfect rows of teeth— the result of putting up with two years of annoying braces. She donned her coat, freeing her long, light brown hair as she rushed out of her office. Amber eyes that sat below exquisitely arched eyebrows couldn't hide the gleam of anticipation for her sleuthing debut. Since the start of her law enforcement career, she'd been anxious for the day she'd examine a crime scene, which she regretted wasn't part of rescuing dormant files in Cold Case. Sure, she'd inspected pictures of crime sites, but it just wasn't the same as being there. Today she was investigating a scene. Today, she was a bonafide detective.

“Detectives, we’re on. Let’s go!” The lieutenant urged her two colleagues. “The captain will drive?” She cocked her eyebrow as she glanced at Lewis, unsure of his reaction to her suggestion.

“I’ll drive with Steele,” replied Sergeant Jackson.

“I’m good with that, see you there.” She hurried off. The captain had to keep up with her pace.

The spring morning breeze blasted through her flimsy spring coat, chilling her to the bone even after she’d buttoned it up and turned up the collar. In her haste to get to the crime scene, she left her hat and scarf behind in her office. She jogged to the SUV, shivering audibly as Lewis pulled out of the parking stall.

“I don’t find it cold at all.” The captain chuckled, patting his protruding belly. “I guess all this insulation comes in handy.”

Julie pondered on a witty comeback to lighten things up. In the end, she said it like it was. “You don’t look too bad for your age.”

“For my age?” He knitted his brows, giving her a sideways look. “Thanks for reminding me I’m old.”

“You’re not old. I mean, you’re older than me.”

Captain Lewis laughed off her comment as he changed lanes. “So, this is your first crime scene... raring to go?”

“You have no idea. I’ve been waiting a long time for this.” Her voice had the excitement of a teenager going on her first date.

“It didn’t take you that long to become a detective. Only what, a couple of years?” He could feel the enthusiasm that seemed to glow out of her. “Less, just a year. That’s how long you were on the beat if I remember correctly. You’ve been solving cases in Cold Case for almost a year now. That’s not bad at all.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“You’ve accomplished a lot in two years. Your father would be very proud of you.”

She couldn’t help but think of her investigation while she was in Cold Case. Her ferocious pursuit of evidence to solve her father’s case hadn’t produced the results she’d imagined or would’ve liked. That bothered her. How could she call herself a detective when she couldn’t solve her own father’s mysterious killing?

She'd explored many avenues looking for motive, from vengeful perpetrators to hostile colleagues, to a jilted lover— she went there, as painful as it was— and had come up empty-handed. After all her searching, the only motive that made sense to her was a long-ago rivalry for lieutenantcy between her father and Captain Lewis, which made him her prime suspect.

This notion stemmed from the fact that three weeks after her father, Paul Bradford, was promoted to lieutenant, he was found in grave condition. His car had been smashed and he had fatal bullet wounds, one of which had gone through his temple, lodging in his brain, causing a hemorrhage and, ultimately, his death. As soon as he was buried, Brad Lewis got the job of lieutenant and worked his way up to captain. Though it was the logical succession, the series of events remained suspicious in Julie's eyes.

Her efforts to find infallible proof that the captain had any hand in her father's murder, either as the mastermind or the actual killer, had been nothing but futile. Thus far, she'd been unable to establish probable cause to search the captain's house to find the crucial evidence: a .38 revolver that killed her dad. There was nothing more she desired than to finally put the person responsible behind bars. Now that she was working closely with the captain, she expected to chance upon the opportunity to prove or dismiss her suspicions.

Lewis noticed her pre-occupation. He cleared his throat to get her attention back. "You know, your dad was like a brother to me. He'd be glowing with pride at all your achievements."

She bit her lower lip, remaining silent.

He continued. "I assume you've had a peek at his file?"

Her pulse accelerated. "I went over it a couple of times."

"Did you get anywhere with it?"

She turned to study his gestures. It was hard to see his full face while he had his eyes on the road, his hands on the wheel, but she could tell there wasn't anything weird happening with him; he wasn't tense. On top of that, she didn't pick up any bad vibes from him. "I didn't get very far. There were too many missing pieces. It would've been great to have witness statements to follow up on, any evidence, or a lead on a suspect. Even the gun's missing."

"I hear you." His inhale was laboured as if his lungs were struggling to fill up with air. "His case was very challenging. The harder we tried to solve it, the more helpless I became. We pressed on for months to find a motive or a suspect without success. There was even a toll-free number for tips. We hit the media—TV, radio,

newspapers— asking for the public's help. We got nothing but useless leads.” He lamented. “We never found a witness. People who drove 6th Avenue that day seemed oblivious to the whole incident. You couldn't imagine the shock I felt at Paul's death.” His angry voice trembled, startling Julie. “How could anyone close their eyes to something like that? No one bothered to come forward with any information. It's just unbelievable.”

She felt his genuine pain, but that wasn't enough to convince her of his innocence. “Between you and me, Captain, did you have your suspects?”

“I can't say that I did. I racked my brain trying to figure out who'd want him gone but I couldn't come up with anyone. We looked into perps he'd arrested. Apart from the ones who had died, all of them were in the slammer at the time of his death. Your dad was a good man. He was easygoing, got along with everyone. He worked hard, stayed away from precinct politics; I was lucky to have a great partner who became a friend.” He shook his head. “You know, the moment I was informed your dad didn't survive his injuries, I swore I wouldn't rest until I found his murderer. That didn't happen. Some friend and partner I turned out to be.”

His regret felt like a punch to the chest, knocking the breath out of her. She frowned. “Don't be harsh on yourself.”

“It was a tough case.” He mumbled as if to compensate for the guilt of leaving his partner's case unattended; his sad eyes were stuck in the past.

She turned her eyes to the road, pondering whether or not putting the killer behind bars would lessen her grief. After coping with her loss practically all her life, she wondered if her earnest pursuit of the offender was worth it. After all, nothing would bring her father back and she doubted that catching his killer would give her peace, or that justice would be served. She questioned if it was justice she was seeking. It felt more like retribution, creating a conflict in her. Growing up, she'd seen and been immersed in so much sorrow over her father's unfortunate demise that she made it her objective to do right by her family. Old heartbreaks resurfaced as she thought of how her mother moved on quite nicely, replacing her dad. She wiped away stinging tears that uncontrollably trickled down her cheeks.

Out of the corner of his eye, the captain could see she was distraught, causing him a heavy heart. Since he met Julie, he'd always had a soft spot for the vivacious, smart, little girl. During Paul's funeral, he'd convinced himself that given the opportunity, he'd watch over her like she was his daughter. He'd lost contact with his dead partner's family over the years, but now that he was working with Paul's daughter, he'd make sure she was safe. He stopped at a red light. “When I found out that you were at the police academy, I had mixed feelings about your choice of career.”

She'd known the captain since she was very young. Nevertheless, she felt he wasn't entitled to have opinions or feelings about any aspect of her life. "Why?"

He glanced at the red traffic light. "I could see you following in your father's footsteps as a tribute to him. On the other hand, I thought you should have done yourself a favour by *not* following in his footsteps." The light changed to green. "You know, out of curiosity, I looked at your academic background. Impressive! An undergrad degree in molecular biology. You could've gone far in the medical field. Why a detective? If you don't mind me asking."

Heat rushed to her face all the way to her ears. "In my grandmother's heart, I was going to be the best surgeon ever." The thought of her grandma made her smile fondly. "Medicine is fascinating, there's no doubt about it, especially the research end of it. But my heart was never set on my grandma's wishes. Solving a crime has a certain *je ne sais quoi about it*."

"Ah, I see." He smiled knowingly. "Let me guess, you like reading or watching crime stories." He glanced her way. "Tell me, do you figure out the culprit before he's revealed?"

"I haven't done that since junior high, but yeah, most of the time I got the right guy." Looking back to those teenage years made her voice a bit blithe.

He was glad to see her more animated. "Before you graduated from the police academy, I strongly hinted to the Commandant that we needed you at Gramercy. He was more than happy to write your recommendation." Finally arriving at the scene of the murder, Lewis found a spot to park in between two patrol cars. "I enjoyed our conversation, Bradford. We should talk more often." He was light-hearted as he got out of the SUV.

"For sure." She responded without thought, immediately regretting it. Her regard for the captain was problematic. He was nice enough, but until she could prove or disprove a connection to her father's death, she didn't dare get too close to him. His heartfelt pain over her father's unsolved death was beyond doubt. Nevertheless, she also had an issue with the captain's influence over her career. Though she was aware he meant well, she was disappointed, offended that she'd been robbed of the satisfaction of landing a position on her effort and merits. Had she known that Captain Lewis hand-picked her, she would've refused her assigned precinct. In that mindset, the suspicion started again; was it possible the captain was keeping her close as a way of recompensing for his guilt in murdering her dad, or as a way to sabotage her investigations? Engrossed in her thoughts, she almost walked straight into a parked police cruiser and would have, had the captain not steered her away.



They arrived at a building cordoned off with yellow crime tape across its front, its section of the street barricaded by police vehicles at each end. An ambulance was haphazardly parked on the short lawn.

Crowds of bystanders milling about indicated the significance of the crime in this neighbourhood; Chelsea was a peaceful area, where a murder had been unheard of for a couple of decades or so.

Reporters aggressively hustled the officers guarding the front of the building, trying to gain access to the crime scene, but the officers were just as adamant about keeping it secure. Julie and the captain wedged their way through the crowd, their badges up in the air.

“Those bloodhounds are quick at sniffing out tragedies,” commented the captain distastefully, referring to the reporters. They patiently waited for the elevator.

“Your dislike for the press isn’t obvious at all.” Her eyes narrowed with mischief. “I could use one of those bloodhounds to help flush out killers.” She pestered as the door opened, making the captain wonder if she was serious as they got out.

“I can just see them now, reporters playing cops, making a mess of things.” From his tone, it was clear to Julie the captain wasn’t into her wry humour.

They donned gloves. From the apartment’s threshold, the chaotic path of a hurricane greeted them. Julie was speechless as she quickly scanned the apartment. Looking down at the entryway floor, her eyes were met with happy faces in broken picture frames. Shards of glass were everywhere.

“Are you two coming in? Or are you going to stand there all day?” curtly asked the forensics officer dusting the door for prints, jogging the new arrivals out of their stupefied state.

“We’ll be out of your way in a second.” Julie continued with her eye sweep of the apartment. She inspected the chain dangling from the door. On the wall by the unhinged side of the chain unit was a hole where the device had been ripped off. *Forced entry*, she mentally noted. Hoping for prints, she examined the outside of the door. The lack of discernable marks didn’t stop her from suggesting to the forensics officer to dust the entirety of the door. The officer dropped what he was doing,

glaring at her. Realizing she'd over-stepped the bounds of professional etiquette, she apologized to the vexed officer for her intrusion.

They advanced farther into the apartment while Julie tried to visualize the vicious fight that caused this mess. Forensics personnel gathered as much evidence they could find throughout the apartment and took numerous photographs of the havoc. Uniformed officers picked up items from the floor, examining them for clues to the struggle that had occurred earlier.

An inexplicable apprehension suddenly gripped Julie; tingles afflicted her entire body, giving it an uncomfortable heaviness, particularly as she got closer to the victim. A strong presence was palpable, giving her cold sweats, making her restless. She looked around, seeing only the captain with her and the victim. Nothing like this had happened to her before, so she was unsure of what to make of it or how to handle it. Trepidation accelerated her already racing heart and for a moment she wondered if she was having a stroke or something worse. She pinched her left arm to make sure that her sensations were intact and was glad to feel the pain.

Lewis took a note of Julie acting out of sorts. He thought perhaps she was having a hard time seeing her first up-close dead body. "Bradford, is everything okay?" When he saw her chalk-white face, he panicked. "I suggest you take a break from looking at the victim." He grabbed her by the arm intending to take her out of the kitchen but lost his grip.

"I'm fine," she muttered, quivering as she dropped to one knee to take a closer look. She was fighting to disregard whatever had taken hold of her, diverting her attention to examining the body.

On the female victim's neck was a ligature mark, and she saw the wrung dishtowel in a pile to the side of her. There were contusions on her face; one eye swollen and completely shut while the other was partly open. Her nose and lips were ruptured, crusted with dried blood. The victim had a well-toned, strong physique. When Julie saw the victim's bloodied, bruised knuckles, she speculated that the victim put up quite a fight to try and save her life. The lieutenant was excited about the possibility of finding the perpetrator's DNA on the woman's hand and looked around for a Forensics officer to find out if a swab had been taken. No one was in the immediate vicinity. As she stood, she lost her balance.

Lewis caught her by the arm. Her distress worried him, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm good." However, her voice couldn't hide her weakened state. The presence was still around, seeming to drain her energy. She didn't have the capacity to talk

about what she was going through as she had no idea what it was exactly. Apart from that, the captain's concern was intensifying her panic to the point she'd convinced herself something was very wrong with her. *I need to call mom.* Her feeling was urgent.

Her chest was tight. She felt as if a boa had wound itself around her, squeezing and crushing her lungs. Frantic, she panted and coughed, gasping "Where's my phone?" She dislodged her arm from the captain's hold, sprinting towards the door, looking for an escape.

Lewis wasn't quick enough to accompany her on her panicky exit, but a uniformed officer caught up with her. With his arm around her back, he guided her into the hallway as she violently coughed, gasping. He barked instructions to a fellow officer to grab an EMT to assist the distressed lieutenant. In the meantime, he coached Julie to take slower, more deliberate breaths, repeatedly assuring she was going to be fine.

The fussing captain arrived in the corridor, along with other curious officers. As soon as he got there, he asked the attending EMT about Julie's condition, but got no response from the medical technician who was busy tending her.

It was clear to the EMT that she was having a severe panic attack. He told everyone to disperse to give the patient room. "Detective keep your eyes on mine," he instructed firmly but gently. Julie complied. "You're going to be fine. You're breathing too fast right now. You need to slow down. Follow my lead, okay?" He inhaled slowly through his nose, then just as slowly, exhaled through his mouth. At the same time, he monitored Julie's pulse at her wrist while he listened to her heart and lungs with his stethoscope. He repeated the exercise until Julie got the hang of it. "You're doing great. Your pulse has calmed down nicely," he assured.

Her breathing became more rhythmic, the tightness in her chest opened up, her coughing stopped. She felt drained and still tingly, but much improved. "I feel much better, thanks," she choked out, trying to sound more energetic than she was.

The EMT wasn't fooled by her attempt. "It's good to see some colour back on you." He put his stethoscope back in his bag. "You looked like you'd seen a ghost. I suggest you go see your doctor for some tests, just to be sure you have no underlying medical issues."

As soon as the EMT made eye contact with him, Lewis, who was hovering protectively nearby, asked, "What happened?" He was relieved to see Julie breathing normally, sans her deathlike pallor.

“She had a panic attack,” the EMT replied. He turned to Julie. “Has this happened before?”

“No. It’s the first time.”

“Do you know what brought it on?” Without waiting for a response, the EMT began looking inside her lower eyelids. He was satisfied with their pinkish colour, but reiterated, “Go for a check-up just to make sure you’re okay.”

“Sure. Thanks for your help.”

“Take care,” he picked up his medical bag. “Excuse me, I’ll go finish up inside.” He left with his medical bag.

‘What ifs’ blitzed Julie’s thoughts: *What if Captain Lewis considered me a weakling and was disappointed? What if I lost the respect of my colleagues because of this panic attack and they feel awkward working with me? What if there was something medically wrong? Worst of all, was this even a panic attack? It had felt like so much more; like somebody, or something, was sucking the life out of me.*

These thoughts alarmed her, but before her imagination had the chance to let loose another severe, consuming fear, she closed her eyes as she expelled the dark notions from her mind. Embarrassment ensued. Taking control over this anxiety episode on her own would have been preferable, though she was glad for the care she received. The EMT’s intervention enlightened her regarding panic attacks, giving her confidence she’d be able to handle future occurrences, should there be more.

By the entrance, Lewis stopped the EMT. “Thanks for looking after Lieutenant Bradford.” He patted the EMT’s upper arm to show his appreciation.

The medic stared at Lewis with a knowing look, as if the captain was familiar. “Don’t mention it. I’m glad I could help.”

Julie reproached herself for being an obstacle but was grateful that duties were resumed as if nothing happened. While seated in the corridor to regain her self-control, she examined every aspect of the incident, from the start of the strange sensations to her hyperventilating and panic to her recovery. The whole experience baffled her, especially by that presence in the room. *What was that?* she shivered.

She took a deep breath, shifting her attention back to the murder scene, and was immediately reminded of the victim’s bloodied knuckles. Cautiously, she got up, about to return to her investigation.

The captain blocked her way. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Back inside. I hardly had the chance to look around before that, uh, embarrassing nonsense. I can’t believe that happened.”

Lewis shook his head. “That’s not a good idea, Bradford. Just rest easy for a bit. You can go over her file at the office.” He looked into her eyes. “Don’t feel bad about what happened to you. FYI, you’re not the first person to react to a murder scene. I’ve seen officers refuse to look at a victim, some who’ve vomited, others who’ve downright fainted.”

She took a minute to absorb what he just said. She was sure whatever happened to her didn’t fall into the ‘reacting adversely to a crime scene’ category, but she didn’t comment on it again. “I prefer to check things out. That’ll give me a better feel for what I’m dealing with. Did we find out her name?”

“Fair enough, but I still say take it easy for now.” He momentarily turned his attention to the victim being wheeled out of the apartment. “The victim is Aimee Cleaver.”

At the entrance, they stood side by side, both facing into the apartment. Julie was compelled to go back inside, regardless of her sense of foreboding. It was an atmosphere that had been present since she first arrived; nevertheless, it had only increased her determination to conquer her fear vis-à-vis. As soon as she set foot in the foyer, visions of the vicious skirmish abruptly appeared before her, as if a movie was unfolding in front of her eyes. She watched in horror as a tall, dark figure slammed his body against the front door, flinging it open, its edge striking the homeowner’s face. Julie instinctively groped for the weapon on her left hip before realizing that she was experiencing some strange hallucination. She looked on helplessly as the intruder shoved Aimee, sending her a few steps backwards. An exchange of blows followed, ending with the intruder’s arm wedged in the victim’s neck as she was pinned to the wall. *What the hell?* She blinked quickly, hoping that the next time she opened her eyes the illusion would vanish. *I’ve gone off the rocker.*

Sensing something else was amiss with her put the captain back in alert mode. “Bradford, what’s going on now?”

She said nothing. She was transfixed, expecting a replay so she could take a closer look at the intruder, but the images didn’t play again. Like a gust of wind, they had passed. She sighed. “My heart breaks for Aimee.”

“I admire her for going down while fighting for her life.” He noticed how unstable she still was. “I’m more worried about you right now. I think it’s time to leave.”

“I’m okay. Honestly.” Despite Lewis’ concern, Julie steeled herself, proceeding farther inside the apartment. Forensics officers were still meticulously going over it

with a couple of uniformed officers puttering around. To satisfy her curiosity, she walked over to the balcony with Lewis on her heels. While both her vision and the broken door chain indicated the murderer came in through the front door, she looked over the edge to the balcony below to confirm that it would be impossible for someone to climb up to this apartment without a rope. Then she went back inside, making sure to avoid stepping in the spilt smoothie.

She approached the officer closest to her to ask who the first responders were. The officer was almost as tall as the captain, with wavy, cropped, tawny hair and gentle, puppy-dog eyes.

“It was me and Simon over there.” He nodded at another officer who was scrutinizing the living room.

Julie’s eyes followed his gaze then turned back to face him. “Do you know who called 911?”

He took out a small notepad from his pocket and ripped out a page. “Gina Spiralli, the victim’s neighbour. She was waiting for us in the lobby.” The officer revealed nice pearly whites as he handed Julie the piece of paper with Gina’s contact information on it. “According to her, she noticed Aimee’s apartment door was open on her way to the elevators. She said when she saw the mess inside, she called 911 right away. She couldn’t stay long to talk to us this morning because she had a meeting.”

His deep-set, ocean blue eyes ogled hers as he spoke, unsettling her; listening to him took focus. “Perfect.” She averted her gaze to look at the piece of paper in her hand. “I’ll get in touch with her. Thanks, officer.”

With a sparkle in his eyes, the slender officer offered his hand, “David Sherwood at your service, Lieutenant Bradford.”

“Nice meeting you, David.” His soft hand grasped hers warmly. Grooves formed between her eyebrows. “Uh, how... “

His face flushed. “I never got the chance to introduce myself when you first started here. You used to be Bloom’s partner.”

She once again looked at the piece of paper he gave her, ignoring his remarks. “I hope Gina will have some valuable info for us to work with.” She folded the paper, putting it in her coat pocket soon after. “I appreciate your help.”

Her attention was distracted by a man eagerly peering inside the apartment while he talked to the sentinel at the entrance.

“It’s my pleasure to assist Lieutenant Julie Bradford, the famous Cold Case Closer,” David noticed her diverted eyes and turned his head to look at whatever was taking her attention.

“Famous cold case closer?” She was surprised she was known as such; though pleased, the idea of notoriety for doing her job was absurd. She would’ve preferred that no one made a fuss, but it was too late for that. In addition, this conversation was inappropriate to her under the present circumstances.

“The whole precinct’s been talking about it.” His enthusiasm was infectious.

“I was just doing my job. It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s nothing to you but it’s major for the precinct. Between you and me, the old detectives there were collecting cobwebs. Like the files they were working on.”

“I can’t take all the credit. Solving those cases was a team effort. There’s an awesome group of detectives in the cold case unit.”

“But the new brain to figure things out was a great help,” David’s fondness for her showed in his eyes. Since he first saw her, he’d always wanted to talk to her but never had the nerve to. This seemed the perfect time for him to do so. “If I can help with anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Great, I’ll keep that in mind.” She took a couple of steps back to widen the distance between them. “Did you find the victim’s ID, or notice anything not quite right in here?”

“We found ID in her room, her name’s Aimee Cleaver. Other than the mess, there was nothing that stood out.”

Julie noticed the unknown man was now inside the apartment. He had convinced the officer to allow him in. Fortunately, he wasn’t touching anything, he just looked around from where he stood, visibly stunned. She looked towards the man, “Do you know who that is?”

David’s gaze followed the Lieutenant’s. “I have no idea. Let’s go find out.” He strutted to the man, Julie beside him

“Excuse me, sir. This is a crime scene. You shouldn’t be here,” David said.

“I’m sorry, but I had to come take a look.” Frowning, his eyes darted this way and that. “I’m Jorge Padilla, the building manager. I was cleared by the officer at the corridor to come in as long as I don’t touch anything.” He added that Gina Spiralli had called him earlier to alert him of the crime.

While discreetly scanning Jorge for injuries, Julie told him about the attack on Aimee. “As you can see, it was violent.” She saw no abrasions or bruises on the building manager, which wasn’t much of a surprise. Their conversation touched on how well he knew the victim and how secure the tenants were in the building. It was obvious to Julie that Aimee wasn’t familiar to him. He didn’t have much to offer that would shed light on the case. Regardless, she gave him her card.

Wanting a word with the building’s security guards, Julie asked him to take her to the security office. She didn’t bother to tell the captain, who happened to be out of her sight; it was enough that David knew. As Julie followed Jorge’s lead, David was keeping pace with her. Though she didn’t plan on his company, she didn’t mind him coming along.

The three of them took the service elevator down to the basement without conversation, arriving at the security room situated a few steps around the corner. It was well-lit with more than enough room for two people to monitor the multiple screens, which Julie noticed were off.

One security guard was on duty. He sat, slouched on his chair, busy on his cell phone. He looked up at his visitors after Julie cleared her throat. “I’m Detective Bradford. This is Officer Sherwood,” she introduced. “We’re investigating a murder in apartment 306. Why are the screens off?”

“Cause the cameras don’t work?” The security guard made it obvious he was annoyed.

“Why the hell didn’t anyone get them fixed or tell me about it?” Jorge’s voice rose.

“Don’t yell at me, I wasn’t here when they broke.” The guard shrugged, unconcerned.

Jorge tried to control his irritation but wasn’t too successful. “How long have they been out?”

“Two, maybe three days. I thought someone was on it already.” The guard returned his attention to his phone. “I’m just the little guy here, I don’t make decisions.”

Jorge turned his beet-red face to Julie. “I’m sorry that we can’t help you, detective. I’m going to get right on fixing our security cameras. I know it’s too late for your case. I’m sorry.”

“This is incredible. Two or three days with broken security cameras?” Julie managed to control her outrage, especially amplified by the guard’s indifference. She

addressed him again. “Were you here at this desk early this morning, or did you do your rounds of the building?”

“Ask Ankur. I started my shift at 7.”

“How do I get a hold of Ankur?” Julie asked. The guard’s uncaring attitude was wearing thin.

Jorge interrupted. “I have his contact number on my cell. Give me a second to find it. Here it is.”

“Thanks. We’re done here.” She turned to David.

“Okay, detective. Follow me.” Still miffed, Jorge led Julie and David back to the elevators. “I’m sorry that we couldn’t give you that security tape.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it now.”

She could look straight into Jorge’s eyes as they spoke. She judged his age to be around late 40s to early 50s. From the incident she had just witnessed, she assumed his job was somewhat stressful. His hair had thinned out and he wore a worried expression, though he seemed to be in good shape. His small frame looked solid with no evident flab.

“Don’t hesitate to call me if you hear anything that might help in this case,” Julie reiterated.

He nodded, “This is my stop.” The elevator door opened on the main floor, “good luck, detective, I hope you find the killer soon. If I hear anything, I’ll give you a call.” Jorge got off while the law enforcers continued to the third floor.