

We stand outside the door to the room where they are keeping Ford's body. Me and the two officers with their drawn faces and downturned eyes. The woman moves to touch me, and I shrink back from her reaching hand, wrapping my arms protectively around my chest.

"Are you ready?" the female officer asks in a hushed tone as the male presses his palm to the door, awaiting my reply.

Beyond the rectangular window, awaits a sterile room. Clean tile floors and stainless-steel walls and humming fluorescent lights.

Little silver handled doors checker the back wall, and within them, dead people lie chilled on slabs of metal. But what draws my eye most is squatted at the middle of the space: a lumpy form covered loosely in a white sheet.

*Ford.*

"We just need you to ID the body and then we can leave," the older male officer says in a gruff, professionally-detached tone. I wonder how many bodies he's seen. How many loved ones he's watched cry over corpses.

"But I will warn you," he continues when I do not reply. "Due to the...*nature* of his injuries and how we found him—well, it isn't pretty."

"I understand," I say flatly, afraid of what other words might come out if I'm not careful. "I'm ready to see him now."

The officers share a look before they escort me into the room. A burst of prickling cold brushes over my bare arms, making my teeth clench. But that isn't the worst part.

The worst part is the smell.

It's faint. They've gone to painstaking lengths to ensure the cleanliness of this room for visits such as this. But I know the smell of death better than most ever could.

Panic lodges in my throat, and I clench my hands around my arms tighter, trying to force the horrid memories back into the dark places of my mind.

Ford said it was for my own good—the things he did to me.

He said he was protecting me. Keeping my fragile body alive by keeping me locked up tight. Severe combined immunodeficiency—they're fancy words for saying I am *weak*. I can't even stand up to the common cold and hope to survive.

The officers' footsteps clack and echo against the tile. My only-worn-once sneakers squeak, damp from the puddle I stepped in on the sidewalk outside.

The male officer waits for my nod before drawing back the white sheet to reveal the grotesquerie that is Ford.

His swollen face looks near bursting, tinged in hues of blue, red, and green with patches that seem bleached of all color. He is nearly unrecognizable.

His hair, always meticulously combed back is disheveled, revealing more gray strands than I remember. And his nose, broken and crooked, looks strange. Worse than all the rest is the injury in the top right portion of his skull. A mean indentation, ringed in puckered and mutilated flesh.

“It’s him,” I croak, eyes welling even though my chest is light as air.

*It’s really him.*

The female officer rubs a hand over my back, and I try my best not to flinch away, merely stiffening at the contact.

“You did great, honey.”

The other officer re-covers Ford’s face, and I burst into a sob, shuddering at the intensity of the feeling flowing through my veins. Swelling like a geyser beneath my skin.

A grin I can’t help spreads wide on my lips.

I am free.