

## Chapter Three

### *Who did it?*

I sit in one of the booths at the restaurant, my fingers interlaced tightly and resting on the table. The detective is sitting across from me, watching me intently, with a note and a pen in his hand. I feel hot all over, like an overworked engine. I can still hear the detective's words in my mind. *We haven't conducted a full autopsy just yet, but we had an expert look and his wounds appear to have occurred between 10 pm last night to the early hours of the morning. The wounds on his body indicate signs of blunt force trauma.* My thoughts race relentlessly, threatening to override my mind. *Death? In the La Truffle Noir?* It sounds like something that could come from a dark horror. *Why now? Why Eddie of all people? What motive would someone have for coming up here and killing him? His lifestyle was always bound to put him in trouble. Maybe he got into trouble with the wrong lot and it turned around to bite him in the ass?* My heart's palpitating heavily, almost as if it wants to burst out of my ribcage. I think of what this death means for my restaurant and I feel like someone's rending my heart to pieces. Yesterday, I might have created the impression of being short-fused. And now, Eddie's dead. If the first blow wasn't strong enough to kill the restaurant, this one could not only kill it, but bury it deep beyond recovery.

Suddenly, something sparks in my head, a tiny thought, leading to an epiphanic moment. I raise my eyes, looking at the detective, and notice how his eyes are leveled at me. *He's studying me,* I realize with a start. *Trying to watch out for cues.* Last night, I exploded toward Eddie in front of everyone and this morning he's gone.

I chuckle sardonically, my shoulders heaving, my heart inflamed. "You don't think I did it, do you?" I ask, peering into his ice blue eyes. The detective's got short laid-back hair, a bit lower on the sides with a faint fade. His shoulders are broad, with impeccable musculature outlined underneath his black turtle neck. Thing could've been different under different circumstances, I imagine.

He offers a wan smile and flicks his pen adroitly between his fingers. I can tell from the light in his eyes he's impressed. He was probably looking forward to dragging me along by the hand and spoon-feeding me information in parcels so my mind doesn't get crammed full or something.

"You own a spare to the studio apartment upstairs, yes?"

"Yeah, but I've never used it," I reply quickly. Too quickly.

"Multiple eye witnesses say you had a fight with Eddie Lawson at the bar last night."

I titter, sensing the castigation in his voice. "And you think picking a fight with him makes me the killer?"

“Nobody’s saying that. But it’s a detective’s duty to find the whys and right now, you’re—”

“One of the boxes you need to tick off your list.”

He spreads his lips momentarily, contemplative, then shrugs in acceptance. “You could say that.”

“Well, if your eye witness accounts were true, you must have heard that Eddie was constituting a nuisance and I wanted him out of my restaurant.” I lean back into the chair, folding my arms across my chest to steady my shaky nerves. The last thing I want to do is give the detective a weapon he can use against me, no matter how small. “I run a business here, Mr...” I cock my brow inquisitively.

“Damon Blake. Detective Damon Blake. Sorry for not introducing myself earlier.”

“Yeah, I get. The murder takes precedence.”

He smiles a little; there’s a little glint of genuineness in his eyes this time. I think he’s trying to play the good cop routine. Maybe, if that doesn’t work, I get to see an ugly side. *I wonder which he’d look hotter in.* Someone’s just died in my apartment, right above my restaurant. I should be freaking out. *Been there, done that.* But indulging those thoughts are not going to get me out of this, not with the cloud of suspicion hovering over me.

“Miss Presley, some of the people who ate here last night said you got violent with Eddie Lawson and even threatened him. One of them said you threatened to do something to him if he didn’t leave the restaurant and get out of your apartment.”

I bite down on my lip, looking out the window beside me. I can feel the palpitation of my heart in my ears, a steady hurried thumping. Years of working under pressure have taught me to craft a façade of solidity, a deceptive mask to turn people away from what I really feel inside. However, right now, there’s a deep fear that mask will crack, my emotions will slip out, and the detective will have a field day painting me black with whatever I supply him. I don’t like where he’s headed with his questions. They sound more like accusations, like he’s more certain than not that he’s got everything he has to nail me. I don’t like the flinty edge to his voice, even though he’s coming off calm, like a friend. *Quit thinking like that,* I reprimand myself instantly. *Hold yourself together. You can do this. If you’re innocent, you’re innocent.*

But so far, everything seems to have the hand of the compass pointed directly at me. *Snap out of it.*

“I agree I was furious at him,” I reply as controlled as I can. “He was going to chase my customers away with his lousiness. I couldn’t afford that.”

“You could have simply called the cops.”

A deep breath. More control. “Come on, Damon. I can call you that, right?”

“Of course.”

“You don’t go calling the cops for everything now, do you?”

“You don’t need to answer that,” I add quickly. “I know you’re a cop yourself.” I let out a sigh. “My point is, sometimes, what people just need is a firm hand. That’s all. You call the cops only when it’s really necessary. Call them too much, and they’ll start thinking you’re crying wolf. You know what I mean?”

He mumbles incoherently. Then pauses, as if he’s just tapped into a bit of forgotten memory.

“Last night was not your first altercation with Eddie Lawson, was it?”

I click my tongue and bob my head repeatedly. “Wow,” I mouth. “You know, if I weren’t at the end of your shtick, if I wasn’t being grilled for murder, I might actually be impressed.”

He chuckles lightly. “We’re not saying you’re the culprit, yet. So, you’re allowed to be impressed.”

Twisting my lips cynically, I roll my eyes. Meanwhile, underneath the table, my fingers are drumming on my laps.

“Look, it’s really unfortunate that Eddie Lawson died, okay? But I didn’t clash swords with him unless he bit. The first time I argued with him, he’d brought his gambling and drinking buddies back with him. You need to understand; the apartment is right above the restaurant. If someone’s throwing a massive party up there, there’s going to be an earthquake down here. He was disturbing my business, I had to go up there and ask nicely.”

He arches his brows. “Ask nicely? Your clients could hear the sound of your voices.”

“I already told you, detective. Eddie Lawson was a difficult person to be with.”

He nods. “You said he had a penchant for gambling and drinking.”

“Yes.”

“Why then did you rent the apartment to him?”

“I had no idea. He gave me this sob story about coming here for Mardi Gras to look for a sister he hadn’t seen in a while. I fell for it.” I shrug indifferently. “What can I say? I’m a softie.”

“Why didn’t you ask him to leave after the first altercation?”

“That was the moment of discovery. You don’t cut people off the first time they do something you don’t agree with, do you?”

“Depends on the gravity of the offense. You don’t think gambling and drinking raucously falls into such?”

“This is New Orleans, detective. It’s Mardi Gras. People gamble. People drink. You’re either new or you have your head too deep in your work. Which is it?”

He chuckles softly. “Not all jobs are situated on one of the most famous parade routes of the city. Besides, if you knew a thing or two about my job, you’d know that I can’t always be in Mardi Gras.”

“If you knew a thing or two about my own job, you’d know I couldn’t have let someone like Eddie Lawson, ruin a reputation I’ve struggled to build.”

“Yes, yes,” he says in a demure manner. “Harper Presley. Proud owner of the La Truffle Noir, and James Beard Award winner. I’ve heard a little about you.”

“So, you’re a fan. Pity you came at such a time. I’d have given you a tour of my restaurant and showed you the troph...”

The words trail off and a rash of goosebumps breaks out across my skin as an icy chill runs down my spine. *Where are they?*

Jumping to my feet, I step out of the booth and move to the center of the restaurant, staring at both sides of the wall.

“We’re not done yet, Miss Presley,” the detective says in a warm, but authoritative voice.

“Where are they?” I ask, not taking my eyes away from the cases.

“Where are what?”

The wooden framed cases are still there, but the panes are now shards of glass on the ground.

The frames are nothing but empty constructs now.

The awards—the silver pan and medal—are gone.

“My awards. They’re gone.”

The detective gets up quickly and joins me.

“Hmm,” he says, puzzled.

“Where were you between 10 pm and the early hours of this morning?”

“At home. Sleeping.”

“Any witnesses?”

I level a pointed gaze at him. “No. I live alone, detective. With a catahoula. Are we done here?” I’m suddenly fed up with the whole interrogation. If his going to arrest me, he should arrest me already.

“Yes, we are. Regarding those awards, you’re sure they were here when you left last night?”

“Yes, I’m positive.”

“What does this mean, detective? New evidence suggests that this might be a robbery gone wrong, right?”

“You don’t plan on leaving town anytime soon, do you?” He asks, ignoring my question completely.

Jutting my chin out a little, I look him in the eye, and make sure to feed as much sarcasm as I can into my voice. “It’s Mardi Gras, detective. I wouldn’t want to miss out on all the fun.”

“Great. I’ll be seeing you soon.”

With that, he walks away. As soon as he leaves the restaurant, I hurry toward the next chair, and clutch my head, trying to keep it from exploding. With the detective no longer breathing down my neck, my defenses crumble like a pack of cards. My mind burns with so many questions, but none so prominent as: *Who did it? Why do it?*

Initially, I thought it was just plain murder, but with the awards missing, this could’ve been a robbery gone wrong. *Could’ve*. I chuckle bitterly. Whichever it is, I know enough to know from the detective’s questions, I’m the prime suspect here. It’s morbidly humorous that even after death, Eddie can still be a pain in the ass.

Inhaling deeply, I sit up and stare at the entrance. Outside, I can see the cops clearing out the crowd. Dottie’s still speaking with the detective. I wonder if he’s painting her black like he did me. The La Truffle Noir won’t be open for a time now, and that’s an unbearable pain. Why me? Why now? And then like a crack of lightning, it hits me. A memory. One I’d chosen to forget. The fortune teller. She hadn’t also told me success lay in my path. She’d told me: “Even the greatest success can vanish in the twinkle of an eye. There’ll come a time when you must fight for yours, or lose it.”

Apparently, no one wants to be walking around with the looming thought that they could lose what they’d fought so hard for, so I locked that last bit in a box and tossed the key away. Now, like before, the fortune teller’s words are coming true. But I’m going to fight. La Truffle Noir is my life, and my reputation is integral to its success. There’s no way I’m letting a murder accusation get in the way of that. The detective won’t understand. I’m getting to the bottom of this. I’m finding who

killed Eddie Lawson, who stole my awards. I'll clear my name and get this restaurant back and kicking.

Work Sample