

I stood in front of my open closet and shuffled through my tie selection. “Amy, have you seen my red tie?” I called to my wife.

No answer.

“Amy!”

She came into the bedroom, dark brown hair in a messy knot, stray strands stuck to her face. She held our six-month-old son, Christopher, over her shoulder as she rubbed his back. “What are you yelling for?” She glanced at the jacket on the bed. “I thought you only wore that suit to court.”

“I need to look sharp today, which means I need my lucky red tie.” I went over the ones on the rack for the third time. “The one with the dark gray pinstripes. It should be here.”

“For crying out loud. Let me.” She held Christopher out, forcing me to take him.

Before I could turn him around, he burped, a wad of spit landing on my chest. “Grab me a clean shirt, too.” I didn’t have time for this. “I need to make a positive impression today.”

“Jackson, you’re coming off desk duty. Not starting a new job.”

“All the more reason to look good. I need to remind the guys I’m an investigator, not a glorified secretary.”

Whatever Amy said was lost in the rattle of hangers. “Here.” She held out the tie. “It was with your other court suit, still in the bag.” She tossed it, along with a clean shirt, on the bed.

I handed back our son. “You’re an angel.” I leaned over and kissed her. Even wearing an old T-shirt and jeans, she put any supermodel to shame. At

least in my mind. If I hadn't been determined to be early, I would have demonstrated my gratitude with a little more emphasis.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't you forget it." She disengaged Christopher's hand from her hair.

I slipped into the shirt, buttoned it, and swiftly knotted the tie. Then I shrugged into my jacket. I held out my arms. "Well, how do I look?"

She smoothed my lapel. "Like one of Niagara Falls Police Department's finest homicide detectives, which you are." Her voice was light, but I caught the worried glint in her beautiful deep blue eyes.

"It's going to be okay, Amy. I'm ready to get back to work."

"I know." She kissed me. "Go get 'em, tiger."

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I arrived at HQ and waved to the desk sergeant.

"Detective Davis, you going to testify today?" he asked.

"Nope. I'm back in the rotation, Herb."

He smiled. "It's about time."

I took the elevator up to the floor where the Criminal Investigation Division was located and went to my desk. As always, I avoided looking at the empty one facing mine. I briefly wondered how long that would last.

Hopefully for a while.

From across the room, a voice said, "Davis. You're here."

I looked up to see Captain Yannick striding toward me. Trailing him was an unfamiliar Black man. He was in his mid-thirties, close-cut hair, nice suit. Really nice suit. He held the largest-sized cup of coffee Starbucks sold in one hand and a cardboard box under the opposite arm.

I focused on the captain. "Morning, sir. You get the paperwork?"

"I did." The captain shook my hand. "I'm glad to have one of my ace investigators back in the rotation. I want you to meet Rodney Kirke. He's a new detective for homicide. This is his first day."

I nodded. "Welcome to the looney bin. I'd shake your hand, but looks like they're full."

He put the box and Starbucks on Max's empty desk. "Captain Yannick told me all about you."

"Only the good stuff, I hope." I refrained from saying anything about his stuff on that desk. "Who'd you get partnered up with?"

Yannick pointed. "You. Meet your new partner."

*What the actual?* I forced myself to remain calm. "Oh. You didn't mention anything on Friday before we left."

"And I apologize. I meant to and the day got away from me."

I glanced at Rodney. "Captain, can I talk to you?"

"What about?"

"Nothing major. A few details and then I can get to work." Like how he'd forgotten to say he'd assigned me a new partner.

"Unpack your things." Yannick pointed to the new guy. He nodded toward me. "My office."

Once inside, I closed the door. "Sir, what the hell? A new partner on day one?"

"I understand you feel blindsided. I should have called over the weekend. Mea culpa." His expression told me he'd expected this response. "You had to know this was coming, though."

I did. But the speed unsettled me. "I guess I expected more notice. Not to walk in on Monday and be introduced to the new guy without even a hint of

noticed. And I didn't realize Max was so easily replaced. I thought you'd take more time."

Yannick's gaze and voice held sympathy, but firmness at the same time. "Her position has been open for six months. Kirke's recently passed the detective exam. You'll work well together. You can show him the ropes." He leaned back. "I spoke to Kirke's commander from patrol, who said he's top-notch. I think you'll get on well together."

Seeing the empty desk every day had been hard. Having a stranger occupy Max's chair was worse.

Yannick seemed to read my mind. "Look, I can't replace Max. Oh, sure. I can hire a new body. It won't be the same. I know. But give him a chance. You learned a lot from Max and she'd expect you to step up and pass it on. Next call is yours."

What a cheat. Problem was, he was right. She *would* expect it. "Yes, sir. I'll do my best."

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I returned to the desks and assessed the man who Yannick thought could fill Max's shoes. He'd unpacked the box and was arranging everything to his satisfaction. Strike one, he drank Starbucks. I couldn't stand the import from Seattle, much preferring Tim Horton's, the Western New York alternative. Max had not much cared about where the coffee came from, as long as it was hot and black.

Strike two. He'd put a fancy brass nameplate in front of him, with a leather blotter, and matching pen and pencil cup next to it. I hoped the attention to office supplies didn't mean anything except excitement for the new shield. Max had never bothered to have more than a jumbo calendar

and her ever-present book of Sudoku puzzles on her desk. “Looks like you’re all settled in.”

His hand jerked and the cup of pens toppled over. “Just about.” He straightened everything and looked around. Very few of the battered desks held anything as fancy as his desk set. “Guess I overdid it a little with the office supplies, huh?”

“How long have you had your shield?”

“Two weeks.”

That explained a lot. “I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s natural to be a little nervous, especially starting a new job like this.” I sat down. “Where’d you come from?”

“Downtown. Spent a lot of time chasing pickpockets away from tourists.” He unbuttoned his suit jacket and took his seat. “It’s not very often you meet a white guy named Jackson. No offense.”

It was what people said when they knew they’d been offensive. I could tell his clothes were new. The jacket and slacks were tailored and the tie shone like silk. “My mother was a horror fan and *The Lottery* was her all-time favorite short story. She loved it so much, she swore to name her first child after the author. I’m lucky I wasn’t a girl or I’d be called Shirley.”

He laughed, but stopped short. “I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

I held up my hand. “True story. My father tried to get the nickname Jack to stick, but it never did. I’ve gotten used to it.”

He shifted in his seat. “I, uh, heard about what happened to your old partner. Hope I can measure up. She sounds like she was quite the investigator.”

The words were a knife in my chest. “She was.” I had no intention of discussing Max with the new guy. “Why’d you become a detective?”

“It was time for a challenge. I also thought it would help in other areas.”

I waited, but he didn't continue. “Such as?”

“What's the scoop? Did Yannick give you an assignment when you talked to him or something?”

*He has things he doesn't want to discuss. We're equal there.* “Not yet.”

Yannick emerged from his office. “Davis, Kirke. Attempted bank robbery downtown. Get down there and take witness statements.”

I stood. “On it, sir.”