

## **Thesis Proposal and Project: Transplanted**

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I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Working Title</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Artist Statement</b> .....	<b>3</b>
Inspiration and Background of <i>Transplanted</i> .....	3
Introduction to the Manuscript .....	6
Literary Context .....	6
Significance of the Topic as a Christian Writer .....	8
<b>Critical Paper: Everything Happens for a Reason</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Research Topic</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Comparable Literature .....	17
Additional Forms of Research: <i>My Sister's Keeper</i> (film) .....	19
Additional Forms of Research: <i>God's Not Dead</i> .....	20
Additional Forms of Research: Scientific Studies .....	20
Conclusion .....	20
<b>Thesis Project: Transplanted</b> .....	<b>21</b>
Cover Page .....	21
Title Page .....	22
Copyright Page .....	23
Dedication Page .....	24
Epigraph .....	25
Thesis Project: Transplanted .....	26
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>93</b>

**Working Title**

The working title for my thesis project is *Transplanted*. This is a title that I came up with that surrounds the main plot line of my story and allows the reader to be able to search for hints at this plot line from the beginning of the story.

**Inspiration and Background of *Transplanted***

My childhood was not one heavily surrounded by religion. I did not go to church every Sunday and truly I can't remember often thinking about God, religion, or the church. From birth until my high school graduation, and my subsequent moving away to college, the most experience I had had with religion was the occasional services or Youth Nights I attended with friends.

The first significant moment in my life that pushed me to pursue a relationship with God was after watching the film *God's Not Dead*. The movie focuses on a college student in a battle of wills with his college philosophy professor. The main theme from the movie that I could recall having been, "Why does God allow bad things to happen?" As someone who has seen hardship in many capacities throughout her life, and even more after my viewing the movie for the first time, I could easily relate to why someone might pose that question. And I realized that I wasn't alone in my thinking that I didn't know how I could support a God that allowed such horrible things to happen to those he deemed his children. I eventually learned that this was because the Lord wanted to allow us all to have the choice to follow Him. Because while the Lord may have a plan and he may lead us in certain directions that he sees fit for us, we are still all able to practice free will, be it for or against the Lord's Word.

This movie was what pushed me to seek a relationship with God, or to simply learn more about what role religion could play in my life. From this moment on, I chose to always seek the

truth of my faith for myself. Even throughout my time as an undergraduate I took courses on philosophy that allowed me to look at religion from a unique perspective. I truly believe that this allowed me to choose the Lord for myself and to want to learn more. It allowed me the ability to discern the truth without pressure and in a way that truly allowed me to question my beliefs and seek answers.

When brainstorming ideas for my thesis, I knew that I wanted to remain true to myself and my beliefs while creating a story that would hold readers captive. At first, I had attempted to pick a specific verse or idea that I enjoyed and formulate my story around that, but I quickly learned that this wasn't allowing me to write for myself and produce a plot that would be interesting and flow well, it kept leading me down paths that felt forced.

Frankly, I came upon the idea for my story accidentally. Scrolling on Pinterest one day, I came across a pin that had laid out different basic ideas for a plot and using a random number generator I grabbed a few pieces of inspiration, including beginning in a hallway, a murder mystery, and some basics on the look of my main character. This didn't give me too much to work from and if anything, it only gave me a topic that was well outside of my usual comfort zone. I have always loved to read fantasy or romance and that's also always been what I have felt most comfortable in writing. However, I knew that this was something I wanted to take on headfirst as I felt that a true challenge to see how far I have come throughout my degree would be to try something different.

I knew I needed to produce a murder mystery that would engage the reader and that I could relate to my own experiences with religion. After some thinking, I was inspired by a friend who had anonymously donated her kidney. Through a series of events after the donation she eventually learned where her kidney went and continues to remain in contact with the recipient

and the little girl's family. While her story is not mine to tell, she remains an inspiration to myself and to all around her, including to the plot of my story. Organ donation is something many have probably thought about, including myself, but have more than likely not heavily considered and I knew that I wanted my story to force people think heavily on this topic. When we pass, as organ donors, our lives end so that someone else's life can continue, except in very rare cases of living donors. However, in cases where the organs come from the deceased it's typically in a tragic method – car crash, etc. I wanted to reflect on why God would allow someone to die in a tragic way in order to save the life of someone they do not know, potentially even encouraging someone to want to be an organ donor.

My story begins in the Preface, a week before the rest of the rest of the plot takes place, with a newly promoted detective and her mentor on the hunt for a serial killer in New York City. The Preface ends with the scene going dark after the detective and her mentor are presumably attacked and knocked unconscious by a dark figure in an alley. Throughout the following chapters of the story, the detective and her partner remain on the search for the killer with their freshly renewed interest in solving the case quickly as the killer's latest focus. Their search leads them to come into contact with many different individuals and their family members, all of whom recently received and are recovering from an organ transplant. Each new character that they come into contact with leads them to another character that will help them find the killer, and the identity of the killer's final victim. Additionally, each new organ recipient reminding them of the detective's mentor in many different ways, be it having the same favorite color, same favorite sport, or same favorite taste in candy, all having only started experiencing these phenomenon after the receiving the organ donation.

The story ends with the main character learning of her mentor's death at the hands of the serial killer that day in the alley when she helps detain the killer and her mentor is no longer there. While a typical murder mystery attempts to find the killer, I knew that I didn't want to draft a typical story; that's why my plot attempts to find the final victim as one of the main drivers as well. The search for the final victim is meant to show the mentor helping the detective see the good that came from her having passed and showing how everything happens for a reason.

### **Introduction to the Manuscript**

No detective ever hopes to have an active serial killer on their hands, never mind a detective that is only a few months into her new promotion. However, Detective Joy Livingston finds herself in this exact situation alongside her mentor, Detective Dolores (Lo) Clark.

After finding themselves attacked by the wannabe Ted Bundy in an alley, the two women are more determined than ever to put the killer behind bars. Will they be able to stop him before he claims another victim, or will they fall prey to his hands as well?

Follow Detectives Joy and Lo as they search the streets of New York City for the latest serial killer. An action-packed story filled with interesting characters and an unexpected love interest, *Transplanted* is guaranteed to leave you wanting more.

### **Literary Context**

The story follows Detective Joy Livingston, a twenty-two-year-old detective hot to trot in her new promotion in New York City and her mentor, Detective Dolores (Lo) Clark, a seasoned detective with more than thirty years on the job. After graduating from high school, Joy immediately signed up to be an officer at the local police department and after four years she was promoted to be a detective. Joy was encouraged to follow this path since she was a young girl

after watching Sherlock Holmes. She knew that this was what she was made to do as she was always turning everything in her life into a mystery, be it her mother losing her keys or what the family was going to have for dinner that night. Partnered with Detective Lo, Joy is eager to please and impress her mentor no matter the costs.

I knew that I wanted the main character to be lead to two main conclusions at the end of the story. One that would come from her drive to find the killer, the main plot driver, and one that would come from a secondary plot line hinted at to the reader and the Detective through a series of breadcrumbs all linked together. Should one pay close enough attention to the plot then they would be able to piece the breadcrumbs together to find the second conclusion. I also wanted to add a bit of romance to the story in order to stick to what I love while also helping to lead the reader and Detective to the conclusion while also serving as a distractor and setting the end of the story up for a potential second book.

After speaking with my friend about her experience with organ donation and her interactions with the recipient and her family, I knew exactly how to work the plot in order to arise at a twist that wouldn't be expected. In the Preface of the story, Detective Lo is killed by the serial killer, her body taken and hidden in his home until the end of the story when he is captured. In order to find the killer, the two detectives are lead to a series of individuals that give them clue after clue into the identity of the killer. However, the story's twist being that all of the individuals have just received or are caring for someone who has just received an organ donation. An organ that in the end is learned to have come from Detective Joy's mentor, Detective Lo. Throughout the story, Detective Lo will only engage with Detective Joy, finding a multitude of reasons as to why she is unable to speak with the people they come across.

At this point, I had a main plot and drivers but knew that there would be significant problems in keeping the story moving without any plot holes. One such problem that arose was how I would keep the main character, Joy, and the reader from realizing that Detective Lo was dead until I wanted them to and how I would reveal that information once I was ready. In my first brainstorming, I had wanted the story to only feature but soon realized that having the main character dead lead to many different problems that truly couldn't work and would make the story seem fantastical rather than realistic. This is why I proceeded to come up with the idea to have her mentor be killed instead. Throughout the story, Detective Lo will find different excuses to get out of speaking with the other characters, be it wanting Detective Joy to handle something on her own or needing to make a phone call. This solved my issues in wanted to keep Detective Lo's death a secret.

At the end of the story, the truth will be revealed when Detective Joy goes to detain the killer and is unable to find Detective Lo. She will inevitably stumble across information that proves that the identity of the latest victim was Detective Lo and that the individuals they came into contact with were recipients of her organs. The story will end with Detective Joy and her fellow officers at the funeral for Detective Lo.

My brainstorming process truly allowed me to think outside of the box for this particular story and allowed me to analyze all of the problems that I might face. In the end, although I felt like I might have been taking on too much after I shared my thoughts with others, I knew that this story was something I truly felt passionate about sharing.

### **Significance of the Topic as a Christian Writer**

This story is significant as a topic for Christian writers because at its basis it covers one of the main reasons why people are turned away from the faith. My story seeks to answer the



question of, “Why does God allow bad things to happen?” As a question that I have struggled with facing myself, I knew that I wanted my story to serve as a testament to the faith and to allow both Christians and non-Christians to enjoy the story and potentially learn from it.

Additionally, as Christians we are encouraged to spread the truth of Christ, and I feel like my plot does so by allowing non-Christians to gain answers on their faith as well as practicing Christians. While not directly sharing the Word of God, it shows why we should have faith in the Lord because he has faith in us, and he has a plan for us.

We are all graced with free will and choice by the Lord, whether we choose to use that for good or evil. While the actions of others may have an effect on our lives, we know that God always has a plan for us that is even bigger than we may know or understand. My story reflects that by showing that even though the detective dies, her death has to happen in order to save the lives of others that were waiting on organ donations. Although her death may be upsetting for her and her family and friends, she is able to see all good that came from it by speaking with the recipients and their families. This story should serve as a testament to our faith and help provide comfort in why the Lord allows us pain and struggle in our lives.

### Everything Happens for a Reason

I didn't always grow up with God in my life, but I did always grow up with struggles. My father was an alcoholic, my mom often worked two jobs to make ends meet, and kids weren't always very kind to me at school. It was very easy to get caught up in asking, "Why me? There has to be something better out there than this, right?" It wasn't until college when I accepted God into my life that I began to be able to cope with the struggles that I faced time and again. I found comfort in the Lord, and I also learned that I wasn't alone in my feelings. There were many other people like me that were left wondering when we might find something better in our lives. The Bible tells us, "'For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"' (*New International Version*, Jer. 29:11). The Lord has a plan for all of us that will lead us to a beautiful future, but we must have faith in him that these plans will come to fruition. My thesis project, titled *Transplanted*, features a young detective that comes to learn that the Lord always has a plan and that everything happens for a reason, even if we might not understand that reason at first. "'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"' (Matt. 11:28). You can only grow comfortable in the plan the Lord has for you and the trajectory of your life if you accept that everything happens for a reason, have faith in the plan that the Lord has for you, and are willing to face the trials the Lord sets for you.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). As God's children, much like our own parents, he only wants what is best for us. It may be hard to see that God has our best interests in mind when we are being guided by him away from sin or when we are being tested in our faith, but one must know that everything the Lord does is for a reason. Sometimes we must face evil in

order to bring about good, proving that there is always something positive that can come from a bad situation.

No one ever wants to hear that they have cancer, arguably it's some of the hardest news that someone might ever hear in their life. In the spring of 2022, Clea Shearer, co-host of *The Home Edit* on Netflix, heard those words, "you have cancer" (Miller, "How 'The Home Edit's'"). For anyone who has been in that situation, it can be hard to see where there could be any positives that may arise from that situation. However, Clea Shearer refused to allow this to remove her hope and joy in life. Clea serves as a perfect example of not allowing our trials and tribulations to thwart our ability to see the positive. In an Instagram post announcing her diagnosis to the world she said, "I have to admit, for the first few days I endured the "why me" feelings. But quickly, I started to think "honestly, why NOT me?!" I have all the support, resources, and a platform to help other people through this. So if anyone has to have breast cancer, I'll gladly let it be me" (cleashearer). Instead of focusing on the negative, Clea focused on what good could come from this for others.

Clea Shearer is a perfect example of someone seeing and believing that something positive could arise from something negative. However, there is no better location to gain an understanding of good things coming from bad than from the Word of the Lord himself. In fact, the Bible shows us that the Lord always works for the good of His people. Joseph, sold into slavery by his own flesh and blood would one day become one of the most important and powerful men of the time. When reunited with the family that had him enslaved, "Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives'" (Gen. 50:19). Joseph

knew that had he not been enslaved, he may not have been put into the position that he was in in bringing about Jesus Christ to this world.

Jesus Christ himself can be seen as an example of bad things leading to positive outcomes. He had to be crucified and subsequently die in order for us to be forgiven for our sins. Our salvation came from God giving the life of his only son for us and our sins. There truly is no greater example of God always rooting for good things to come to us even when we are in the midst of difficulties. Everything happens for a reason, and one must come to accept that as the truth.

My thesis project seeks to show this by incorporating a criminal investigation into the story. Police officers are the first line of defense against evil in the world; they are witnesses to the worst parts of the world and often question how God can allow these people to do the evil things that they do against innocent people. Joy and Dolores must work together to see and accept the plan that the Lord has for the both of them.

Before one can truly accept that everything happens for a reason, however, they must have faith in the plan that the Lord has for them without being able to see or understand what that plan is. “The Lord works out everything to its proper end – even the wicked for a day of disaster” (Prov. 16:4). While the Lord allows His children free will he still has a plan for them and for their future. One must always see all facets of what the Lord has in store for them before their plans can truly come to fruition.

A few of the easiest examples to see where the Lord would bring about good things from bad beginnings is to look at our celebrities. One such example is that of Selena Gomez. Best known for her early role as Alex in *Wizards of Waverly Place* on the Disney Channel, Selena didn't start out in the limelight. Before her claim to fame she can remember searching for

quarters with her mom to get gas for their car (“Selena Gomez”). Additionally, her mother had even said that she remembered times when she would often go to the dollar store just to put spaghetti on the table for dinner (“Selena Gomez”). It is easy to see where Selena’s family faced troubles, but they never decided to give in to those troubles. While Selena remembers the troubles that they faced, she can also recall going to church with her family and practicing in Catholicism (“Selena Gomez”). Although she faced many troubles early in her life, the Lord had plans for her. He eventually played out his plans for her, and she saw what good could come out of her struggles. Even later in her life, struggling with illness, Selena remained faithful to the Lord and accepted that he might have plans for her she may not be able to currently see.

She isn’t the only person in the world to have faith in the plans the Lord has for her, enough to wait to see them through. Rapper Nathan Feuerstein, also known as NF, has often used his Christian beliefs as inspiration for his lyrics. Much like Selena, however, he did not face an easy time early in his life. A child of divorced parents, his mother a drug addict who would one day lose her life to the disease, NF faced many hardships in his life (“NF (rapper)”). Similarly to Selena, he never allowed these hardships to sway him from his faith. He rather accepted these hardships knowing that the Lord would have a plan for him that would lead him to greater things.

While Selena and NF are both great examples of modern-day Christians who have held faith in the plans that the Lord has for them, again, it is the Word of the Lord that gives the greatest examples of faith. Noah may especially be one of the greatest examples of someone who has accepted the plans that the Lord has for him. The Lord told Noah of his plans for him, and Noah trusted in the Lord’s plans for him that good might be brought about one day. Noah trusted in the Lord and had faith in his plans for him, and he was rewarded by the Lord. It is clear that faith and trust will bring about good things for us from our trials.

At the end of my thesis project, Joy must accept the plan that the Lord has for her partner Dolores even though she may not want to agree with it. The entire story line is meant to help Joy to understand why the Lord allowed something bad to happen to Dolores and how it will turn into something positive.

However, it is lastly one's willingness to accept that they must face trials from the Lord that allows them to grow comfortable with their faith in the Lord. If we accept that God only wants what is best for us, and we accept that he always has a plan that will lead us to what he best wishes for us then we must also be willing to accept that any trials or troubles we might face are at the will of the Lord. As an American, I can see this in many different places in our country's history. Firstly, in the pilgrims who traveled to America in search of a better life and those that came after them in the search for the same. They trusted that the Lord would have a plan for them and would bring them a better life so long as they faced the trials of travelling to a new world. It is because of the pilgrims that a precedence was set in American Christian culture that we trust in the trials that the Lord sees us fit to face. The American Revolution was yet another example of a time when the actors accepted that they must face a trial in order to meet a better outcome that the Lord had planned for them.

The Bible tells us, "'Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go'" (Jos. 1:9). The Lord tells us that we will face trials, but he also tells us that he is with us, that he will stand by our side as we face these trials. It can also be read in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalms,

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely your goodness

and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psa. 23:4-6).

Even the Lord's own son was not able to avoid facing trials. Jesus Christ himself even faced trials in his time on earth. No one person is free from facing trials in order to test their faith and trust in the Lord.

It is, however, important to note that God allows us the choice to trust in him and his plans for us. It is only because of his grace for allowing us free will to make decisions that we are able to face these trials with trust and faith. This is truly what ties it all together and allows us to grow closer with the Lord. This is what is reflected in my thesis project.

We are all allowed free will by the Lord, whether we choose to use this will for good or evil is our choice only and the Lord allows us that grace. My project features both sides of the same coin. A headstrong detective faithful to the Lord and understanding that there is always a reason behind the things we face and the plans the Lord has for us. And a person who chooses to make the wrong decision, to use the gift of free will against the wishes of the Lord. It is only the negative actions of this man that will lead the detective to truly learn of the plans that the Lord has for her.

The goal of my project is to show that an unyielding faith in the plans that the Lord has will lead us to the beautiful things that the Lord has planned for us as his children. As someone who did not always have God in my life, I felt it important to share in the joys of the Lord, and to write a story that might help a non-Christian understand why it is that we hold so strongly to our faith even when we are facing hard times. If I might share a little of my own faith with the world, then I might be able to help at least one more person glow in the light of a relationship with God.

**Research Topic**

For my thesis project, there were many items that needed to be researched in order for my work to be a success. Most pressing was researching murder mystery style novels. As it is not my preferred genre to read or to write, I knew that I needed to read some other examples of works in order to know how best to write. I prefer romance, as I am a hopeless romantic myself, and it was very different to me to not only write in a different genre but to write a story that featured only one main character. And while my story does have a twist at the end it does follow a standard murder mystery format.

Additionally, I needed to research on organ donation as that was what my story relied upon in order for the twist to come together at the end. I have always been an organ donor; from the day I got my license I knew that should the moment ever arise I wanted to still be able to help others even after my passing. I wanted something good to come from my death. It was, however, one of my friends that truly inspired my interest in including organ donation into my work. My friend, Sarah, is a living organ donor and she is an inspiration to so many around her. Having anonymously donated her kidney and now working to anonymously donate a portion of her liver, I knew how much it could affect the lives of the recipients. Sarah has met the little girl that received her kidney and has had the pleasure to see how greatly it has affected her own life, like how it affected her father to receive a kidney as well. Now, it isn't my place to share her story, but it does hold an important place in my story.

With the foundation of my story firmly built based on research and fact, I knew that I would be able to create a story that would seem realistic and believable to the reader. Of all things that was what I wanted to be most important because I knew that I also wanted my story



to serve as inspiration to non-Christians to consider why we are so passionate in our faith. I knew that with a strong base in research my story might do just that.

### **Comparable Literature**

While performing my research, I found it very hard to find a novel that perfectly matched what my idea was. Which in truth, was preferred, as I knew that I set out to create something unique. However, I found novels following a female detective that looked into murders that I felt served as a great inspiration for my work as this was the main foundation of the story.

The Miss Marple series by Agatha Christie was a series that I found of great interest in my research. Although Miss Marple is far older than my character it was her role as an amateur, someone needing to prove their worth, that made me feel it was perfect inspiration for my work (Christie). Due to the nature of how I wished to work my story, I needed my character to have a reason to be by herself for most of the story without going to get help from others. Upon reviewing a few of the Miss Marple novels, one quote in *A Pocket Full Of Rye* caught my attention, “This is a wicked murderer, Inspector Neele, and the wicked should not go unpunished” (Christie 40). From the Miss Marple Series, I was able to determine that having my character strive to prove her own worth with a rather large case was exactly what I felt that I needed to do in order to make her be able to be by herself.

The second main source of my research needed to help me with my interest in organ donation and my need to see how it affected the lives of those around them, primarily the recipients and their families. For this, I went to the fairly well-known novel, *My Sister's Keeper*. The novel is better known for its movie adaptation, but it features a young girl, born to serve as a source of organs and other items for her older sister suffering from leukemia (Picoult). While the story has a bit of a heavy note, it also reads, “It is a remarkable question – Do all the wonderful

things happen when we are not aware of them?” (Picoult 200). For my story I wanted the main character to learn that even though she may have passed, there was still good that could come to the world. This in turn ties back to my theme of the story to show that God allows good things to come from bad.

However, once again, this book was not perfectly similar to the idea for my story, something I was still overjoyed about, it would help serve as inspiration. It was clear to see how organ donation could affect a family and how dealing with a sick family member could do so as well and therefore I was able to pull a lot of the emotions from that story to show how many of the family members felt.

I felt that the Miss Marple series gave me plenty of inspiration in regard to writing in the Murder Mystery style genre; however, I knew that I wanted to find more research in regard to organ donation in literature. The first book that I came across was *The Heart* by Maylis De Kerangal. *The Heart* follows three young men in France that get into an accident leaving one boy in a coma. The novel then describes the emotions that the boy’s family deals with when deciding on the collection of his organs for donation (De Kerangal). The story is rather factual and informational in nature rather than emotional; however, it will assist in my understanding of the process in order to create a story that feels and seems realistic even if there are parts of it that might not truly be possible.

With my research of *The Heart*, I also came across the novel *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro. Ishiguro’s story is a science fiction novel with similar themes to that of *My Sister’s Keeper*. *Never Let Me Go* is a story that follows clones bred to be used for organ donation and how one keeper of theirs seeks to have them viewed as individuals with an importance to society

(Ishiguro). For the end of my story, I felt it was important to know what it might feel like to have one's organs used for donation and this story gave me an idea of how to work that into my novel.

Finally, as I wanted to have some information on writing a main/side character that was deceased but guiding the main character throughout the story, I looked to Nicholas Spark's *Safe Haven*. *Safe Haven* features a woman on the run from her abusive husband, led to a small town and encouraged to pursue a relationship with a man she meets by his former wife who has passed on. This story inspired how I wished to write Detective Lo into my story and how I might best keep her secret hidden, much like in Nicholas Spark's book.

**Additional Forms of Research: *My Sister's Keeper* (film)**

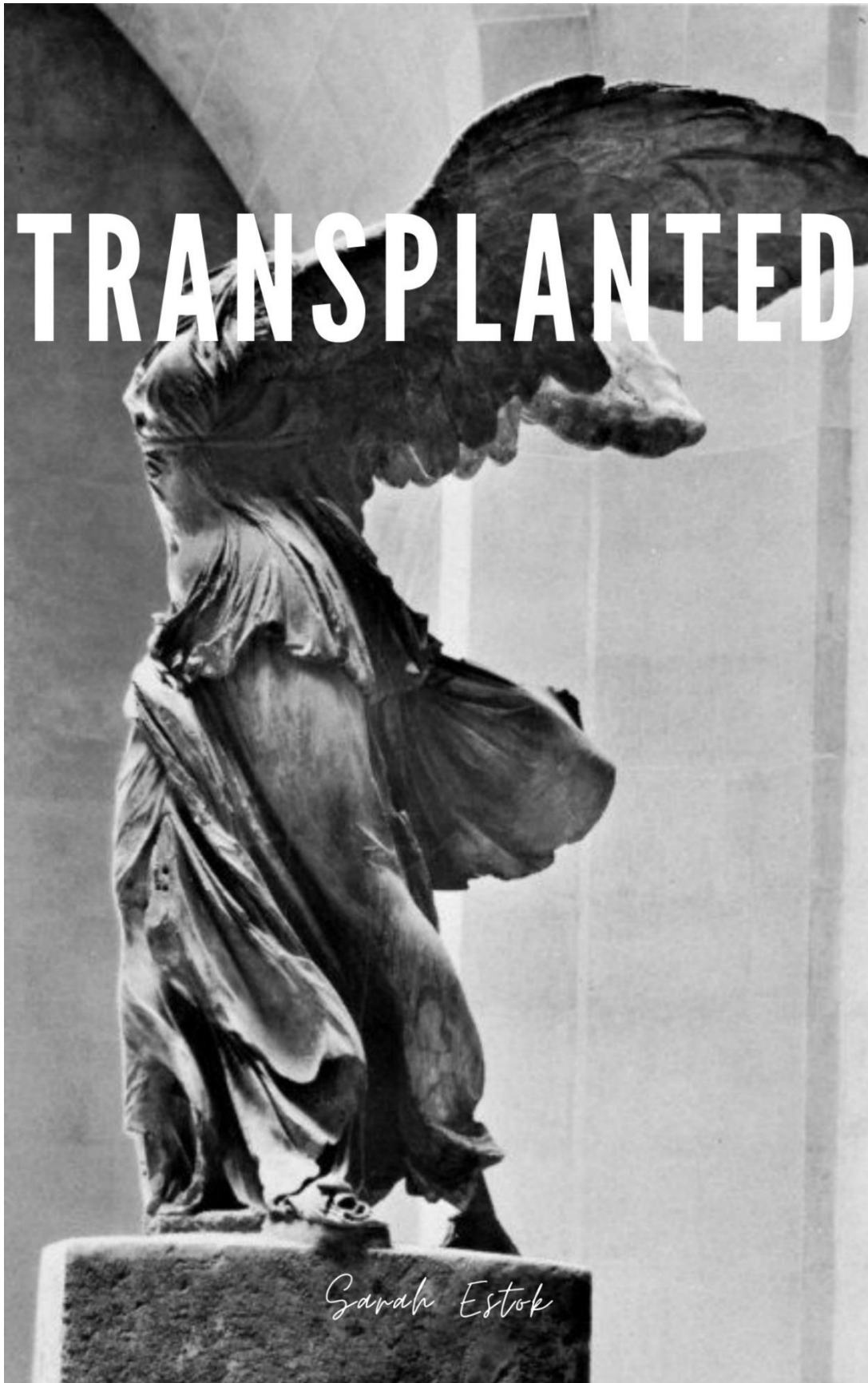
Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper* might be better known for its film adaptation which is why I wanted to ensure I included it in my research. Oftentimes enough emotions are far easier to understand when we see them expressed than by reading about them. We can see how deeply emotions are felt by the face and actions and I can better understand those emotions to be able to put them into words. The final line of the film is exactly why I felt it important to include, saying, "I'll never understand why Kate had to die and we all got to live. There's no reason for it, I guess. Death's just death, nobody understands it. Once upon a time, I thought I was put on earth to save my sister. And in the end, I couldn't do it. I realize now, that wasn't the point. The point was I had a sister. She was fantastic. One day I'm sure I'll see her again. But until then, our relationship continues" (*My Sister's Keeper*). We do not understand death or why someone dies before we wish them too. That is why this plays into my story, because we must trust the plans the Lord has for us and why my character must be led to this conclusion by her mentor.

### **Additional Forms of Research: Scientific Studies**

The twist that my story ends with relies much on details laid out throughout the plot in order to make it work for the reader. I want to lay a metaphorical trail of breadcrumbs for the reader so that they might have thoughts on what the twist may be should they pay close enough attention. Therefore, I wanted to attempt to make it as realistic as possible throughout the story so no one would suspect that Detective Lo had actually passed at the beginning of the plot. Scientific research has shown that in some heart transplants, there is a scientific reason for why the recipient of an organ might take on different attributes of the donor, things like food preferences or personality changes (Leister). As the breadcrumbs that I plan to leave rely solely on this detail, I found it incredibly important to include in my research so that I knew it was something truly capable of happening.

### **Conclusion**

My thesis project and research has been formed and written with one purpose in mind: to help others. I have always been driven to see and be the good in the world, and I wanted my project to be no different. It is my hope that my story might inspire the reader to any multitude of conclusions. Whether that conclusion lead them to become a detective, find God, be an organ donor or to simply seek to help others then I will have completed my only goal in life.



*Sarah Estok*

# Transplanted

**Sarah Estok**

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To my mother, who supports me always. I love you.

To the family and friends who stood by my journey.

And to Sarah, thank you for being my inspiration and also my friend.

To learn more about organ donation, please visit: <https://donatelife.net/>

Or, to learn more about living donors, please visit: <https://unos.org/transplant/living-donation/>



*And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am. Send me.” – Isaiah 6:8 ESV*

## Chapter One – The Attack

Joy Livingston had always believed that everything happened for a reason. The most recent example being her spilling hot coffee on her pants as she left her apartment that morning. She'd had on her favorite pant suit, consisting of navy-blue slacks and blazer with a baby blue shirt underneath. The suit flattered all five feet two inches of her and complimented her blonde hair and blue eyes.

She'd been forced to change, and knowing she'd be late anyway, she stopped at the Starbucks on the corner to grab a vanilla latte before heading to the precinct to replace the one she had lost. That's how she found herself stuck in Manhattan traffic just before rush hour, reminiscing on the past few months and how she was finally in her dream position at work.

She'd always been a regular Nancy Drew ever since her father let her watch Sherlock Holmes as a child. Joy had made puzzles out of everything, even putting her detective skills to work looking for her mother's phone or the keys to the family car.

She had wanted to be a detective for as long as she could remember. That's why she moved away from her family's ranch that sat just outside of Billings, Montana right after she graduated from high school. She was hired as a New York City police officer and four short years later she was finally promoted to detective.

As Joy looked out the windows of her beaten up Honda Civic and out onto the busy streets of New York City packed with other commuters and yellow taxi cabs, she knew that everything in her life had led her to this moment. Her parents supported her career, had even helped her move out to the city with the promise to call once a week. Most people would find her parents overbearing, but Joy knew it was because they loved her. They had always supported her and had only wanted what was best for her.

She had grown up as an only child and having helped her parents on the ranch in Montana her whole life, she grew close to them. She had found it hard when she moved away but having always felt called to something bigger, she stayed in the city to pursue her dream job.

Now, thirty minutes after Joy pulled out of her apartment's parking garage, she made it the four miles through the city to her station in the Lower East Side. She pulled into a spot, grabbed her well used, black JanSport backpack, and rushed into the building, and down the halls to her desk so she could throw down her bag before roll call.

She made it into the briefing room with only seconds to spare, sliding into a chair at a table towards the middle of the room. Next to her sat a blonde officer with a pixie cut in a pair of dark wash jeans, combat boots, a plain t-shirt, and a brown leather jacket. Detective Dolores – Lo – Clark, Joy's mentor, was a woman to be feared. With more than thirty years of experience with the New York City Police Department, Detective Lo was the perfect mentor, if only Joy could get her to like her.

The woman had more than earned her reputation for being tough on new officers, especially those placed under her wing. She'd made more than one rookie cry while on their shift, but it was all because she cared...in her own weird way.

"Alright, everyone! Settle down!" The Chief of Police, Gunner Brown, yelled from the front of the room. He was a tall, broad man with short dark hair buzzed on the sides from his time in the military. The chatter died down and all heads turned to the front of the room, the only sound being the scrape of chairs on the linoleum floor.

"For most of you, today should be an easy day," the Chief announced as he glanced around the room. Although, as his brown eyes made contact with Detective Joy as he said, "but for others...today will be rough."

As she listened to the Chief call out assignments, she could feel her mentor's eyes burning holes through her temple. She knew she'd be in trouble for showing up late, coffee in hand and they would both pay the price. And when the Chief finally got to their assignment, she knew why.

“Detective Livingston, nice of you to grace us with your presence. Don't think I didn't see you slide in here seconds before me. That's why you and Detective Clark will be scanning the alley off of Essex again for anything forensics might have missed since the last body was dropped. Don't forget gloves...you'll need them to dig through the dumpsters for anything we missed.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. It won't happen again, sir,” Joy replied.

Although she knew, just as much as he knew, that it would more than likely happen again. She knew she was lucky that she was good at her job, otherwise she might have been fired as quickly as she had been promoted. She'd always been characteristically late. Joy blamed it on being a Gemini but that usually just earned her an eye roll.

“Sure, it won't, just get out there and find something so we can get this psycho off the streets, Livingston.”

The psycho in question being the serial killer that had been stealing women off the streets, torturing, and killing them, before dropping them off in an alley for the police to find. Women that all looked suspiciously like Joy and Detective Clark. Although a bit closer to Detective Joy's age than that of her mentor.

Standing up, Detective Clark laid her hand on Joy's shoulder, “Let's go, Yellowstone. We have a killer to catch.” Lo walked out without even glancing back at the rookie under her strict watch.

Joy followed her mentor out of the room, only stopping at her desk to grab her bag before heading out to the motor pool for their unmarked car. Joy had slid into the passenger seat, mentally preparing herself for the lecture she knew would be coming.

However, once the two were on the road, Detective Lo glanced over at Joy out of the corner of her eye, "I'm not going to lecture you. I know you know better. You know you know better. Don't do it again."

"Yes, ma'am," Joy responded, glancing over at her mentor before looking back out the windshield.

It was her mentor's clear disappointment in her actions that upset her and that's why her mentor was so good at whipping rookies into shape; she never yelled, instead she guilted you into doing better.

8

Five minutes later, the two detectives pulled into a spot on Essex Street near the alley. Essex wasn't a busy street, it had a couple of small businesses, including a sandwich shop across from the alley and a pizza shop that's back door opened right into the alleyway.

As Joy stepped out of the car and onto the sidewalk, she reminded herself of one of her mantras: everything happens for a reason. At least that was what she wanted to believe as she followed her mentor into the dark and narrow alley. Yes, she was late to work, but maybe she'd have been in an accident if she'd left on time.

That's what she reminded herself as the two women began to search the alley. Detective Joy slipped on a pair of latex gloves and searched inside the trash cans that lined the brick walls. The more she searched the more she was able to confirm that this was indeed meant to be a punishment.

She had only made it halfway down the alley before a scurrying sound rose from behind the trash can at her back. She turned around and made the most unladylike screech just as her back hit the red brick wall behind her, forcing the air out of her lungs in a gasp. Joy pulled her firearm from its holster at her hip and aimed it at the culprit...or above it. Her gaze tilted down, causing her to make eye contact with a giant street rat that had been searching for its next meal when it made Joy lose her cool. Her body relaxed at knowing that she wasn't about to come face to face with the serial killer but tightened right back up when she heard her mentor let out a full bellied laugh.

“Jeez, Yellowstone. You’ve lived here what...four years now? The rats shouldn’t scare you out of your pants at this point,” she teased as she too, slid her firearm back into its holster.

So while she judged Joy, she too was ridden with anxiety at being in an alley by themselves with a killer on the loose.

“You can’t tell me you aren’t a little jumpy knowing we’re in a dark alley hunting down a serial killer that grabs women that looks *EXACTLY* like us!”

Joy knew she sounded a little crazed, but this instance had to validate a little craziness.

“You’re a detective in New York City, you’ll do far worse before you retire than dig through a few trash cans in a dark alley. Get back to searching.”

Lo turned around to continue searching the dumpster at the end of the alley that belonged to the pizza shop at her mentor’s insistence.

A couple of minutes later, Joy joined Detective Lo at the end of the alley after spotting something under the dumpster her mentor had been searching moments before. The two women leaned against the dumpster in order to shift it enough to see way lay beneath.

“Push on three. One...two...three!” The two women put all their weight against the side of the dumpster, pushing it only about a foot, but that foot was all they needed.

“What is that?” Joy asked, as she bent down and picked up a piece of plastic with red spots all over it. It almost had to be dried blood, although Joy thought there was a small chance it could be marinara from the pizza shop.

“Good work. Put it in a bag and we’ll make sure it makes it to forensics,” Detective Lo turned to grab an evidence bag, not noticing that the two women were no longer alone in the alley.

“Wha-,” Joy started, as she turned towards the sound of her mentor falling to the pavement in a heap only preceded by the sound of a pipe bouncing off a skull. The only thing in her vision being the same pipe coming at her before the world faded to black.

## Chapter Two – The Waking

Joy was sure of two things:

1. She was in her bed in her apartment. And,
2. She wasn't alone in her apartment.

The familiar feel of flannel sheets was the first thing that registered in Joy's mind. The second was the ray of sun shining across her eyes. And the third was the sound of breathing coming from the other side of the room.

"I know you're awake, Yellowstone. Open your eyes."

At the sound of her mentor's voice, Joy could feel the tension in her body melt away. She opened her eyes, blinking as she glanced around the bright room she had slept in every night for the past four years. The familiar worn dresser from her childhood bedroom sat on the wall across from the wrought iron bed she was on. The thin blue comforter she purchased when she first moved to New York lay on top of her and in the corner sat the velvet green wing back chair that was now occupied by her mentor.

Joy sat up in her bed, rubbing the sleep from her eyes before beginning a round of twenty questions with her mentor. "How'd *I* get here? How'd *you* get here? What happened? How long has it been? What about - ?"

"Alright, let's start with one question at a time. I'm not up for interrogation here," Lo cut her off. "I got us here. You keep your spare key under your mat – probably shouldn't do that. It's been a little under twenty-four hours...and honestly, Joy? I don't know what happened either..." Lo trailed off.

The silence in the room was palpable. The mutual understanding that neither woman could remember anything from the alley keeping them both from speaking. Joy watched her mentor



turn her head and look out the window next to the chair that faced the busy Manhattan street below. She swore she could see the wheels turning in her mentor's head.

Joy had only worked with the woman for a few short months since her promotion, but she already had a finger on her tells. The dimple that appeared in Lo's cheek as she chewed on the inside of her mouth showed how deep in her own thoughts the older woman really was. It also proved that a woman Joy believed to be unshakable could be shaken. She decided to let her have a moment to herself, knowing she should probably take a moment to process the events of the last day as well.

The two women had been lucky. There was no way they should have made it out of that alley alive, never mind with barely a mark between the two. Of course, the lump on the back of her head that Joy could feel with the fingers she ran through her hair was a sure-fire sign that she had indeed been hit by something.

After having taken stock of the minor injury she could feel producing a headache at the base of her skull, Joy threw her comforter off of her and swung her legs to the side of the bed. She slipped her feet into the baby blue moccasins she kept next to her bed and made her way into the small bathroom that sat off her bedroom.

Her apartment wasn't much, but it was more than she could have pictured she'd been living in when she was still in Montana only dreaming about moving to New York. It was a small one bedroom, with window access to the fire escape where she often spent her mornings drinking a cup of coffee. Joy knew she'd be brewing a pot of Folgers' once she was through with her morning self-care routine. The coffee had been a habit that her father instilled in her from a young age, and she wasn't quite able to kick it yet.

By the time she washed her face, put in her contacts, did up her hair and make-up enough to be presentable, Lo had already left her bedroom and made her way into the open concept living area. Joy could hear her mentor through the door, banging cabinets and glassware and a moment later she heard the sound of her Coffee Mate turn on. Hurried by the prospect of a cup of coffee to get her mind working, Joy threw on a pair of black slacks and a white blouse before finally emerging into the living area.

“I see you found the mugs,” Joy said as she observed the fresh cup of coffee that sat on the counter, the other in the hands of her mentor. She opened her fridge and poured a hefty amount of French vanilla creamer into the cup as her mentor watched on. Lo was probably judging Joy’s taste in coffee, seeing how she always took her’s black. Finally, she grabbed the warm cup and turned to face Lo, leaning her hip against the counter behind her.

“Are you ready to talk about what happened in that alley?” Lo asked, looking Joy directly in the eye. Joy knew the woman was trying to discern if she’d lie to her about being ready, but she wanted answers too. And she sure didn’t need the older woman babying her because she didn’t think she could handle the difficult parts of the job. She wanted, no, needed, to prove her worth to the woman.

“Yeah, I need to know. Let’s go to the escape, I do my best thinking out there and I think we both might benefit from some fresh air,” Joy led the way to the escape, taking a seat on the platform as her mentor sat on the first step. Joy leaned back against the railing, setting her cup next to her as she crossed her arms over her chest in a protective manner.

“We shouldn’t have made it out of there,” Joy said, looking down onto the street below where the people looked like ants. Her apartment was on the fifteenth floor of the building, just high enough to block a little of the sound from the world below. It often made living in the city a

little easier for her since she was used to sleeping in far quieter conditions. “It had to have been him, right? The killer? Maybe he was watching us the whole time and only attacked when he thought he might get caught.”

“It could be. That’s the most probable reason...or we spooked a homeless man that had been sleeping among the trash. There’s only one way to find out...”

Joy finally looked over at her mentor, “I don’t know if I can continue on the case. It feels too...personal now. I mean, we look like the women he takes, you realize that, right?”

“You can’t live in fear, kid. You wanted this more than anything. I promise you’ll see much worse before you retire. And it feeling personal? You should want it even more now,” Lo emphasized her words with a pointer finger aimed at Joy.

Joy brought her knees up, bringing them into the circle of her arms and rested her cheek on her knee. She knew Lo was right, she couldn’t stop now, she was lucky...but the next woman? She might not be, and Joy took an oath to protect and defend and she couldn’t let one roadblock scare her. She knew being a detective wouldn’t be easy, she needed to push through and be strong. If not for herself, but for the killer’s victims and for the other women that looked just like she did that might not be so lucky.

“Alright,” Joy straightened her back and looked over at her mentor. “What’s the plan?”

## Chapter Three – The Beginning

Joy and Lo finished their coffee quickly, placing the dirty mugs in the sink before immediately heading downstairs to the unmarked car parked on the street. She didn't know how Lo was good enough to drive them back to her place, but she was grateful for it, nonetheless.

"I managed to get it here while you were still out of it," Lo shrugged before tossing the keys to Joy and heading to the passenger side.

"I- you- what?" Joy stuttered through, shocked that her mentor had tossed her the keys after never allowing her to drive previously while the two women were on shift.

"Just get in the car, Yellowstone, before I change my mind."

Joy jumped in the car, immediately starting it up and pulling out onto the street once they were safely inside. "So, what's our next step? Just head to the station and hope something jumps out at us or...?" Joy glanced over at her mentor through the corner of her eye, catching the woman tapping her fingers on the arm rest built into the door, another nervous tick she's caught onto.

"What do we know so far about the killer?" her mentor asked.

Joy knew this was one of her tests. Since she first started working with Detective Lo, she caught on quick to how the woman worked, understanding that she needed to be at the top of her game if she wanted to stick around for more than a day. One of her favorite tests being a vigorous round of twenty questions. It was meant to test if Joy knew all the facts of a case, but often, she wondered if it was really just to help build her confidence in stressful situations. Being interrogated by your mentor apparently being one of those occasions.

“I mean, we really know more about the victims than we do the killer, everything has been too clean...too careful. Like it’s someone who knows how to kill or maybe someone that has had it planned out...”

“That’s not what I asked,” her mentor responded, her tone reflecting her disappointment in Joy’s response. “What do we know about the *killer*, we can discern plenty about the killer from what we have learned so far, especially through the victims. Go over everything.”

“Alright. Well, we know that the killer targets women in their twenties, all blonde. So, it’s more than likely that the killer is a man...” Joy looked at her mentor for approval on her thoughts. Her mentor nodded her head and waved her hand in Joy’s direction, urging her to continue. “More than likely he’s young, preferring women closer to his own age, someone who can blend in well. This is New York, there’s always someone around so he couldn’t have been seen as suspicious while he was dragging around a giant bag with a body in it. We can probably assume he’s attractive, then? It would also support his ability to lure these young women in.”

“Good, see, we know more about him than you think,” her mentor stated matter of fact. The woman was always able to get a dig in, especially if she was able to prove how good she was at her job at the same time.

“Yes, because we’ve really narrowed it down,” Joy said, her voice dripping in sarcasm. “An attractive man in New York City in his twenties...only thousands of those around here. Just your regular Ted Bundy.” Joy rolled her eyes as she pulled into the station’s parking lot.

The women stepped out of the car, heading towards the entrance. However, about twenty yards from the door Lo stopped walking. She pulled out her phone, and quickly flashed the screen towards Joy before putting it up to her ear, “I gotta take this, grab your things and your notes on the case and meet me back at the car.” Lo walked away, speaking into the phone, the

words indistinguishable to Joy. It wasn't the first time her mentor walked off on the phone and it sure wouldn't be the last time either.

Joy headed into the building, waved hello to the officer at the front desk – a rookie she didn't know the name of – and made a beeline for her own. If she kept Lo waiting longer than the woman thought was necessary, she knew she'd hear about it later. The woman lacked patience; a trait Joy had plenty of to go around. Having grown up on a ranch out west, she learned how important patience could be and couldn't understand why it seemed that no one in the Big Apple had the same trait.

What Joy's mentor lacked in patience, though, she made up for in understanding. The older woman could relate to anyone, often preferring to talk to victims and their families over Joy since she had the experience to do so. The woman could talk to anyone, about anything, at any time. It was a trait that Joy admired, finding it hard to relate to people that grew up so differently from herself, but she was always willing to try.

Joy made it to her desk with no disruptions, grabbing the items she needed that had been left on her desk from the previous morning and the notebook she designated for this case that had all her notes. She had always preferred to take all her notes by hand and keep them that way, something she had begun to do in high school. Her parents weren't poor, but they didn't have a ton of money so growing up she didn't have a lot of technology, only getting her first laptop her senior year of high school after she saved up enough cash from her summer job.

Her parents always said, 'you can take the girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the girl.' She always valued her meager upbringing and knew it was what made her so unique, and she wouldn't change a thing.

Having all her belongings in hand, Joy attempted to sneak back out of the station unnoticed but after rounding the final corner to the door she nearly ran into Special Agent Domenico Luca.

“Where are you headed in such a rush?”

She brushed her hair behind her ear, glancing over his shoulder to the door she had almost made it to, “To do my job, some of us have to work for a living, Special Agent.”

The larger-than-life man let out a laugh, throwing his head back. She hadn’t thought what she said was very funny, but she had always thought the man was a little off. He had seemed shady to her, appearing one day out of the blue and always taking calls in dark corners. Nevertheless, she still had to work with him, and she may as well make it enjoyable. That’s why she was never afraid to show the man a little sass every now and then, it was good for his ego.

“You are a funny one, Joy. If your day job doesn’t work out you could always be a comedian,” he gave her a cheeky wink. Then, turning serious, he asked her again, “Seriously though, where are you headed out to so quickly? Anything to do with that serial killer case you’ve been working on?”

Joy rolled her eyes at the man. He’d always been butting into her cases ever since she had made detective. She knew it was mostly because he had an interest in her, but he’d really been on her about this case. As a federal agent though he had no jurisdiction unless the killer decided to cross state lines. Until that happened though she was determined to keep him away from the case.

“I’m headed to. Do. My. Job.” Joy was sure to emphasize every word hoping it would get through his head, then shoved past him to make her way for the door she had almost made it to before he stopped her.

“Call me if you need help, Joy. Or...just call me,” Domenico called behind her, throwing a cheeky wink her way.

“I can assure you that I won’t be calling you, Special Agent,” Joy threw over her shoulder. “Especially not as a personal call...” she mumbled to herself as she made her way through the glass door and back out into the New York City air. She raced toward the car, hoping the Special Agent wasn’t on her tail after their run in.

When she finally made it to the car, she found Lo leaning against the passenger door with her arms crossed over her chest. “Why are you breathing so heavy?” her mentor asked as she opened the door, climbing in.

Joy got into the car, started it, and buckled her seatbelt before she responded, throwing her head back against the headrest behind her before looking out of the corner of her eye at her mentor. “Two words: Domenico. Luca.”

The sound of her mentor’s laugh filled the car as Joy pulled back out onto the busy streets of the city.



## Chapter Four – The Return

Joy felt a sense of déjà vu as she pulled into a spot off Essex Street. This time though she felt a sense of dread that sat in her stomach like a brick. Her chest constricted and her muscles tensed as an ache began in the back of her skull. She couldn't get herself to move from the car as her mentor stepped out, slamming the door behind her.

Joy turned her head as Lo knocked on the window, "Get out of the car, Yellowstone. We talked about this already. Don't make me come in and get you."

Joy took a deep breath before slowly making her way from the car and onto the sidewalk next to Lo. Blackness began to creep into the corners of her vision. The keys to the car jangled from her shaking fingers as she slid them into her pocket.

"Don't let fear control your actions, Joy." Lo walked into the alley, headed right for the dumpster at the back. Joy followed, slowly and as she wiped her clammy hands on her pants. She met Lo at the end of the alley and helped search the area around the dumpster and just inside, keeping an eye on the opening of the alley.

"It's not here, whatever we thought we saw...it's long gone..." Joy's words were filled with despair. Any hope she had was crushed by the missing piece of plastic with blood on it. Not even a drop of blood remained in the alley, rather it looked as though the area had been cleaned recently. "It had to have been him. He must've known we were onto him...about to have a break in the case and he took care of it."

"Keep looking. Maybe we missed something yesterday that will give us a break." Lo set out to keep searching the alley, Joy right on her heels.

"What if we don't find anything? What's the next steps?" Joy asked her mentor.

Lo looked over at Joy before continuing to move around the trash in front of her, “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.” Lo’s response was shaky, even she wasn’t confident that they would find anything to go off of.

The two women searched the entire alley, top to bottom, not finding anything of note to help them in the case. They met back up at the opening of the alley, both standing on the sidewalk lost in thought.

“There has to be something here that can help us!”

Joy threw her hands in the air before analyzing her surroundings. Suddenly, her gaze caught on the sandwich shop across the street. The small shop had a red and white awning and a glowing sign in the window that said *Vinnie’s Sub Shop*. She knew the place, had even grabbed a sandwich there before on her lunch break while she was in the area. She remembered it being good, had also remembered it being a small family-owned business.

What she didn’t remember was the brand-new security camera hanging off the awning outside. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?” Joy asked her mentor, her voice rising with a hope that simultaneously filled her chest with warmth.

Joy started across the street, practically at a run, her mentor not far behind. As she stepped onto the sidewalk on the other side of the street she crashed into a tall body, having been distracted by the newly found hope in the form of a hunk of metal and wire.

“I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed, reaching out to steady the person she had slammed into. The tall, blonde-haired man continued on, not glancing her way in true New York fashion. “I didn’t even see him coming.” She really hadn’t, she was so lost in her mission to learn more about the camera that she had put blinders on.

Her mentor just shook her head, knowing that oftentimes her mentee could have a one-track mind. “You go inside and question the owner, I’ll keep watch outside, see if I can find anything else. Good job, Yellowstone.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll do that. Thank you.” Joy stepped through the glass door, a smile on her face from the praise and from the excitement that filled her at finally getting a break in the case.

## Chapter Five – The Break

The clang of the bell above the door announced Joy's entrance into the small sandwich store. "I'll be out in a minute," came a male voice from the swinging metal door that led to the kitchen.

Joy made her way to the counter; the smell of fresh bread and a variety of meats and cheeses met her nose. She'd been here before, remembered the small seating area up front and the long counter with the clear cases holding all the toppings. The shop had always been homely, having been owned and run by the same family for years. The walls featured family photos of the owners' children and grandchildren growing up. Joy had always loved the little place because it always reminded her of her childhood home and her family.

The kitchen door swung out towards her, and a young man walked through, drying his hands on a rag that he proceeded to throw over his shoulder. "What can I get you, Miss?" he asked, pulling on a pair of kitchen grade gloves.

Joy pulled out her badge, showing the man, "Hopefully some answers. My name is Detective Joy Livingston with the NYPD. Are you willing to answer some questions for me, Mr...."

"Castellone. But my first name's Vinnie, Detective." Vinnie pulled the gloves off his hands, throwing them in the trash behind the counter before turning to face the detective again.

Joy eyed the man up, her brows coming together and her lips pursing in confusion. "I've met Vinnie before and you..."

"Ah, you've met my father. He actually owns the place but he's in the hospital at the moment, so I'm covering the shop. Otherwise, he would've had to close the place for the next couple of weeks."

Joy nodded her head in understanding, “Is he alright? I’ve been coming here a little while now, he always reminded me of my own father.”

Vinnie rubbed the back of his neck and glanced away quickly before looking at the clock on the wall. He looked back to Joy before responding, “Yeah, he’s gonna be. He’d been in kidney failure for a while, spent a good number of years waiting for a transplant. I guess a donor came in last night, he and my niece got the call to go in. She’s been sick too; both needed a kidney and were a match, but neither could donate to the other.” He shook his head, “I’m sorry, you said you had some questions? I don’t want to burden you with my family stuff.”

Joy placed her hand over her heart, “Don’t worry about it, that’s amazing they both got what they needed. It’s a miracle.” She reached into the bag that had been resting on her shoulder before pulling out her notepad and pen. “I’ll get out of your way quick, I’m sure you want to go see your family.”

“Yeah, I’m going to head over there soon. They should both be getting out of surgery right about now,” he replied, once again glancing over to the clock on the wall.

Joy opened her notebook, “I’m sure you’re aware of the series of killings that have happened in the area recently?”

“Of course, I am. Who isn’t?” Vinnie crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the counter behind him. “My sister and niece are blonde; I’ve never been more worried about them in the city by themselves than I am now.”

“Believe me...I get it.” Joy truly did understand. Lo and her both fit the killer’s preferences, she always watched her back, but more so now. She refused to be a victim...again, at least. She surely wouldn’t allow him to get her a second time. “I’m sure you also know that a body was found in the alley across the street...?”

Vinnie simply nodded his head once in response, but Joy could see his jaw clench. She could only imagine how the man felt. It was clear the family was close, so this must have been extremely hard on him, especially while his niece and father were sick.

“My partner and I noticed that you have a camera outside on the awning. We were hoping you might be able to share that footage? It would be a huge help in the case.” Joy’s chest constricted at having shared the real reason she was in the little shop questioning the man. She could only hope that he was able to help them.

“I’m going to be honest, Detective...” Vinnie uncrossed his arms and placed his hands on the edge of the counter he was leaning against. “This is the first I am hearing about a camera outside. My sister and I have been taking turns covering the place when my father isn’t able to come in, she must have installed it. She’s far techy-er than I ever will be. Explains why she’s making the big bucks.”

Joy could feel her shoulders slump and Vinnie must have seen it as well as he immediately continued speaking, “I can see if she’d be able to speak with you, even if for only a moment to get you the footage. Give me a moment and I’ll give her a call.”

“You don’t have to...,” Joy began, but was immediately cut off by Vinnie holding up a finger.

The man already had his phone pulled out and was putting it up to his ear. Joy could only mouth thank you as she waited for him to finish calling. While she felt terrible that he was bothering his sister who was more than likely in the hospital waiting for her daughter and father to get out of surgery, she couldn’t help but feel some relief at finally getting a break. Hopefully, the footage might provide them with something to go off of.

## Chapter Six – The Sister

Joy headed back outside and into the noise of New York City. She scanned the sidewalk for her mentor, finding her leaning up against the side of their car waiting.

“Find out anything good?”

“Kind of? The owner’s son said it was his sister that installed the cameras,” Joy said as she gestured once again across the street at the security camera hanging outside the small shop.

“He didn’t know much about it, but he gave me his sister’s number-“

Lo cut Joy off as she searched her notepad for the number she had jotted down inside, “Did you get any useful information?”

Joy glanced up from her notebook before continuing her search, “Yes, I got useful information. The sister had the cameras installed; said she was at the hospital right now for her daughter and their father but that she should be expecting us.”

Lo simply nodded her head and got into the passenger side of the car. Joy stood there, slack jawed, for a long moment before she followed her mentor into the car. She buckled her seatbelt and started the car before finally turning in her seat to face Lo with an incredulous look on her face.

“Seriously? Nothing but a head nod I wouldn’t have even caught if I wasn’t looking at you? I got USEFUL information. This is more than we’ve had to go off of in weeks!”

Joy knew she was probably overreacting slightly. More than slightly, but she knew she had done a good job and she wanted recognition for it. It wouldn’t kill Lo to give her some praise every now and then. Of course, as an only child Joy often received recognition and praise from her parents. They threw it around like the rice they threw at her cousin’s wedding. From her

mentor though? Nothing, ever. You'd have thought the woman was allergic to praise with the way she avoided it like the plague.

When Lo didn't respond after a few tense moments, Joy faced forward once again, practically throwing herself against the back of the seat in aggravation. She threw the car into drive and pulled out onto the street headed for the hospital. The silence was practically deafening after her outburst, but still, she couldn't find it in her to apologize for her actions. She needed to stand up for herself, no matter the costs.

"You did good, Yellowstone. But," Lo paused, looking over at Joy. "I won't always be around to praise your actions, so don't get used to it. I'm prouder of you for standing up for yourself."

Joy didn't know how to respond to that. She was sure her mentor would take her down a notch after she so rudely lost her cool. What she wasn't expecting was to be given praise for her actions. Instead, she just drove on, only taking her eyes off the road to occasionally glance at her mentor, who kept her eyes trained out the passenger window the entire ride, lost in her thoughts.

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A short fifteen minutes later, Joy pulled the car into the parking garage of Mount Sinai. She gathered her belongings and moved to get out of the car but was halted by her mentor answering her cell phone, something Joy only recognized by the glare of her mentor's yellow cell phone case out of the corner of her eye.

"Hello? Yeah, I got a minute."

Joy could only hear her mentor's side of the call but could almost immediately tell it was something related to work. She moved to sit back in the car and wait to go in together, but before she could shut the door Lo waved her hand at her and mouthed that she should go on without her.



Joy mouthed back to confirm that she was sure and once the confirmation was delivered, she got out, leaving the keys in the cup holder.

A team of one, Joy made her way into the hospital and headed for the front desk. She had always disliked hospitals. She didn't fully have a reason, it could have been the smell of antiseptic that filled the air, or maybe the way the building always felt so sterile. So unlike the place she grew up in that gave her comfort.

Her shoes slapped against the linoleum floor as people rushed around her. The desk at the center of the entry was filled with nurses in scrubs and receptionists in business casual that sat at computers. The circular desk wasn't hard to miss as being the place to get information, which is why Joy made a beeline for it.

Joy headed right for a woman with blonde hair and a blue blouse, "Hi, my name is Detective Joy Livingston." She flashed her badge at the woman, confirming that she was, in fact, a detective before continuing. "I'm here to see a Sophie Castellone. Her brother sent me your way and told me she'd be here with her daughter."

The woman glanced away from her computer for only a second, scanned Joy up and down like she was taking stock of her before she continued to type away on her keyboard. Just as Joy was about to repeat her question, the receptionist, Amanda, if her nametag was correct, spoke, "Room 322, elevators are at the end of the hallway on your left."

Unnerved by the bluntness of the conversation with the receptionist, Joy quickly thanked the woman before making her way to the elevators she directed her to. She stood and watched the numbers change as the elevator car came closer to the first floor as an odd sense of dread filled her chest and made it difficult to breathe. She pushed the feelings off as those that came

from simply disliking hospitals as she finally stepped onto the elevator alone and was whisked up to the third floor.

Once she stepped off the elevator, she followed the signs that directed her to room 322 and knocked on the door once she arrived. It was cracked open and after she knocked, she heard a voice gently call out to enter.

The room was large and split down the center by a blue cloth curtain that hung from the ceiling. While the far bed was vacant the one closest to the door held a small body covered with a thin hospital sheet. The girl on the bed couldn't have been older than four or five tops and looked so fragile laying in the sterile room with more wires than Joy could count hooked up to her body.

Finally, Joy took note of the woman sitting next to the bed once she reached her hand across the girl in Joy's direction, "You must be Detective Joy?" the woman asked as Joy reached forward and shook her hand firmly.

"Yeah, I hope I'm not intruding..." Joy glanced back down to the girl in the bed, her heart skipping a beat in sorrow at what this family must be going through. She couldn't imagine having two family members in the hospital at the same time.

"No, of course you aren't! I wouldn't have told my brother to send you this way if I wasn't willing to answer some questions."

"Thank you, I promise not to take up too much of your time. I hope your daughter's surgery went well? Oh, and your father's?"

Joy probably shouldn't have prodded into the family's business; it wasn't why she was here in the first place, but it was so hard not to when she was surrounded by flowers and balloons for a girl who probably wasn't even in kindergarten yet.

The woman, Sophie as Joy could now confirm, pushed hair off her daughter's forehead, looking at her with such intense love in her eyes, but with something else too. It almost seemed as though Joy could sense relief and once Sophie replied, she knew she was correct.

"It went wonderfully. She'd been waiting for a kidney for so long...we almost didn't think it would happen... my father, too, if I'm honest." Sophie looked up into Joy's eyes, "Is it horrible that I can feel such intense happiness over someone else dying so my daughter and my father could have a chance at life? He wants to watch his granddaughter grow up so badly..."

Joy couldn't respond quick enough, "Of course not, I can only imagine how you must have felt waiting. You're allowed to feel whatever emotions you want to feel."

Sophie continued to run her hand over her daughter's blonde locks, hair that looked exactly like her mother's only a little shorter. Her other hand reached up to wipe a tear off her cheek, so Joy handed her a tissue off the rolling table at the foot of the bed.

"Thank you. I'm sorry for dropping that on you. You must be busy, ask me anything you need to."

"I'm sure you are aware of the series of killing that have been taking place in the city?"

"Of course, who isn't? It's all over the news. My husband and brother won't even let me out of the house by myself since I fit the description the psycho is hunting after."

"Yeah, I fully understand..."

Joy ran her hand over her own blonde hair, truly understanding what it felt like to be scared. She was lucky, she had been attacked and she had gotten away, but next time? It could be Sophie and her daughter that get grabbed and maybe they won't be so lucky.

"Anyway, my partner and I were searching the alleyway that's across from your father's shop when we noticed that there was a security camera hanging in the front window. I was

hoping that you'd be able to provide us with that footage since it looked like it was aimed right at the alley."

Joy watched as Sophie's face fell, "I...the camera doesn't work..."

"What do you mean it doesn't work?" Joy could feel her heartrate rising with her panic. They had just found the one thing that should have given them a break. There was no way that this would fall through for them.

"I'm so sorry, they were never hooked up. With my father being sick we wanted to install the camera for when no one could be around...I haven't been able to get to setting it up yet."

Joy let her body fall back into the green leather chair on the opposite side of the bed from Sophie. Her back was hunched, her hands hung limp between her thighs, the pages of her notebook crinkling as they hung loose. A million thoughts swarmed through her head: how would her mentor react, what would they do next...she couldn't believe this was another dead end.

"I'm so sorry..."

"It's alright. It's not your fault, it was a lead, but they often turn out to be dead ends. Is there anything else you can think of that might help us? A body was dropped there only a few days ago, it's hard to believe that no one in this city saw something suspicious."

Joy wanted to remain hopeful that Sophie would know something, would have anything that might help them, but that hope dwindled with every dead end that they came to.

Sophie's eyes bounced around the room, searching her mind for even a small detail that she might be able to remember.

"Well, I think the pizza place across the street might have information...or even a camera on the alley. They'd been having issues with raccoons digging through the dumpsters out back,

the owner Fernando, his wife wouldn't even take out the trash it got that bad. You could always check with them?"

"Yes, thank you! That's super helpful!" Joy's back straightened and she wrote everything Sophie said down in her notebook, not wanting to miss a single detail about something that might help their case.

While writing in her notebook, Joy noticed a small movement from the bed. A twitch of a finger, nothing more but both women shot up and moved closer to the bed. Sophie placed her hand on her daughter's shoulder, "Gia, are you awake baby?"

Gia made a small movement with her hand that was still in her mother's. Moments later her eyes fluttered, struggling to come out of the anesthesia she had been under. Joy rushed to the doorway of the room, peeking outside, and scanning the hallways for anyone that could help before flagging down a nurse to come to the room.

The nurse came immediately and began to check the girl's vitals, prompting her to answer a few questions. "And lastly, what's your favorite color?" the nurse asked Gia.

"LELLOW!" Gia shouted, the 'y' still being a difficult letter for her to pronounce.

"Gia, are you sure that's your favorite color?" Sophie asked her daughter, confusion drawing her brows together on her forehead.

Clearly intruding on a personal moment, Joy finally pulled a business card from the back of her pocket and handed it over to Sophie. "If you can think of anything else, anything at all, big or small...call me."

"Of course," Sophie nodded her head and turned back to her daughter laying on the hospital bed. Joy made her way to the doorway but was stopped before she could exit. "Oh! Detective! One other thing, there's an older woman that lives above my father's shop, rather

nosey woman if I'm honest...but nothing happens in that neighborhood without her knowing. She might be someone you could talk to."

Joy nodded her head and thanked Sophie for the information before making her way from the room. She glanced back at the mother and daughter, filled with a renewed energy for the case that she hadn't had in her earlier in the day. And just when she turned back around, she could have sworn she heard Sophie mutter, "She told me yesterday her favorite color was blue..."

## Chapter Seven – The Pizza Shop

As she made her way down the hallways back to the parking garage, Joy could only contemplate how weird the after effects of anesthesia were. She couldn't imagine how a small child would feel coming out of it, especially after such a long surgery. The poor girl was delirious...but she'd live to see another day, and that is what was most important.

She arrived at the car and immediately got in, turning in her seat to face her mentor, hands resting in her lap. "I have good news and I have bad news..."

Lo let Joy fall back to thud against the seat before turning to look at her. Joy simply turned her head and smiled widely at her mentor, patiently waiting for which news the older woman wanted to hear first.

"I suppose I'll want to hear the good news second...might help me forget what you're about to tell me."

"Welllllll..." Joy started. "You know that camera at the shop we came to ask about?" She waited until her mentor cocked a brow to acknowledge that she had spoken. "It seems that it uhm, it, uh, it doesn't work."

Joy rushed through the last part of the sentence hoping to get it out quickly. And just as Lo went to complain about Joy's inability to gather useful information, Joy held up her hands, palms facing out, to halt her.

"However! Good news is that the pizza shop across the street? Yeah, they have a WORKING camera pointed at the alley way. And there is a nosey old lady living above the sandwich shop we could question."

Lo scanned Joy with her eyes, a small smirk appearing on her lips before she shook her head at her rookie. “Alright, Yellowstone, you saved yourself this time. Now, let’s get back over there.”

The grin on Joy’s face lasted the entire ride back over to Essex Street.

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Joy once again pulled into a spot on Essex Street and wondered if her day was going to just continue to bring her back to this spot over and over again. So far, it seemed as if it would, and she wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

Once both women were out of the car and on the sidewalk, Joy began to walk towards that pizza shop that shared a wall with the alleyway. When she didn’t hear her mentor’s footsteps next to her, she turned around to find her mentor leaning against the passenger door of the car.

“Go on,” Lo waved her hands at Joy in a shoo-ing motion. “Might as well allow you to continue to go on your own. It’s good experience and you need it.”

Joy rolled her eyes, but she wouldn’t give up the opportunity to prove herself to the woman she looked up to. This was her shot to prove her worth and she wasn’t going to blow it, not on this case. Not with so much riding on them finding the killer.

Joy walked through the open doorway of the pizza shop. With all the ovens going it was a bit toasty in there which explained why the door had been propped open. Much like many other small restaurants in the city, the place felt cozy with a couple small wooden booths in the open space in front. Behind the booths sat the counter with an old register and a glass case that showed multiple different types of pizza, all available to grab a slice.

She walked up to the register and as usual pulled her badge from her pocket and held it up for the young girl at the register to see. The girl turned around and called into the kitchen,



“Papà, la polizia è qui!” When she turned back to Joy she simply said, “One minute,” before leaving to go to the back of the restaurant.

Joy simply shook her head at the odd interaction and only a moment later a man of average build with clear Italian features came through the kitchen doors towards her. He had dark hair and brown eyes and was wearing a white apron over his clothes. He dried his hands on the apron as he approached Joy waiting at the counter.

“I apologize for my daughter,” he began in a thick Italian accent, his words spoken slowly as if English wasn’t his first language. “We encourage her to speak Italian to us and English to others, so she picks up on both languages easier.”

“It’s not a problem!” Joy pulled her badge back out of her pocket and held it up towards the man, “My name is Joy Livingston, I’m a detective with the NYPD. I was hoping I could ask you a few questions regarding a case we are working on currently. Are you the owner?”

“Yes, my name is Fernando. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

Joy pulled her notebook and pen out, “Thank you. Well, as you must know there is an active serial killer on the loose and he recently left a body in the alley next to your shop.”

“Yes, I thought the racoons would be the worst of my problems...” Fernando trailed off. It was easy to tell that this was something that upset the man. A body being found near your restaurant can’t be good for business, even if it truly had nothing to do with you at all.

As Joy met more and more individuals, she couldn’t help but become more passionate about wanting to get the case solved as quickly as possible. Everyone was affected by the actions of this one man, some more than others. She wanted to protect and serve her community and she knew that the best way to do so would be to get the killer behind bars as quickly as possible.

“I spoke with Sophie Castellone earlier today, her father owns the sandwich shop on the other side of the street...” Joy paused, waiting for a sign of acknowledgment from Fernando before continuing. Once she got a nod of his head she continued, “She told me that you had cameras installed in the alleyway?”

Joy watched as Fernando’s eyes widened, “Yes, yes, I did! I don’t know why I didn’t remember before now. Our insurance said we needed hard proof of the racoons in our trash before they would send someone out to get them.”

Once again, Joy felt the hope rise in her chest as a smile turned the corners of her lips up. “Would I be able to see the footage? Maybe get a flash drive with it?” Joy rushed over her words in an attempt to get them out as quickly as possible in her excitement. She could only hope that this would work out this time and not lead to a bust like the last attempt to get footage.

“Yes, come with me to my office in the back and I can show you,” Fernando waved Joy around the counter, and she followed immediately.

They walked through the pizza kitchen adorned with brick ovens and stainless-steel counters with a few men throwing dough circles in the air and spreading tomato sauce and cheese. The entire place smelled like pizza, and it made Joy’s mouth water. She loved pizza, but truly who didn’t like pizza?

They finally reached a hallway and headed to the second door on the left where Fernando pulled a key from the pocket of his slacks and opened the door. He waved Joy through first and she entered the small office. The room was barely large enough to hold the wooden desk that sat in the center, a desk chair behind it and one smaller chair in front, sat against the wall next to the door. There was a single metal filing cabinet behind the desk in the far corner. The room was

cozy and featured many photos on the desk and cabinet and walls of what must have been Fernando's family.

"Sit, sit, while I pull up the footage."

Fernando waved at the chair against the wall and Joy took a seat in it. She continued to glance around the room while Fernando typed away at the keyboard that sat in front of the monitor that was taking up half of the desk. Papers and receipts covered the rest of the wooden surface and indicated that the space was probably used very rarely, only when the need called for it.

A few moments later Fernando called Joy to come around the desk. "When are you looking for?"

"Two days ago, most likely at night? Maybe try between 10pm and 6am."

Fernando pulled up the footage and ran it at a faster speed, scanning it for anything that might appear out of place.

At around 2:30am they finally saw something, "Wait, there. Go back, please." Joy's hand shot up and pointed at the screen, her nail tapping against the glass.

Fernando rewound the tape and slowed the speed to run at a normal pace. Both individuals leaned closer to the screen as it played and when the time showed 2:38:27am a figure dressed in all black walked into the alley, carrying a large item wrapped in clear plastic, similar to what you cover your furniture with to paint.

"Can you send this footage to my email?" Joy pulled her business card out and placed it on the desk next to the mouse.

Fernando looked up at Joy from his seat at the desk, "Yes...do you think that's him?"

“Absolutely, can you continue the footage? I want to see if we are able to make a facial profile.”

Fernando clicked play and once again the two leaned in close to the screen, watching the footage play out. The man in the video carried the large item to the end of the alley and dropped it haphazardly onto the ground, right next to the dumpster that was owned by the pizzeria. He then proceeded to unwrap the plastic, producing the body that was found in the alley only days before.

Joy’s stomach tightened at watching the scene before her unfold. Hearing about someone’s actions or speculating about them is very different than watching them unfold. It almost didn’t seem real to her, it felt as though she were watching a movie...a horror movie but a movie, nonetheless. It felt wrong, it was wrong.

After the man finished unwrapping the body he balled up the plastic a small piece tearing off and fluttering to the ground under the dumpster. That must have been what Joy and Lo had found on the ground before they were attacked, maybe the killer figured out that it was ripped off and went back to clean up. It was purely speculation, but it was more than they had before. The killer caressed the woman’s hair before leaving the alley, the camera unable to catch a glimpse of his face with how dark the alley was and the hood that covered his face.

“Can you move to the next day? Around 9:30am, please.”

Fernando saved the clip before searching for the new footage, however, when he did the results came up blank.

“I...I think the battery might have died. I’m so sorry, it has to be recharged, we weren’t able to hook it up to an outlet....I don’t have that footage.”

“It’s all right,” Joy immediately reassured Fernando. “The footage you had will be helpful, I’m going to send it to our forensics department, and we will see what they are able to pull from the footage. Thank you so much for your help.”

Fernando stood from his chair and the two shook hands before Joy left the pizzeria, a large smile gracing her features and she burst through the open door and onto the street to find her mentor in the same position that she left her in.

## Chapter Eight – The Nosey Neighbor

“I have good news-“

“Start with the bad news,” Lo interrupted Joy before she could get out everything she wanted to say.

Joy’s mouth dropped open in response as her feet brought her to a dead stop on the sidewalk. “Why do you think there’s bad news?”

“There’s always bad news with you, Yellowstone.” Lo crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow at the young female staring at her from across the sidewalk.

Joy crossed her arms and popped a hip out with a false attitude. She knew that her mentor was simply messing with her, everyone messed with the rookie. Oftentimes Joy just let it slide off, but other times she struggled to not let it get to her. Her parents had always been so incredibly supportive of her, so she was used to constant praise and reassurance. It was hard for her to simply move past that, but she managed.

“Well, this time there isn’t...If you hadn’t INTERRUPTED, so rudely,” Joy added the last part in as a mumble. “I would have told you that I have good news and I have more good news, which would you like to hear first?”

Lo again lifted a brow at Joy in order to encourage her to continue. “Fine, the good news is that we still have the nosey neighbor across the street to interrogate. The other good news is that my new friend Fernando, who owns the pizza shop? Yeah, he’s got video footage of the killer leaving a body in the alley on the way to my email at this very moment.” Joy smirked, proud of herself for finally having a breakthrough and being in a position where she could see some light at the end of the tunnel in this case.

“You should’ve started with the second part...but nice work. Forward me the footage while you go talk to the neighbor, and make sure it gets to forensics A.S.A.P. Don’t wait on it, Yellowstone.” Lo nodded her head towards the apartments that sat across the street above the sandwich shop.

The entire building was brick, like most older buildings in the city. Joy had always felt drawn towards the style, finding it felt aged in a good way. The windows of the apartments featured metal fire escape platforms connected by ladders, a few chairs sat on some of the landings, a few some plants on some but others were empty.

Joy made her way to a door that sat to the right of the door to the sandwich shop. A buzzer box sat next to the handle of the door, buttons with apartments numbers littered the front. Pulling out her notebook, Joy flipped to the page that held the woman’s apartment number, a Margaret Salazar. She pushed the button next to apartment number four and waited.

After a few moments, Joy pushed the button again after receiving no response. A moment later and the voice of an older woman came through the speaker, “What do you want?”

Joy was shocked by the rudeness that the woman showed over the telecom to a stranger she couldn’t even see. Joy choice to respond with politeness in order to hopefully convince the woman to work with her a little bit.

“Mrs. Salazar? This is Detective Joy Livingston with the NYPD...I was hoping I could speak with you about an investigation that I am currently working on?”

The woman took longer than Joy expected to response, honestly, she thought the woman simply went away. A moment later though, she said, “And what investigation would that be, Detective? Would it have anything to do with a certain killer that left their victim in the alleyway across from my windows?”

“Yes, ma’am. It would,” Joy rolled her eyes.

She assumed that at this point the old woman would probably only help her for a chance to gossip about the case. She reminded herself that she needed to be careful with what information she shared...especially with the woman that she was hoping would let her up to speak with her.

A buzzing sound came from the door in front of her, and soon the door was unlocked. Joy’s hand was on the handle when the woman spoke through the speaker once more, “Elevator doesn’t work, I’ll open the door for you, Detective.”

With that, Joy entered the building, once again alone. Joy was shocked that her mentor was allowing her so much room for independence, particularly on such an important case. She never let her handle anything alone until now. This was all that Joy could think about as she made her way over the linoleum tiled floors of the lobby and up the stairs to the second floor. Apartment four was the first door she came across when she reached the peak. She knocked on the door and after hearing the same voice from the speaker tell her it was open she made her way inside.

The apartment was small, darkened by the closed shades on all of windows and smelled exactly like moth balls. There was a floral couch in the center of the room that was covered in a plastic sheet. Across from the couch sat an old television, the kind in the wooden frame that still had dials and buttons on the front. An old wooden table sat in the far corner with matching chairs.

Mrs. Salazar was nowhere to be found in the space that felt very cozy, filled with knick knacks and the like as it was. “In the kitchen, Detective.”



Joy followed the sound of the woman's voice to the small galley kitchen where Mrs. Salazar stood overtop a kettle that was nearly boiling. Two teacups sat on matching saucers on the counter next to the stove.

"Sit, sit," Mrs. Salazar gestured to the table in the corner that sat across from the entrance to the kitchen.

Wanting to please the woman, Joy pulled out a chair and sat, watching as the woman made two cups of tea once the kettle signaled it was done with a loud chirp. The cups were placed on a platter with a small container of sugar cubes and brought over. Mrs. Salazar slid one towards Joy before taking one herself and sitting in the chair directly across from her.

Now what Joy was across from the older woman she could see how aged she truly was. Wrinkles were a prominent feature on her face and hands, her short hair was grayed, and her hands had a slight shake to them. Her skin was darkened, and her features held a Latin heritage to them.

"Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, Mrs. Salazar."

"Oh no, don't call me that. Makes me feel old," the woman winked at Joy before continuing. "My friends call me Peggy."

"Alright, Peggy. Thank you for the tea."

"It's no problem, I have always believed that the best of conversations happen over a good cup of tea. So, what can I help you with, Detective?"

"As you already are aware, there have been a series of murders in the city. All the victims being young women, typically in their twenties, all blonde." Joy awaited a response from the woman, allowing her time to potentially allow some information to slip through.

“Of course, who isn’t aware? Such a shame really, and such a shame it has now leaked into our neighborhood.” Peggy lifted her cup to her lips and took a sip of the steaming tea, adding in a sugar cube before continuing. “Interesting they found a body here thought, not too many young women with those identifying features live around here...”

Joy knew the woman was right, if not a bit blunt. This neighborhood was characteristically made up of poor immigrants attempting to make a name for themselves in the city. Most shops and restaurants family owned and operated for years. Truly she was shocked they had found the body in the first place. Police response to this neighborhood was spotty at best.

“I know that you must not have much trust for police Mrs. S – I mean, Peggy.” Joy caught her name switch after a stern look from Peggy from across the table. “However, I’d be so grateful if you could help me out, we want to get this guy off the streets as quickly as we can and to be honest, we don’t have much to work with.”

Peggy looked insulted, her face twisting into a mask of disgust for a brief moment.

“Detective, I can assure you that my distrust for those in your profession will not hinder my willingness to assist you in getting a murderer off the streets.”

“I’m sorry, I meant no –“

“It’s alright, Detective. No offense taken.” Peggy took a sip of her tea, Joy’s cup left forgotten next to her.

In an attempt to shake off her nerves, Joy glanced around the woman’s apartment once again. The place felt lived in, similar to her own home. Well, besides the plastic on the couch. Her kitchen was well used too, pots on the counter and a jar with a sourdough starter inside

rested next to her stove. On her glance back to the woman though, Joy took note of a plethora of pill bottles on the island, piles of paperwork rested next to them.

Peggy's eyes followed Joy's line of sight, "Nosiness isn't a good look on you, Detective. Although, I suppose it is your job to be noseey, isn't it?"

"I'm sor – "

Once again, Peggy cut Joy's words off. "Quit apologizing, Detective. And don't worry about me. The meds are because I received stem cells this morning and I demanded they let me go home."

Joy nodded her head at the woman, not knowing how to respond to her, an apology on the tip of her tongue. She refused to let it slip out though, for some reason determined not to disappoint this woman she just met.

Weirdly, the woman reminded her a lot of her mentor. Her demeanor was similar, the way she spoke and the way she carried herself. It probably explained why she felt the need not to disappoint her.

Coming back from her thoughts, Joy pulled out her notebook and pen. "I suppose I should begin? Have you seen anything suspicious in the neighborhood lately, anything that might have happened two nights ago when the body was dropped or possibly around that time?"

"Actually...I was woken up in the night. Sometime around two in the morning," Peggy took a sip of her tea to clear her throat. "I went to the window to see what was causing a ruckus and while I didn't find anyone outside, I did see a strange car on the street. One I had never seen before."

“How do you know you haven’t seen it before?” Joy asked, needing to play good cop and bad cop in this situation without her mentor. She had to question everything in order to ensure that she had the correct information.

“I’m sure you are aware that many see me as the nosey old woman on the floor,” Peggy held up a hand before Joy could attempt to disagree. “I know what cars belong parked on my street and which ones do not. A white Ford truck does NOT belong on my street.”

Peggy spoke with such confidence that Joy couldn’t see how she’d be wrong. She immediately wrote *white ford pick-up* inside her notebook. Unfortunately, narrowing the vehicle down to a white ford truck wasn’t of much help in a city with millions of residents and vehicles.

“Do you remember anything else about the truck?”

Peggy rolled her eyes, “I’m old, Detective, not only do I not have bad memory, but I wasn’t looking at the license plate.” Peggy’s Latin sass came through in her response to Joy, something Joy felt she deserved with that question.

“Did you see anyone get into or out of the truck?”

“I saw a dark figure get into the truck after throwing something into the bed. I wasn’t able to tell what it was, some of the streetlamps don’t work.” Peggy shook her head as if she were attempting to clear a fog in her brain. “The figure was tall though and rather broad shouldered, so I knew it had to have been a man.”

“Was there anything distinctive about the man’s outfit?” Joy knew she was probably overwhelming the woman, questioning her in the manner she was, but she needed answers. Answers that it seemed this woman might have.

“Not as far as I am aware. Jeans and a dark sweatshirt, too far away for me to truly tell if there was anything on it. However, he did have work boots on with his jeans. Maybe that might help you?” The woman followed her response with a yawn.

Joy was unable to come up with any other pressing questions and wanting to get out of the woman’s hair she pulled a business card out of her wallet.

“If you think of anything else at all from that night, or any night really, please call me,” Joy slid the card towards Peggy over the surface of the wooden table.

She stood to leave, placing her palms on the table in front of her in order to stand from her chair. Before she could move away though she was stopped by a hand on top of her own.

Joy glanced at the hand and traced the length of the arm before coming to rest her eyes on Peggy’s. “You be safe, Detective...I sense something dark around you...”

Joy never believed in anything paranormal or the likes, so she brushed the woman’s comment off as the mumblings of an old woman. She had been sick and had spent the morning in the hospital, surely, she wasn’t in her right mind. Nevertheless, Joy placed her hand over top of the older woman’s before reassuring her that she’d be safe and thanked her for the cup of tea.

“No need to thank me, Detective, it didn’t seem as if it was your favorite. Oddly, I don’t even want mine at the moment...I think I’d enjoy a black coffee more.”

Once again associating the old woman’s ramblings with that of someone who may not have been completely present in their own mind, Joy simply patted her hand before showing herself out of the woman’s apartment. She’d hope that maybe she could narrow down her search based on the woman’s description of the truck as well as the footage they got from the alley.

This case was really testing them, and Joy wanted to do well on this particular exam, especially now that Lo was placing so much responsibility on her shoulders. Eager to please, Joy headed outside and herded her mentor into the car and headed straight for the station.

## Chapter Nine – The Evidence

Joy knew her mentor was going to question what information she got from the woman the minute they were inside of the car and her mentor did not disappoint. Before Joy had made it to the end of the block her mentor was asking for a play by play of the entire conversation that Joy had with Peggy.

“What did you get out of the nosey neighbor?”

“She has a name you know,” Joy glanced at her mentor from the corner of her eye as they stopped at a light. In return she received a glare that urged her to continue on. “*Peggy* let me know that there was an interesting character roaming the neighborhood two nights ago and she saw them leave a gift in the alley.”

“Seriously, Yellowstone? No need for the dramatics, just lay out the information,” Lo forced out the words.

Joy could tell her mentor was getting annoyed based on the tone in her voice. But she had no idea what could be on the woman’s mind. She was usually so hard to bother, so calm and collected. Her mentor was often the eye to her storm in many different ways, which is why they had worked so well from the start.

Joy decided it was in her best interest not to continue to get Lo riled up, so she simply relayed the information that Peggy had given to her.

“She said a man in jeans, a dark sweatshirt with the hood pulled up and boots got out of a white pick-up truck and carried something into the alley before bringing a piece of it back out and putting it in their truck and taking off.”

In response to the information that Joy shared, Lo simply drummed her fingers against the handle of the car door and hummed in the back of her throat. Joy remained silent and allowed the woman a moment to think.

However, a few minutes later, Lo interrupted the silence in the car. “Make a left here, I need to stop at my place.”

Joy’s head snapped over to her mentor’s. She’d never been to her apartment before, she didn’t even know where in the city her mentor actually lived. After a few turns and going quite a few blocks, Lo led Joy to a red brick row home in the lower portion of the Garment District. When Lo told Joy to stop, Joy couldn’t keep her jaw from dropping open in awe. She leaned forward over the steering wheel and gazed at the home with wide eyes before she glanced over at her mentor who had her hand on the handle of the door.

“Head to the station and start working on finding that truck...and analyzing the footage. I’ll meet you there later.” Lo opened the door and began to get out of the car and step onto the sidewalk.

Joy interrupted her before she could get the door closed though. “Wait, what?”

“Just go, Yellowstone. I won’t be long, and we can’t let this sit, we need to start searching. So, you need to go.” Lo slammed the door on Joy and headed through the short gate into the row homes small yard and up the stairs. Joy simply sat in the car slack jawed until Lo turned around and waved her away with an annoyed look on her face.

Joy took another moment to simmer in shock before she finally pulled away from the curb deep in thought. She had spent months with the woman and somehow had no idea that she lived in a beautiful home in the city and seemed well off. In fact, Joy realized at that moment that she didn’t know much about her mentor outside of what she knew about her at work. How could



she have spent months with someone and not know much about them at all. And it wasn't for a lack of trying, Joy was always asking Lo questions about herself she just never got answers in response. It made her question what else her mentor might be hiding from her.

Joy also couldn't wrap her head around the fact that Lo was suddenly entrusting her to handle everything on her own. Lo had always been a micromanager. She never let Joy question anyone by herself before, never mind in a case this big. Joy knew that something had to be off, but she couldn't seem to figure out what it was for anything. Her mind stayed on her mentor the entire drive to the station.

8

Joy wandered into the station by herself and headed to the forensics lab first instead of stopping at her desk. The lab was located in the basement of the station. It was a decently sized room with no windows that held a plethora of computers and various equipment. Joy had always felt that the room had an ominous vibe to it. The lack of windows made the space feel smaller than it really was, and she was always put off by the place.

The analyst on duty was an older gentleman, Kenny, who had been working in the department for probably forty years. Kenny had been on the job for far longer than Joy had even been alive, but it was why he was so good at his job. Honestly, Joy was glad it was Kenny that was in that day. If anyone could find something on the tape, it would be him.

"Hey, Kenny!" Joy greeted the man the minute she made it into the dim room.

Kenny didn't move from his spot at the computer he was sitting at, and Joy assumed he had ear buds in to listen to whatever was on the screen. She walked over and tapped him on the shoulder before leaning around him to give him a big grin. He had always felt extremely fatherly

to everyone at the station, and he acted like it too. Joy knew if she ever needed anything, and he called Kenny he'd come running in a heartbeat.

Kenny slipped his earbuds out of his ears before grinning back at Joy and giving her a greeting, "Hey, Yellowstone! How's it going?"

"Not you too!" Joy gave a defeated sigh, similar to a toddler when their parents tell them it's time to go to bed.

"Ah, you know I'm just messing with you, kiddo." Kenny bumped Joy lightly on the arm with his fist. "What can I do for you? Where's the boss?"

"She had to make a stop. But I wanted to get started on that footage I sent you earlier. Have you had a chance to look at it at all yet?"

Joy clasped her hands together under her chin and pouted her bottom lip out at the man. She was never above begging to get a little extra help, especially if it made her look good in front of Lo.

Kenny simply pointed to the screen in front of him in response. When Joy looked closer, she noticed that it was the footage from the alley, zoomed in on the dark figure in the exact outfit that Peggy had described.

"Have you been able to get any information out of the footage? This has to be him; I have a witness who says she saw him walk into that alley from a white Ford."

"Well, he's probably about five foot ten --"

"WAIT, hold on. Let me get my notebook." Joy rushed to grab the notebook and pen she always kept on her before urging Kenny to continue once she wrote the height down.

"He looks to be of a muscular build," Kenny pointed to the figure, noting different areas where his clothes hugged the more muscular areas of his body. "I'd say with his height and build,

probably a little over two-hundred pounds. Sorry I couldn't get much more yet. He never looked towards the camera and with his hood up I wasn't able to see much else."

"No, this is awesome! This is so much more than we had before. Thank you!"

Joy wrapped her arms around Kenny's neck before flipping her notebook shut and hurrying from the room. She stopped just outside the door and poked her head back around the frame.

"Thank you again, Kenny!"

Overjoyed by the new updates, Joy rushed to her desk in order to begin searching for anything she could on the white Ford that Peggy saw. On her way to her desk though she saw Special Agent Luca and had to make a detour and go the long way to her desk.

She knew she shouldn't have been avoiding him, but she wanted to get started on the search and didn't want to be distracted by the man. He was always polite, but he always distracted her by asking her on a date when she should have been working and she needed to have at least started her search before Lo turned back up to the station.

After a quick stop in the breakroom for a coffee, cream and sugar added, and a bag of crunchy Cheetos, Joy finally made it to her desk. Her desk covered two of the walls in her cubicle and above it was overhead storage packed with notes and files for her current cases, some older ones too. On her desk sat her computer, some family photos and a few brightly colored knick-knacks of which Lo always made fun of Joy for having.

Joy sat at her computer, booted it up and once she logged in, she pulled up the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System – NMVTIS for short – and began to run all white Ford trucks in the states of New York and New Jersey. Joy propped her feet up on her desk and leaned

back in her chair while she waited for the system to finish running. Halfway through the search and her bag of Cheetos, Joy's work phone lights up with a call from an unknown number.

## Chapter Ten – The Call

Picking up her phone, Joy slid the green answer button across the bottom of the screen before putting the phone up to her ear.

“Detective Joy.”

“Hello, Detective,” the throaty voice of Peggy filled Joy’s ear through the small speaker at the top of the phone.

“Peggy, what can I do for you?”

“Well, Detective, I thought of something that might have been of use to you from the other night.” Joy pulled out her notepad once again in order to capture whatever it is that the woman might share. “The truck that I mentioned, I think it might have been a company vehicle. I wasn’t looking to closely, but it had a green ‘C’ and ‘T’ intertwined together.”

“Thank you, Peggy. This is helpful. Please don’t hesitate to reach back out if you remember anything else.”

“Of course, Detective. I do hope to see you around the neighborhood again in the future.”

With that, Peggy hung up the phone, not even deigning to say goodbye. Joy shouldn’t have been shocked, the woman seemed very blunt so she really should have been grateful she called at all. And she was, but she also promised herself to make sure that she got back to that neighborhood every once in a while. The people there deserved better no matter their circumstances.

A quick google search of companies with logo’s fitting the description that Peggy provided produced hundreds of results before Joy narrowed it down to companies that were based out of New York. *County Technologies* fit the description and after reviewing the company’s website, Joy found a white truck with that exact logo on the side.

The company's services include tech support for all kinds of businesses and companies. Including individuals that work from home and need assistance in setting up their work from home offices. The perfect way for a psycho to get access to young woman alone in their homes.

A young man, probably attractive in a position where he is able to prove his trustworthiness to women...it was the perfect set up for a serial killer and Joy had narrowed it down to the company he probably worked for. Lo would never believe that Joy was able to narrow it down this far.

Joy nabbed her phone from her desk and immediately picked Lo's number from her speed dial and listened to the phone ring...and ring...and ring. The dial-up style tone continued until Lo's voicemail picked up and the sound of her mentor's voice prompted her to leave a voicemail. Instead, Joy hung up and tried calling again.

By the fifth time that Joy called, she finally left a message. More determined than ever to have had a break this big in the case, Joy gathered her items and stood from her desk. She quickly spun in her cubicle and smacked into a hard chest. Two strong hands reached out and grabbed her biceps to steady her, hands connected to the body of one Special Agent Domenico Luca.

"Well, well, well, how lucky am I to run into you twice in one day. And in a rush both times...where are you headed off to now, Ms. Livingston?"

Joy pulled herself out of the Agent's fingers and stepped back, gathering herself up before responding with a roll of her eyes.

"Once again, none of your business, Agent."

Joy attempted to skirt around the man that took up a large portion of her cubicle. His presence alone could fill the space without the physical presence of his body.

Domenico stepping in her way before Joy could make it past him though. He crossed his arms across his chest and looked down on Joy, much like a father would.

“I happened to overhear you on the phone, Joy. Don’t play coy with me...whatever you were planning to do, don’t go alone. You aren’t stupid.”

Joy spent a long couple seconds simply standing there staring at Domenico, her arms crossed over her chest as well. The tension in the air built at the standoff. Joy didn’t want to be the first to break but she knew deep down that Domenico wouldn’t let this go. He hadn’t let his little crush go, so she couldn’t see him dropping something like this that easily. Not something that concerned her safety.

“Fine, but let’s go, Special Agent. I’m driving.”

Joy pushed her way past Domenico, not glancing back to ensure he was following as she could hear his shoes clicking off the linoleum floors of the station behind her.

Joy headed straight for her unmarked car, getting in, and buckling up at the same time as Special Agent Luca. As soon as they were both in the car, she took off and started down the street in silence.

A few minutes into the drive, Domenico interrupted the silence in the car. “So...where are we headed off to?”

Joy stayed silent, she knew he’d find out where they were going, he was in the car after all. But still, she didn’t want to tell him, didn’t want to let him in on her case. She needed to prove herself and outside help would make her look weak in front of Lo.

With a groan, Joy gave in and told him, “*County Techs* New York City office. Got a tip that the killer might be an employee...”

Domenico glanced over at her and raised an eyebrow but didn’t speak.

“I know they have hundreds of offices all over the country, figured the closest might be the best place to start.” Joy could see Domenico nod his head at her as Joy continued to drive.

The rest of the ride was filled with silence, the only thing giving Joy solace in the silence of her own thoughts.



## Chapter Eleven – The Body

As soon as Joy parked in the lot of the Tech company Domenico was out of the car and onto the asphalt of the lot.

“Does my driving really horrify you that much that you had to escape the moment you were able?”

“Of course not, Joy. Just eager to get a move-on, much as you seemed to have been back at the station.” Domenico smirked at Joy, to which she ignored in favor of heading towards the building, Agent in tow.”

“Let’s set a few ground rules, Agent Luca,” the man smiled at Joy’s back in response to her antics. “First rule, you don’t speak. This isn’t your case. You are simply back up. Second rule, you forget everything you heard and don’t take it back to your bosses, got it?”

“You are always refreshing, Joy. But you know I can’t keep it a secret, although, I could be persuaded...”

Rather than respond, Joy chose silence as she entered the building. She headed to the small desk that sat in the lobby, a single woman sat behind it. The lobby was well-lit and consisted mostly of whites and grays. The desk was white marble and built into the rest of the structure and sat parallel to the back wall.

The woman at the desk looked up and smiled as Joy approached. She appeared to be in late sixties or early seventies, her hair graying and her skin wrinkled and weathered with age. Although unlike the receptionist earlier in the day at the hospital this woman seemed friendly enough.

“Welcome to County Technologies, how can I help you today?” the woman greeted them with the same smile on her face.

Joy and Agent Luca pulled out their badges, and flashed them at the woman before Joy responded, “Hello, I’m Detective Joy with the NYPD and this here is Special Agent Domenico Luca with the U.S. Marshalls. We’re here about a case we’re currently working on. I was hoping I could speak to someone about your staff?”

“I can send you up to Human Resources. Mrs. Williams is up there at the current moment, she’s simply lovely and would be delighted to assist you.”

The older woman reached over and grabbed the phone from her desk before dialing and announcing, most likely to Mrs. Williams, that she’d send them up.

Once the woman hung up the phone, she directed them through the lobby to the elevator bay and instructed them to head up to the third floor. Joy and Domenico thanked the woman and then headed upstairs to speak with Mrs. Williams in Human Resources.

Once they stepped off the elevator they were greeted by another woman around the same age as the receptionist whom they assumed was Mrs. Williams.

“Hello, Detective, Agent. Mrs. Williams.”

The woman shook both their hands in greeting. “If you’ll follow me this way we can speak in my office, we’ll have a little more privacy.”

Joy and Domenico followed Mrs. Williams down the short hallway. Mrs. Williams was shorter, dressed in a black dress and kitten heels, her hair was long down her back and a light brown shade. She walked with a purpose, her back straight and spoke of a woman who was confident in who she was. Joy only hoped that’s how she appeared to others.

Reaching the woman’s office, the three of them entered the room as a shrill ring cut through the air. Joy reached into her pocket, pulling out her cell phone. Her eyes widened at the

caller ID – Chief Brown. Joy glanced up at Domenico before she mouthed *handle it* to Domenico and showed him her phone screen.

Joy excused herself before she stepped out into the hallway to answer the call. “Chief Brown, how can I help you?”

“Detective Livingston...another body was found...” the Chief’s voice held a waver and Joy knew that this was somehow worse than just finding a body.

“I assume this is related to my case, Chief?”

Instead of a response to her question, the Chief simply said, “Need you to come to Mount Sinai, down to morgue...now.”

“Yes, sir. Is everything all right?” Joy could feel the blood rushing from her head, she knew something was wrong, but she couldn’t figure out what it could have been.

“Just get here, now.”

“Alright, I’m on my way.” Joy hung up, confused as to what the rush could be.

Joy took a moment to compose herself before she went back into the room. She didn’t want to appear shaken in front of a civilian or in front of Domenico, especially him.

Joy went into Mrs. Williams’ office just as Domenico was standing and thanking her while shaking hands.

“I’ll send the information over as soon as my report finishes running, Agent Luca. I hope it’ll be useful for you.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Williams. We appreciate your help, and your confidentiality, in this.”

Domenico turned as Joy was just stepping up behind him. She made brief eye contact with him before she faced Mrs. Williams behind the desk.

“I apologize for having to step out, thank you for your help.”

“Of course, Detective. Please let me know if I can assist you further.”

Joy began to step out, clearly in a rush and hoping Domenico would take the hint and follow her. Once she heard his steps fall in line next to her, she glanced his way.

“Chief needs me at Mount Sinai, they found a body. And since you are here...I guess you're coming with.” Joy pressed the elevator button, wishing it would move faster.

Domenico nodded his head and held the elevator door open. It was clear that he could sense the change in Joy's mood. It would have been clear to anyone who watched her as much as he did. Silence filled the elevator, the lobby, and the car all the way to Mount Sinai. Joy truly had no idea what she was walking into, but if the Chief was nervous? She knew she should be too.

## Chapter Twelve – The Body

Joy flew into the parking lot at Mount Sinai. It was only a few hours ago she pulled into the same lot with her mentor but this time she was filled with a sense of dread. She knew something bad was coming, truly it had only been a matter of time with this case.

Joy knew where the morgue was and without waiting for Domenico to follow, she began to rush there. Every step felt weighted as she made her way into the building and through the hallways that led to the morgue. Her heart raced and her palms grew wet with perspiration. The further she went into the building the more blackness crept into her vision in the corners.

She could tell that Domenico was following her, but she couldn't find it in her to turn and look at him, she could only move forward. She felt as though all her actions, everything she had been through and experienced in the last two days had brought her to this culminating moment.

She was cresting the peak of the rollercoaster, and as she could see more than one officer, including the Chief, outside of the morgue she oddly felt a moment of peace. The world stood still. Sound and time stopped. She had reached the top of the hill, the coaster slowing for a brief moment before the weight of the car pulled it down the hill.

She stepped up the Chief and her stomach clenched, the brief moment of peace coming to its end as she felt the eyes of her fellow officers on her cheeks and back.

“What’s going on, Chief? Why’s everyone here?”

Chief Brown cleared his throat, using his fist to rub against his sternum. He quickly glanced up at the fluorescent lights that lined the hallway before glancing back down at Joy.

“I...you aren't going to be ready for this Joy. I'm so sorry.” Chief Brown placed a hand on Joy's shoulder as he spoke to her.

At the use of her first name, Joy knew this wasn't going to be good. Whatever it was that had the Chief so worked up Joy knew she would never come back from.

"The body...it, uh...it, uhm..." Chief Brown fumbled for the words, something Joy had never seen the man experience before.

"Chief, who is it? This isn't the first body, why is this such a big deal?" Joy began to feel her panic rise in her chest the longer no one told her what was going on.

The Chief swallowed deeply, and Joy watched as it made his adam's apple bob. "Uhm, Joy, it, uh..."

"Oh my God! I'll figure it out myself!" Joy shouted the words, her frustration expelling with every syllable. She pulled herself from the Chief's grip and briefly heard him shout her name as she pushed the right side of the two swinging doors that entered the morgue open.

All of the exam tables lay perpendicular to the door and all but the one at the end of the room remained empty. Joy made her way to the end of the room. The body that lay covered by a white sheet became clearer the closer she came to the stainless-steel table.

As Joy stepped up to the table her feet stopped carrying her. Once again, she felt her pulse quicken, it pounded in her ears, and she felt it all across her body. It thrummed through her and blocked out all noise but its incessant beat.

It took a moment before her hearing came back and she finally registered the screaming that filled the space that smelled of antiseptic. Joy realized slowly that the screams came from her own throat. Through the tears that filled her eyes and blurred her vision Joy stared down at the face she knew so well. Her knees finally gave, and she fell to the floor, the last thing filling her vision a blonde pixie cut.

## Chapter Thirteen – The Mentor

Long minutes passed as Joy sat on the floor next to the body of her mentor. Every time she attempted to get herself together, she remembered the body of her mentor lying on the exam table and burst into a fresh round of tears. It was a surprise she had anything left in her to cry at all.

A hand rubbed across the top of her shoulders in a manner that was meant to comfort her in her grief. After quite some time she allowed that hand to bring her that comfort and she was finally able to pull herself together enough to stand.

“I’m so sorry, Joy.” Domenico stood behind her, his hand still pressed between her shoulder blades.

“I...” Joy began, but Domenico shook his head at her.

“You don’t need to say anything right now,” Domenico told her as he glanced behind her quickly.

Joy took note of his gaze and turned around to face the Chief standing next to the coroner. She took a brief moment before she felt confident enough to speak.

“What happened?”

“Her body was picked up this morning by a different station and brought here, unfortunately with nothing identifying her as an officer she was treated as a Jane Doe. Upon arrival she was found alive, but brain dead and finding a piece of her license in her pocket, doctors were able to utilize her organs for a number of transplants. It wasn’t until this afternoon that we we’re contacted by the department with them having connected it to the case you were working on.”

“I, I don’t understand,” Joy stuttered. “I saw her this morning...”

“Are you sure it was her? She had been here all day, Joy.” Chief Brown looked at her with concern in his eyes.

Even to her own ears, Joy sounded crazy. Her mentor’s body had been here all day, there was no way that she had spent the day with her.

The coroner stepped forward and spoke to Joy, “If it brings you any comfort, her organs helped so many people, a young girl and her grandfather, an older woman sick with anemia, and so many others.”

Joy nodded her head and looked back at the Chief. “What’s next, sir?”

“Head home and get some rest. Her service will be held in a few days...take off the next week or two. But, Joy, please don’t hesitate to call, you shouldn’t be alone to deal with this.”

“Thank you, sir. I will.” Joy turned on her heel and made her way from the morgue, past her fellow officers and to her car.

Joy felt as though she were in a trance as she drove to the station, grabbed her belongings, and went in her own car. She had no idea how she had made it through the city and to her small apartment.

The space that she so often found comfort in suddenly felt dark. She had woken up in her apartment that morning with her mentor, but now she wasn’t really sure if that was the case. She placed her bag just inside the door, the same place as always and headed for the fridge for a bottle of water. As she pulled the bottle out and took a sip she glanced at the sink and noted the single mug that sat inside.

Needing a moment, Joy went out to her fire escape to think. The sights, sounds and smells of this city surrounded her as she clutched onto the bottle of water in her hand. Leaning against the rail she tipped her head back and closed her eyes. The darkness behind her eyelids



was filled with her memories from the day. A small sandwich shop, a young girl in a hospital bed, an older woman in her apartment and an Italian in his pizza shop.

Joy's eyes shot open as her back straightened, her mouth opening with a gasp. She has no idea how she didn't put the pieces of the puzzle together before now. Almost everyone she spoke with that day had in one way or another been affected by the organs that were donated at the cost of Lo's life.

Joy was right, they weren't lucky enough to have both made it out of that alley alive. But, out of the darkness of the situation and her mentor's death she could find the light. So many had a second chance at life, a young girl will grow older, a grandfather will have a chance to witness this and even Peggy will get to spend the rest of her days with a bit of comfort. Joy is brought back to her thought from that morning that everything happens for a reason. It's so clear to see this now even though she will continue to process her grief for weeks to come. It's with that comfort that Joy is once again able to lean her head back and rest in the sounds of the city.

8

### *Three Days Later*

Joy has spent the last fifteen minutes standing in front of the stand-up mirror in her bedroom straightening the shield that sat above her left breast on her dress uniform. She couldn't even remember the last time she pulled her uniform out of the closet to put it on and she wished she were doing so for some other reason.

She wanted to ensure that everything was perfectly in place to lay her mentor to rest. She couldn't disrespect her mentor in that manner. Finally satisfied with the way she looked she grabbed her service cap from her dresser and made her way from her apartment and to her car.

The entire ride to the cemetery she sat in silence, honoring her mentor by continuing her tradition of driving without music. By the time Joy arrived, most other mourners had arrived. A crowd of close to a hundred surrounded a dark wood casket with a flag dropped over top hovered over a hole dug six feet deep into the earth.

Joy placed her cap on her head and made her way to her fellow officers, taking a spot in the front row only moments before the memorial began. A pastor began the service in prayer before many stepped up to speak. Joy was the last person to step up and she felt her throat close as she made her way behind the podium and microphone. She cleared her throat a few times before she began.

“Detective Dolores “Lo” Clark was one of the most talented women that I have ever had the opportunity to know. For the short couple of months that I had the honor to be mentored by her, I learned as much about life as I did about being a detective. She was difficult to work with, but only because she cared. She wanted what was best for those under her supervision. It may not have been clear to me then, but it is clear to me now.

“Her legacy will continue on in not only the lives of the officers that you see before you, but in the lives, she has saved in her time on the job and in the lives of those she saved via organ donation. I know that Lo wouldn’t have wanted it any other way and she would have been proud to go out in the manner that she did. She was unbelievably dedicated to her position and loved what she did. It’s my hope that one day I may join her in the special spot in heaven saved for heroes.”

Joy stepped from the podium, passing Chief Brown as he stepped up to lead the End of Watch Call and the twenty-one-gun salute for Lo. He placed his hand on her shoulder briefly in a

moment of comfort to Joy before he stepped up to the podium and spoke one Joy was back in her spot.

Chief Brown pulled his radio out and placed it in front of the microphone for all to hear.

“Dispatch, we’re ready for you.”

The radio buzzed as dispatch came through, “Radio 1013 Clark...No answer 1013 Clark...1013 Detective Dolores Clark end of watch. Gone but never forgotten. May you rest in peace.”

A brief silence followed before the honor guard began their salute.

“Ready...aim...fire.” Seven guns fired into the air, the sound shaking Joy to her core.

“Ready...aim...fire.” The second bang just as jarring to Joy’s nervous system as the first.

“Ready...aim...fire.” The final shot preceded a single tear rolling down Joy’s cheek and falling to her chest.

The ceremony ended with the honor guard folding the flag as all watched on. An officer she recognized but couldn’t name held the flag delicately in his hands, folded into a triangle as he walked over to Joy.

“Lo didn’t have much family; you were closest she had. She’ left a note stating that she wanted this to go to you.” The officer held the flag out towards Joy and Joy reached out to accept it without speaking.

Flag pressed to her chest, Joy watched as Lo’s casket was lowered into the ground and remained even as the grave digger began to cover the wooden box with dirt.

“Lo would have wanted you to have this...”

The muscular hand of Chief Brown reached in front of Joy, palm down with something clasped inside. Joy reached her hand up and placed it under his, ready to accept whatever fell into her palm.

Chief Brown opened his fingers and a dainty gold necklace fell into her hand. Joy brought the necklace up to her face and looked closer. Written in script the necklace read ‘Isaiah 6:8.’

It was a verse that Joy knew well, one that Lo always seemed to reference.

“And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here I am. Send me.’”

Chief Brown patted Joy on the shoulder before leaving her alone. Joy put the necklace on and ran her fingers across the cold metal that now sat between her collarbones.

Another figure came up to her side, immediately, she knew it was Domenico. His presence had always felt larger than life and it was difficult to confuse it with anyone else.

“Chief Brown is making us partners. Marshalls are getting involved now that an officer was killed.”

Without glancing at Domenico, Joy only said, “We’re gonna get this psycho...for Lo.”

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