

*Offices of Forensic Instincts*

*Tribeca, New York*

*Main conference room*

*Monday, 9:40 a.m.*

Casey Woods, the president of Forensic Instincts, stood at the head of the oval table, her jaw having dropped. She pressed her iPhone closer to her ear, and tried to reconcile herself, both to who the caller was, and the reason for her call.

She certainly didn't sound like the Angela King that Casey knew. And why in the name of heaven was she reaching out to Casey, of all people?

Angela repeated her original demand: "I need you to meet me *now*—as in drop everything and get over here." This time her voice was commanding but shaken.

*Shaken? Angela King?*

Casey's mind raced.

Angela was a high-powered and aggressive criminal defense attorney at Harris, Porter, & Donnelly. A virtual barracuda. Rumor had it that she was next up to make partner. No surprise. She successfully defended the richest of the rich, from corporate executives, to wealthy entrepreneurs, to “businessmen” with rumored links to Organized Crime—a fact she chose to overlook since they were affluent enough to pay her fees. She and Forensic Instincts were on opposite sides of law enforcement. They’d battled it out more than once the criminals that FI had helped catch becoming the very criminals Angela would defend.

Needless to say, the FI team and Angela weren’t friends.

And yet, here she was, calling Casey on an urgent, time-is-of-the-essence matter—one she seemed incredibly high-strung about.

“Casey?” Angela repeated. “Did you hear me?”

Casey lowered herself into a chair. “I heard you. What is this about? And why me, of all people?”

“You’ll see for yourself,” Angela replied. She rattled off the address of a luxury skyscraper on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. “Hurry. I’m jeopardizing my career by waiting to call 9-1-1. I can’t wait much longer. But you have to view the scene first and later provide me with some answers. No more

questions. Just come. I have a key to the building's back door. I'll let you in. We'll use the freight elevator."

Casey's common sense was urging her to refuse. 9-1-1 meant a crime scene, and questions meant involving her. Both those things were screaming for her to stay away. She pushed aside that inner voice. She was too intrigued to refuse. "I'm on my way."

She shrugged into her wool winter coat as she called John Nickels, Forensic Instincts' number one on their security team. Then, she blew out the front door, not waiting to fill the FI team in on where she was going. There was no time. Plus, they'd only try to talk her out of it.

Holiday decorations were glistening everywhere, and tiny snowflakes danced in the air.

Casey didn't notice any of it.

John pulled around a few minutes later, and Casey hopped into the car, gave him the address, and urged him to hurry.

With a brief nod, John was on his way, navigating the FDR Drive in record time. He got Casey to her destination in thirteen minutes. He dropped her off around back, far from the doorman's view. Then, he waited to return her to the brownstone once her meeting was over, as per her instructions.

Angela was pacing inside the building, and opened the door to let Casey in the moment she saw her. No matter how dire the occasion, Angela always looked stunning. An Armani cobalt blue pants suit that set off her dark skin, matching four-inch Louboutin heels, and long wavy black hair styled at the highest end salon. She carried herself like a queen. In short, she was a knock-out.

Now she looked more rattled than Casey had ever seen her.

"Let's go," she said. She led the way to the freight elevator, where she and Casey rode up.

"Tell me what's going on," Casey stated flatly.

Angela didn't answer. She glanced at her Apple Watch, her gaze snapping up as the elevator stopped on the twenty-first floor.

The doors slid open.

Angela paused only long enough to ensure that Casey was right behind her. Then, she strode down the hall, made a turn, and halted in front of Apartment Twenty-One B. She unlocked the door, pulled Casey inside, and faced her to offer the first few words of an explanation.

"This is the home of my client, Christopher Hillington. We had a nine-thirty AM meeting scheduled to be held here."

Casey's brows rose. Christopher Hillington was a renowned and phenomenally wealthy managing director of the private equity firm YNE. He was also a major suspect in a vehicular homicide, and Casey knew through various news sources that he'd been questioned several times by the NYPD and was on the verge of arrest.

"I see you know of him," Angela said. "Given the circumstances, I'm not surprised." She gestured toward a breathtaking sunken living room. "In here."

Casey bit back her question about what Angela had just said. She sensed she was about to get her answers. So she remained silent.

The two women stepped down and Angela stood to a side and waited.

Casey got the full view immediately.

Christopher Hillington's body was crumpled on the Oriental carpet beside his desk, blood pooling out around him. His head was bashed in, clearly having been struck multiple times by a heavy object. The bloodied sledge hammer lying next to the body was obviously the murder weapon. Judging from the damage done, the killer had been, not only determined, but brutal.

Casey eyeballed the scene, feeling sickened as well as confused. She was about to ask Angela what this horrific scene had to do with her when

she spotted the letters, written in blood, on the lower edge of the desk, right beside Hillington's outstretched arm.

She walked over, careful not to touch anything, squatted down, and squinted. The two words were completely legible, and they made Casey's blood run cold.

*Casey Woods.*