



Always Murder

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, Crime And Mafia, Suspense

Description: The only thing worse than murder is...no murder?

It's Christmastime, and Dashiell Dawson Dane (just Dash) is looking forward to a quiet holiday season—no unexpected visitors, no relationship drama, and absolutely no murders.

But when his friend Millie asks for help, Dash says yes. Because that's what friends do.

Millie's brother, he learns, has been accused of stealing packages from his job as a delivery driver. Worse, he's been fired. So, Millie's request is simple: clear her brother's name—and, in the process, save Christmas.

No small task, it turns out, as Dash faces a suspiciously hostile warehouse manager, stumbles onto a family of porch pirates, and somehow gets roped into the Nought Family Nativity Pageant. And when Millie's brother disappears, Dash fears the worst. In Dash's (growing) experience, that can only mean one thing...

Because it's always murder.

Isn't it?

Total Pages (Source): 83

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Chapter 1

Nobody was listening to Millie.

Which, if you know Millie, might sound impossible. But it was happening. Right in front of my eyes. And it was the kind of epically willful ignoring that only family is capable of.

“What about stabbed?” Millie’s mom, Christine, had her attention fixed on me. Like Millie, she was blond and petite. And like Millie, she loved to, er, communicate. And she’d been communicating with me so much this evening that I was starting to understand what those poor trapped animals felt when they finally decided to chew their own legs off. Gesturing with her knife, she leaned over the table. “Have you ever been stabbed?”

“KEME’S never been stabbed,” Millie said. Loudly. “Have you, Keme?”

Keme didn’t answer. That didn’t seem fair; I had to answer all the questions that were launched my way, even (for example) when, as soon as we got to Millie’s house, Christine asked me, quote, Oh, sweetie, did you just wake up?

It also wasn’t fair that somehow, Keme had avoided the theme of the night—ugly holiday sweaters. I was wearing a hideous getup Millie had provided that had a plastic garland glued to it, with tiny ornaments that jingled every time I moved. And Bobby’s sweater looked like a Christmas tree, with triangular flaps of cloth hanging off the arms to look, well, like a Christmas tree. Everybody was wearing an ugly sweater. Everyone except Keme. He was dressed as he always was—tonight’s outfit

was board shorts plus a long-sleeved hoodie with a hole in the cuff. He sat there, poking at the lima beans on his plate and looking like he was thinking about doing some stabbing himself.

Not that I blamed him. A holiday dinner with Millie's family was already a lot, and there were too many people crowded around the dining room table. Millie and Keme, of course. Millie's mom, Christine, and her dad, Matthew, who gave off the air that he had made it this far in life only through the grace of television and what Christine called his man cave. Then Millie's brothers, Paul and Ryan. Paul was older and taller. Ryan was younger and shorter—by an inch or two. They were both blond, both wiry, both in their twenties. Their notable achievement in life was that they'd been publicly spanked—I'm talking bare-bottom in a parking lot—when they were children. For fighting in a Burger King. (I'm serious: people in Hastings Rock still talked about it.)

So far, so good.

Then there were Millie's sisters, Kassandra and Angeline.

They shared the family look: fair coloring, slender, attractive. That's where the resemblance stopped. Paul and Ryan were the kind of guys who argued about video games (I mean, I'm not pointing any fingers—sometimes Keme cheats, and I have to yell at him) and who got themselves thrown out of laser tag matches with shocking frequency. And Millie was like this vibrating ball of pure energy. Kassandra and Angeline, on the other hand, looked—and talked—like the girls in those makeup tutorials that sometimes popped up in my TikTok feed. (I watched one drag queen video, and now my algorithm is doomed.) The first time I met them, I had the terrifying suspicion that they wanted to date me. Fortunately (for everyone, probably), I turned out to be gay. One time, totally unintentionally, I'd blocked Kassandra with my shopping cart at the Keel Haul General Store. She'd asked me to move it. That had been all. And Angeline had been standing right next to her, smiling. But I swear to

God, I caught a glimpse of something in their eyes, and it made me think of those maniacs who accelerate when a cat darts in front of their car.

Even worse, tonight was boyfriend night, so along with me and Bobby and Christine and Matthew and Millie and Keme and Cassandra and Angeline, there were two strangers at the table. David was ghostly pale, with dark hair in a massive shag, kind of like one of those kids from *Stranger Things*. Elliott was a lawyer, as he'd already told us three times, and he was wearing wraparound sunglasses on the back of his head. On the Oregon Coast. In December. At night. Inside.

Christine was still waiting for an answer.

"Uh, no," I said. I kept a wary eye on her knife hand. "Never been stabbed."

"Dash has never been stabbed," Christine announced to the table.

"I knew a guy who got stabbed once," David said in a hauntingly spectral voice. (I'm a writer; I'm allowed to say things like that.) "It was at this club in Portland. You've probably never heard of it."

"Keme LOVES clubs," Millie said. "Right, Keme?"

I had my doubts about Keme loving clubs, but then I also had my doubts about any of us surviving the night.

"Bobby's been stabbed," I said.

"No," Bobby said, giving me a look. "I haven't."

But Christine didn't take the bait. "Dash, tell them about the time you stopped Vivienne from murdering everyone in their sleep." For David and Elliott's benefit, she

added, “Dash is a celebrity in Hastings Rock. Speaking of which—” She turned a gaze on me like one of those big herons about to spear a fish. “We’d love to have you in our Nativity pageant. We do it every year.”

“I’m going to be MARY,” Millie announced.

“We’ll see. Dash, I think you might be the perfect Joseph.”

“What do you mean, we’ll see? You always said I couldn’t be Mary because Mary had to have a boyfriend. And I DO have a boyfriend. I have KEME!”

Angeline wiggled forward in her seat. “I thought I was going to be Mary.”

“Gracie Sterling always gets to be Mary,” Millie said. From the tone, I thought Gracie Sterling might be wise not to frequent any dark alleys or abandoned parking garages in the near future. “It’s MY turn.”

“Desperate much?” Cassandra said.

Angeline stared at Millie, the look full of venom. “At least Mary’s boyfriend could talk. What’s she going to do? Stand up there?”

Keme didn’t react. Bobby, on the other hand, put down his fork and knife and pressed his hands flat on the table.

“For heaven’s sake, Millicent,” Christine said, “not everything is about you. Oh, Dash, you have to come to the Christmas tree farm with us tomorrow.” She brightened, as though something had just occurred to her. “I can give you your lines for the pageant.”

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“Pageants aren’t exactly my thing,” I said.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re going to be Joseph, and you’re going to love it.”

I opened my mouth and realized I had no idea what to say to that.

“It would mean so much to everyone,” Christine said. And then, to the others, “Dash is very popular.”

“I’m really not,” I said.

“Everyone knows Dash.”

“Oh God, I hope not.”

“Everyone loves Dash.”

“No, definitely not. I’m very unpopular. It’s a combination of personality and my looks—”

“Dash is always solving murders,” Christine said over me. Then she gave me a little hurry-up gesture with the knife. “Tell them, Dash.”

Across the table, Millie was giving me a pleading look.

“Actually,” I said, “Keme has saved my life a couple of times. When Vivienne had me at gunpoint, for example—”

“KEME, TELL THEM HOW YOU SAVED US!”

At this, Cassandra and Angeline shared an eyeliner-heavy roll of their eyes.

Keme slouched lower in his seat. He had chosen the no-eye-contact approach to dinner parties. Keme was wise beyond his years.

For the first time that night, Christine flicked a look at Keme. Then her gaze came back to David and Elliott, and there was no mistaking the total and complete dismissal. “Dash was locked in a secret room for months,” Christine said, “so Vivienne could take advantage of his body, and he kept trying to escape, but Vivienne wouldn’t let him, and he had to go potty in a bucket—”

“A bucket?” I couldn’t keep the horror out of my voice.

“That’s the part you object to?” Bobby asked in an undertone.

“David’s a musician,” Cassandra broke in. “He’s on Spotify.”

That seemed to stump everyone for a moment. Bobby rallied, though, and asked, “How did you meet?”

Kassandra managed to look simultaneously insulted and like Bobby was the stupidest person in the world. “On Instagram.”

This was too much, apparently, for Angeline, who cut in, “Elliott and I met in person. I was having trouble with this stupid ATM, and he swooped in to help me. Elliott’s so smart. He’s a—”

“I’m a lawyer,” Elliott said. Then he laughed. Flashed a lot of white teeth. “But don’t ask me to get you out of a parking ticket.”

Bobby made a sound that I knew was directed at me, but before I could kick his ankle, he asked, “What kind of music?”

“You’ve probably never heard of it,” David said.

Bobby is one of the kindest, friendliest, most easygoing people on the planet (unless his deputy mode activates and he catches you idling at a red curb and you only closed your eyes for five seconds). So, it definitely tells you something when Bobby chooses not to respond.

“Come on, David,” I said—mostly for Millie’s sake. “Tell us. Maybe I’ve heard of it; I do spend a ridiculous amount of time on the internet.”

Everyone stared at me. Even Bobby.

“It’s David,” David said, biting off the words.

“Right,” I said. “That’s what I said: David.”

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“Da-vid,” Christine said slowly.

“That’s what I’m saying.David.”

“David!”Kassandra snapped.

“Why don’t we put the TV on?”Millie’s dad suggested.

“What is happening right now?”I said to Bobby.“Am I going crazy?”

“Maybe let it go,” Bobby said.

I didn’t know what to let go—I didn’t even know what was happening—but it turned out to be a moot point because at that moment, Christine said, “I think we should all be thankful that everyone has a good job right now.David’s a musician, and Elliott is a lawyer, and Paul is doing holiday deliveries, and Ryan just got made manager at Pirate’s Cove.”

“God,” David said, the words only vaguely directed toward Ryan, “I can’t imagine working with all those kids.”

Elliott adjusted his back-of-the-head sunglasses.“That’s got to be better than driving a delivery truck and playing on your phone all day.”

Paul and Ryan shot the boyfriends matching dirty looks.

“And Dash is a writer!”Christine announced.

“Not really—” I began.

“What have you written?” David asked. “I probably haven’t heard of it.”

(He beat me to the punch.)

“Writing is such a good hobby,” Elliott said.

“Is it?” I asked.

Bobby squeezed my thigh. Probably to keep me from levitating out of my seat, Matrix style, and kicking Elliott in the face.

“Dash is going to write me into his book,” Millie announced. “I’m going to be Jinx St. James, and I’m going to be Will Gower’s SIDEKICK! She’s tough and brave, and she doesn’t take crap from anybody. Right, Dash?”

Everyone looked at me.

“Um, well, we did have a conversation about that—”

“What about Keme?” Cassandra interrupted in a too-sweet voice. “Does he have a job?”

Angeline played with her napkin, not looking up as she said, “They’re hiring for after-school at McDonald’s.”

“KEME HAS A GOOD JOB!” Millie announced. “HE’S GOT A GREAT JOB!”

Which was news to me—and, judging by Keme’s face, news to him too.

“And I think a coffee shop is just right for Millie,” Christine said. She seemed to remember the rest of us and said, “Oh, and Bobby’s a detective.” The little thrill rang through the room. “Tell them, Bobby.” But Bobby didn’t have a chance before she said, “Like Joe on Blue Bloods! It’s perfect, isn’t it, since Dash is a mystery writer?”

“Bobby isn’t a detective,” I said. “He’s a deputy.”

I didn’t bother to add that Bobby was also a very busy deputy. In the year and a half since I’d arrived in Hastings Rock, the sheriff’s office had lost its former sheriff and one of its veteran deputies. And although Sheriff Acosta had won the most recent election by a landslide, there was only so much she could do about recruiting; it had been hard to find new deputies, and it left the office short-staffed—and my boyfriend overworked.

Everyone traded looks at my comment, but the penny didn’t drop until Bobby said, his gaze focused on some neutral part of the room that wasn’t me, “The position is still open.”

Several long seconds passed before I said, “What?”

“But it’s going to be Bobby,” Christine said. “We were all talking about it at church.”

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I took a few more seconds for myself. “I don’t understand. The sheriff’s office doesn’t have any detectives.”

Christine must have misinterpreted my tone because she stretched across the table to pat my hand. “It’s okay, sweetheart. You’ll still get to solve all the murders in this town. Oh, tell them about the time someone ran you over with their car!”

That registered, but I couldn’t engage with it. I said, “Bobby.”

It looked like it took him an effort to meet my gaze, and he said in a low voice that was almost a mumble, “Nothing’s official yet.”

I wanted to know what that meant—and why I hadn’t heard anything, official or not—but an argument erupted between Paul and Ryan.

“Because I’m not supposed to give out free cards!” Ryan shouted. “And I already gave you one, and you lost it!”

“I didn’t lose it!” Paul shouted back.

“Then where is it, der?”

“I don’t know, der!”

“If you don’t know, then you lost it, der!”

“I didn’t lose it, der! You owe me! I traded you my airsoft rifle for that card.”

“Yeah, and it’s a piece of junk!”

“I don’t want you boys playing with those airsoft rifles,” Christine said. “You’ll shoot your eye out. Ryan, give your brother another card. Paul, stop losing everything.”

“KEME NEVER LOSES ANYTHING!” Millie interjected.

“Did he lose his diploma?” Angeline said with a smirk for Kassandra.

Red rose in Keme’s cheeks.

“You’re such a tool!” Paul shoved Ryan, and the younger brother rocked in his seat.

Ryan shoved back. “You’re just jealous because Mr. Hari made me the manager!”

Another shove. “You’re not the manager. You’re a manager, and you suck!”

“WHY WOULD YOU SAY THAT?” Millie screamed over them. “WHY ARE YOU BEING SO MEAN TONIGHT?”

“Boys!” Christine clapped her hands. “Boys!”

“I don’t suck!” Ryan bellowed as he tackled Paul, carrying both of them to the floor. “You suck!”

“It’s not my fault you’re dating a high schooler,” Angeline said.

Kassandra sniffed. “He doesn’t even have a car.”

“Paul!” More clapping. “Ryan! Knock it off!”

Millie's dad chose that moment to get to his feet, drop his napkin on his seat, and head for his man cave.

"KEME DOESN'T NEED A CAR!" Millie shouted, but she sounded like she was about to cry.

"Why not?" Elliott said. "Because he's got his bike?"

David—or whatever his name was—laughed, and the boyfriends bumped fists.

Millie burst into tears and fled.

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Head down, Keme slunk out of the room after her.

Meanwhile, Christine had hauled Ryan off Paul, and Paul was retreating from the dining room, one hand pressed to a red mark rising on his cheek.

Kassandra and Angeline were simultaneously not looking at anyone and, somehow, managing to resemble two cats who had gotten into the cream.

And next to me, Bobby looked like he was about to arrest everyone and send us all to the nuthouse.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Christine said in her hostess-on-the-brink-of-madness voice.(I’m a writer, remember?) And then she dragged Ryan out of the room by the ear.

Kassandra was studying her press-on nails.She managed a clear, articulate “Ugh.”

“She’s so dramatic,” Angeline said, flipping her hair over her shoulder.“Did you hear her?It was all night.Why does she have to make everything about her?”

This time, Kassandra’s noise was more of the scoff-disgust-contempt variety.

Angeline looked at me.“I don’t knowhowyou put up with her.”

“We don’t put up with her,” I said.“She’s our friend, and we love her.”

Angeline’s mouth dropped open.

Kassandra made a sound like I'd been unspeakably rude.

"Excuse us," Bobby said. "Please thank your parents for inviting us."

Bobby didn't exactly throw me over his shoulder and carry me out of there, but he did have a firm hand on my arm as he escorted me—that's a word law-enforcement types love to use—out of the dining room and toward the front door.

"Should we check on Millie?" I asked.

Bobby shook his head. "Keme's here. And I think she probably wants some time to compose herself."

"Good luck in this nuthouse," I muttered.

(You can say nuthouse twice, if you're a writer, if one time it's in dialogue and one time it's in your head.)

"Remind me why it was so important for us to be here tonight." From anybody but Bobby, I would have called it a grumble.

"I don't know. Millie kept telling me how fun it would be."

"And you believed her?"

"She begged me, Bobby. I mean, I get it; she obviously didn't want to face these jackals all by herself. Besides, I thought it would be, you know, like a cultural experience. You know—ethnography, field work. A groundbreaking anthropological study as we mingle with the locals."

"And how'd that turn out for you?"

“Uh, not as I expected.”I gave a quick glance back at the dining room and remembered the look I’d seen in Kassandra’s eyes.“Remember how field work turned out for Indiana Jones?I feel like we’re trying to escape the secret temple, and if we don’t hurry, that giant rock is going to smush us—”

A shadow lurched into our path, and I remembered how that had ended for Dr.Jones—he’d escaped the boulder only to come face to face with a lot of people with pointy things.

But it was only Millie.Her eyes were red.Her nose was red.She stood in a strange, huddled stance, trembling, and I realized she was trying not to cry.

Bobby spoke first.“Millie, I’m so sorry about tonight—”

“Don’t leave,” she said, her voice scratchy.“Please.I need your help.”

Chapter 2

Millie’s request hung in the air.

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Possibilities of exactly how Millie might need our help flashed through my mind. She knew I didn't have any money. And if she wanted Bobby to have a stern, manly talk with Keme about something, she wouldn't have roped us into this awful evening. I had the sudden, gut-wrenching notion she was going to ask me to fight her sisters.

"I really don't think—" I began. "My conditioning, see—"

"It'll only take a minute," she said in that same awful, scratchy voice, and she wiped her eyes. "Please?"

I didn't say anything, and neither did Bobby. She must have taken our silence for agreement because she turned and headed down the hall.

And since this was Millie, and I would literally do anything for her (except let her pierce my ears, which had been a real bone of contention between us until Bobby had put an end to it by saying he liked my ears the way they were), we followed.

We caught up with her as she was knocking on a door. Keme slouched against the wall next to her, his face a dark mask. I had been down this hallway before; this was where all the bedrooms were located, which I knew because on a previous visit, Millie had showed me the bedroom she shared with Kassandra and Angeline. I figured this was Paul and Ryan's bedroom, and my theory was confirmed when an angry, "Go away!" came in answer to Millie's knock.

Millie pushed the door open and marched inside.

My first impression of the room was boy. The walls were the same off-white as the

rest of the house. The carpet was the same brown. A black, particle-board bedroom set looked like it was at least twenty years old: a dresser, two nightstands, two twin beds. One of the comforters was blue; the other was gray. A desk was covered with loose change and receipts and those little paper event wristbands and open (presumably empty) energy drinks. The top of the dresser had more of the same. Everything was organized around a massive television, from which various game consoles snaked out across the floor: a new Xbox, a new PlayStation, a Switch, even one of those VR systems that looked incredible and were way too expensive. (Although I'd dropped a lot of hints for Santa.) The closest thing to decoration, if you didn't count all the bags of corn chips on the floor, was a pegboard festooned with hats and jackets. It smelled—just one guy's opinion—like they needed to keep the door open.

Paul sat in one of those on-the-floor style gaming chairs. His face was blotchy, and although he wasn't crying, his eyes were red. An energy drink sat on the floor next to him. He was playing *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, which—no joke—might be the best video game ever created. Paul's gaze flicked from me to Bobby to Keme and then back to Millie, and his color darkened.

"I said go away—"

"Be quiet," Millie said. "Dash is going to help you."

Zelda music played softly in the background.

"Uh," I said. "I am?"

"I don't need anybody's help," Paul said. "I'm fine. Now get out of here."

"Paul got fired," Millie said.

“Millie!”

“For stealing packages.”

Paul’s jaw dropped.

“And they’re considering legal action,” Millie said. “Pressing charges.”

“Shut up!” Paul scrambled to his feet and shut the door. In a marginally quieter voice, he said, “Do you want Mom and Dad to hear you?”

“Pressing charges?” I said with a glance at Bobby.

He shook his head. “A company can’t press charges, but they could make a formal complaint. I haven’t heard anything.”

“He works—worked—for CPF,” Millie said. “Clatsop Parcel and Freight. It’s seasonal work; normally, they do commercial freight, but around this time of year, they hire extra workers to help with all the holiday packages. But they said if Paul did a good job, they might hire him full-time.”

“I’m fine,” Paul said. “It’s not a big deal. I didn’t steal anything, and they can’t prove I did, and it was a stupid job, anyway. I’ve got better things to do. I’m going to do e-sports and go pro.”

The look on Keme’s face said what we all thought about that.

A question popped into my head, and I asked it without thinking about it. “What have you been doing since you got fired?”

A fresh wave of color mottled Paul’s face, and he gave me the lamest “Huh?” ever in

the history of huhs.

“Your mom thinks you still work there,” I said. “She was talking about it at dinner. So, that means you’re not hanging around the house all day. Where are you going? What are you doing?”

“It happened yesterday,” Paul said. He dropped into the gaming chair and picked up the Switch controller. “And I was going to hang out with Ryan at Pirate’s Cove, but I couldn’t find my card, and he’s being a butt-munch about it.”

Pirate’s Cove Laser Tag and Mini-Golf was what entrepreneurial types called an adventure park, or an action park or a plain old entertainment business. It was the only location of its kind in Hastings Rock, and from all appearances, it was doing quite well—not surprisingly, since we were talking about a significant tourist destination with unpredictable weather.

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“Ryan’s a manager there?” I asked; I was fairly sure that was what Christine had said, but I wanted to be sure.

“And he can get the cards for free, and it doesn’t cost him anything! I don’t know why he’s being such a butt-munch about it.”

“Right, well, let’s save The Mystery of Why Ryan’s Being a Butt-Munch for later. Why don’t you tell us what happened?”

“Nothing happened,” Paul said, and he unpaused his game and started to play again. “Ms. Hernandez is a jerk.”

My gut was telling me a few things. First, that (apparently) I had little patience for an overgrown man-child, even though I might be one myself. Second, that Paul’s lack of concern was genuine—which, in my book, made him an idiot. And third, that I should agree that Paul didn’t need my help and get the heck out of there.

Millie looked so distraught, though.

“Paul,” I said, “can you stop playing your game for a few minutes? I want to ask you a few questions.”

“Why is everybody being a dill hole tonight?” he said. “I told you, I don’t need—”

That was when Keme unplugged, well, everything.

The TV went dark. The lights on the Switch turned off. In the absence of Zelda music,

the silence suddenly felt thick.

Then Paul screamed, “What’d you do? I didn’t save my game!”

Keme stood there, arms folded, a power cord still hanging from one hand. He looked about as satisfied with himself as an eighteen-year-old can.

“Are you kidding me?” Paul’s voice continued to rise. “What is wrong with you—”

“BE QUIET!”

I’m not joking: I staggered.

Keme took a step back.

Even Bobby swayed, although he caught my arm and kept me upright.

And Paul rocked back in his gaming chair like he was about to go tail over teakettle.

“STOP TALKING,” Millie continued, hands on her hips as she loomed over Paul. “You’re being a—a BRAT!”

A ringing silence followed. I checked my ears for blood.

“Now sit up straight and answer Dash’s questions,” Millie said.

Paul sat up straight. The movement wasn’t all that coordinated, and his eyes were a little glassy.

“And be polite,” Millie snapped.

Paul's head jerked in a nod.

“And if you ever say ‘dill hole’ again, I’m telling Mom, and she’ll wash your mouth out.”

In the wake of all that, you could have heard a pin drop (if your eardrums hadn’t ruptured.)

“All right, Dash,” Millie said. “Go ahead.”

“Right,” I said. “Uh, right. So, they fired you yesterday. Is that correct?”

Paul nodded.

Millie put her hands on her hips again.

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“Yes,” Paul squeaked.

“What did they say?”

“They said I’m fired.”

I tried not to sigh.

“He means,” Bobby said, “what explanation did they give?”

“Oh.Um, that I was stealing packages?”

Keme snorted, but when Millie glanced at him, he clammed right up.

“What exactly did they say?”Bobby asked.

Paul’s face screwed up with concentration; the controller sagged in one hand.“Well, Ms.Hernandez asked me if I knew why she called me in, and I said no, and she said she ‘found that hard to believe’”—Paul even did the air quotes with one hand.“—and then she said they knew I’d been stealing packages, and I said no way, and she said it was only my packages, and I said I wasn’t stealing anything, and she said I was fired and she was going to personally make sure I went to jail.”He thought about it and added, “She was super rude.”

“It wasonlyyour packages?”I asked.

Paul waited, as though expecting more, and said, “Yeah, my packages.That’s why

I'm the thief." And with a level of scorn that would have made a middle-schooler proud, he added, "Supposably."

"That's weird, isn't it?"

Paul shrugged.

"Not necessarily," Bobby said. "If it's someone stealing packages from a specific neighborhood, and they happen to be operating at the same time as Paul's deliveries, it would make sense for all the packages to be ones delivered by Paul. We've had the usual uptick in reports of porch pirates."

"Okay," I said. "Yeah."

Bobby didn't quite smile. "But?"

"I don't know." I frowned at the man-child. "Did they say it was all the packages in one neighborhood?"

Paul bounced his controller against his thigh; apparently, this was taking too long. "I don't know."

Keme snorted again.

"I mean, no," Paul said. "I told you what she said. That it was only my packages."

"See," I said, "I think that's weird."

"It's just Ms. Hernandez being Ms. Hernandez," Paul said.

"What does that mean?" Millie said.

“She’s super mean. And she hates me for, like, no reason.”

The adults—and that includes Keme—exercised our collective willpower for a moment so one of us wouldn’t throttle Paul.

“What’d you do?” Millie asked.

“I didn’t do anything—”

“PAUL!”

“I was just looking at it!”

Keme said a word under his breath you can’t whisper in Papa Noël’s ear.

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“Looking at what?” I asked.

“Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. A couple of weeks ago, this copy came through. The package was already open, okay? It was halfway out of the box, and it was a release day drop, and I wanted to do a quick stream of me with it, you know, because literally nobody had seen one yet. It’s not like it matters—if a package gets opened, we tape it up again and deliver it. There was no reason for Ms. Hernandez to go ballistic.”

I caught a look on Keme’s face that was somewhere close to envy. I tried to keep my own expression smooth—a certain young man, if he behaved himself and quit trying to give me a dead leg every time I beat him in Halo, was going to get a copy of Super Smash Bros. Ultimate this Christmas. The game had only come out a couple of weeks before, and it had been one of the most anticipated releases of the year. My gamer self could understand the excitement of seeing a copy in the wild, so to speak, on release day. On the other hand, that didn’t make Paul any less of an idiot for taking it out of the package to live stream himself with it.

“You’re so dumb,” Millie informed Paul.

“I didn’t do anything wrong! Jeez, you’re as bad as Mom!”

“That’s all?” I asked. “They didn’t fire you?”

“Not that time. But she yelled at me. A lot. It doesn’t matter—everybody hates her. One time, she put Jesse on suspension because she said Jesse had a bad attitude. And she gets on Andrea’s case all the time, and Andrea’s her daughter. All she cares about is her stupid dog; Andrea says she spends so much money on it, and she won’t even help

Andrea buy a car or anything.”He shot the TV a look, in case his game had miraculously come back on.“Oh man!What ifMs.Hernandezdid it?It’s, like, the perfect inside job.She’s in charge of loss prevention.Who’s going to investigate her?”

None of us, it turned out, had an answer to that—although Keme did roll his eyes.

After a moment, though, Millie brightened.“What if it’s a GHOST?”

Those of you playing along at home may not be surprised; Millie’s first instinct, when anything strange happens, is to suspect that a ghost might be involved.

“Is there anyone else you can think of?”I asked.“Someone you noticed on your route?Someone who talked to you?Someone following you?Someone who asked about the packages?”

“Oh yeah, somebody asked me if I knew what was in those packages and which ones were valuable and if I’d mind if he took some of them.”Paul gave me a withering look and added, “Der.”

I don’t know if you’ve ever experienced the sudden knowledge that you’re capable of murder—if you’ve raised a teenager, or worked with teenagers, or know a teenager, the odds are high that you have.I was currently exploring that flash of self-awareness.

Bobby got a surprisingly firm grip on my arm and said, “We’re going to step out into the hall now.”

Millie and Keme followed, and as soon as the door closed, I said, “Der?Der?How oldishe?I’m going to—I’m going to—I’m going to fight him.No,Bobby’sgoing to fight him!”

“No,” Bobby said, “I’m not.”

I stopped. I glared. “Fine. Whatever. That’s okay. I don’t need you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Keme will fight him for me.”

The boy perked up at this, but then he cast a glance at Millie, deflated, and shook his head.

“I don’t need any of you,” I said. “I’m going to tell his mom!”

“Okay,” Bobby said, grabbing my arm again. “Let’s save that for when you’re not hopped up on sugar bars.”

“Oh, they weren’t sugar bars,” Millie said. “They were sugar cookie bars. With triple frosting.”

In his very Bobby way, he said, “Uh huh.” And then, he added, “Millie, I know you’re hoping Dash can help with this, but I’m not sure what you want him to do. The best thing would be to wait, see if the business files a complaint, and then figure out what evidence they have against Paul. If he’s innocent, they’re not going to be able to make the charges stick.”

Having been wrongly accused before, I wasn’t so sure about that. But one thing you learn about having a boyfriend is to save your fights for the stuff that matters. (Like eating Oreos in bed.) On the other hand, I didn’t disagree with Bobby—Paul’s problem wasn’t exactly life-threatening.

Before I could say this, though, Millie spoke. “I know he’s a jerk. I know he’s immature. I know he’s not taking this seriously. But you don’t understand—Ryan and Paul are, well, you know. And it’s really hard for my mom. I haven’t seen her this

happy in so long.If she finds out Paul got fired for stealing packages, it's going to break her heart."She had tears in her eyes.Her voice was thick.She actually, literally sniffled.And then she said, "And it's Christmas."

Chapter 3

"I'm not made of stone," I said.

Bobby didn't respond.I decided to believe this was because he was brushing his teeth.

We'd come home to Hemlock House after that conversation with Paul.I was lying on our bed, in our bedroom, in my undershirt and trunks.The ugly sweater was on the floor, waiting to be burned so that I'd never have to wear it again.Bobby, of course, had folded his neatly.

“I had to say yes,” I said. “What if she started crying?”

Still nothing but the sound of splashing water.

“And it’s not like it’s anything serious,” I said. “I’ll ask a few questions. See if there’s anything to Paul’s theory about it being an inside job. Maybe if I threaten a lawsuit, they’ll give him his job back—I mean, I can’t imagine they have any proof he’s behind the thefts.”

Old pipes groaned. Then the water shut off. Hemlock House was awesome—damask wallpaper and canopy beds and secret passages and so many giant paintings of horses (I wanted to say they were geldings?) that sometimes seemed like they were watching you. Around the holiday season, it was even more magical, festooned inside and out with lights and garlands and stuffed with Christmas tree after Christmas tree. It was warm. It was safe. It was beautiful, and it was unique, and it was a treasure, and the fact that somehow I’d accidentally ended up owning it was one of the best things that had ever happened to me (except for the utility bills). I was planning on spending the rest of my life here. With Bobby, if he didn’t wise up before I could trap him into marriage. Hemlock House was, however, noisy. Apparently, most old houses were. Which was probably why Bobby still hadn’t said anything.

At that moment, he appeared in the doorway to the bathroom. He was naked. This was a thing with Bobby. He was super comfortable with his body, which, as an objective outside observer, I felt he had every right to be. See, Bobby is jacked. He’s ripped. He’s toned. He’s—what’s the non-objectifying word for beefcake? He also happens to be the most handsome man I’ve ever seen. And right then, with his skin still flushed from his shower and his dark hair still damp and mussed, free from its usual precision part,

he looked like a total snack.

“Of course it’s serious,” he said. “This is felony theft, Dash. We’re not talking about a slap on the wrist and some jail time. This is prison. Whoever’s doing this, they’re highly motivated to make sure no one catches them. That’s why the sheriff’s office is looking into this.”

“But it’s not a murder. It’s just some packages getting stolen.”

“It’s always murder with you.”

“How dare you!”

He smiled, but only for a moment. He padded over to the tallboy and opened a drawer. “I’m serious, Dash. People kill over less than this.”

“Do you want me to tell Millie no?”

He pulled out a pair of boxers, but then he stood there, holding them.

“If you want me to tell her no,” I said, “I will.”

That earned me the big, goofball grin.

“What?” I asked.

“That was very sweet.”

“Bobby, I can tell people no. I don’t have to investigate every single thing that happens. I’m perfectly happy to rot at home on the couch, dissolving into a slurry of video game soup.”

“Is there a middle ground between snooping and rotting on the couch?”

“Bobby!”

“We talked about a gym membership.”

“BOBBY!”

Somehow, that goofy grin got even bigger. He came over to the bed, sat, and put his hand on my chest. “I want you to be careful. And if this is more than a few packages disappearing, I want you to tell me so I can help you.”

I nodded.

Bobby has the most incredible eyes, in case I haven’t mentioned them before. They’re this rich, earthy bronze. And when he’s happy, they crinkle.

“Come here,” I whispered.

His eyebrows went up.

I yanked the boxers from his hand and threw them. “You aren’t going to need those.”

Laughing, he let me pull him onto the bed.

After, lying in the circle of Bobby’s arms, I was warm and limp, melting into the familiar strength of his body. I thought I could hear his heartbeat. Every so often, his lips would brush against me: my nape, my collarbone, my shoulder. Do you want to know one of the pluses of having a boyfriend who is serious and earnest and one hundred percent committed to doing the best job he possibly can at everything? (Aside from the fact that he does a killer job at mowing the lawn.)

The word, my friends, is attentive.

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And enthusiastic.

And energetic.

Oh, and stamina. Did I mention Bobby does leg days?

His hand stroked my flank, moved upward, following my belly, then chafing lightly at my ribcage.

I fought the bone-melting happiness that was telling me to lie there and be a puddle of goo, because this—the energy I could feel behind his restless touching—meant Bobby wanted to talk about something.

Then I remembered.

“You’re going to be a detective.”

His hand stilled on my side. He left it there, solid and warm. Then his thumb moved again, scratching pleasantly across my ribs. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I think that would be great.”

His “Yeah?” was warier than I anticipated.

“Yeah, of course.” I did some squirming-twisting-rolling to face him. “Bobby, you’re such a good deputy. You’re smart. You’re hardworking. You’re good with people.” I nuzzled into him. “You’re amazing. You’ll make a fantastic detective. Oh my God,

Bobby, you could tell me all the stuff detectives really do—I'd have an inside source!"

He did a funny laugh. "I'd have to apply."

"You haven't applied?" When he didn't say anything, I asked, "Why not?"

"I don't know. I wanted to talk to you first."

And maybe that was true. Maybe. In fact, it probably was, because Bobby Mai wasn't a liar.

But it wasn't the whole truth.

He started to speak again, stopped, and then said, "I've got to work a double tomorrow."

Fighting the urge to ask, Again?, somehow I managed to nod.

"It won't be like this forever," Bobby said.

"I know."

"It's going to get better."

"I know."

He hitched me closer. "I love you."

"I know."

When he pinched me, I squealed.

“I love you too,” I said, somewhere between outrage and laughter.

And then everything felt all right again, and we slept.

Chapter 4

The next morning, Millie drove me to Clatsop Parcel and Freight in her Mazda3.

It was not what I expected.

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In a couple of ways, actually. The drive itself was unusually quiet; aside from a few mumbled comments, Millie kept to herself. She was wearing sunglasses, and she had an enormous coffee in the cupholder (there was one for me too, because Millie was always thoughtful like that). A couple of times when I glanced over, Millie was squinting, as though the light were too bright even with the sunglasses—or as though she had a headache. I thought about asking what was wrong, but my general policy—and my specific policy with Millie—was that if she wanted you to know, she wouldn't be shy about telling you. Still, it made the drive long, and the silence became strangely oppressive.

Clatsop Parcel and Freight wasn't what I'd expected either. I'd pictured one of those huge Amazon fulfillment centers—cavernous acres of reinforced concrete, the kind of place where you know zombies would be hiding after a zombie apocalypse. (Yes, I did just binge *The Walking Dead*—why do you ask?) Or maybe something like a FedEx or UPS hub. Heck, I'd even been to some really impressive post offices.

(Okay, that's a lie. But I've been to some really busy post offices.)

Clatsop Parcel and Freight, in contrast, looked...provincial.

What must have been the administrative-slash-customer-service offices were located in front, in a single-story frame build-out with clapboard siding. The siding was a beige that reminded me of those creepy "flesh"-colored crayons in the big Crayola boxes. The windows were small and dark. Behind the frame building sprawled a brick warehouse with a pitched roof. The brick was worn and weathered. The glass-block windows were cloudy. Rust and algae competed for purchase on the metal roof. Fifty years ago, it probably would have been considered outdated; now, it was a relic. The

only hint of holiday cheer was dollar-store tinsel hung around the office windows; it was so old that it didn't look particularly tinselly anymore—perhaps the politest word would have been bedraggled.

A chain-link security fence topped with razor wire surrounded the facility, but when Millie turned down the drive, we saw that the gate was open, and the security booth next to it was unmanned. A handful of cars were parked in front of the clapboard office, but Millie kept driving toward a larger lot farther back on the property. This one, parallel to the warehouse, held more vehicles—cars and trucks, most of them domestic, most of them the kind of thing you saw on the coast. A brown Chrysler minivan. A mint-green pickup that had to be from the 1950s, its wheel wells rusting out. Even an '80s-era Honda, all sharp angles, with tires that desperately needed air and a bumper sticker that said CERTIFIED SILLY GOOSE.

Broken asphalt ran in an expanse toward the warehouse and the loading docks. The bay doors were rolled down, and there were no trucks pulled up to the bay.

As Millie parked in the warehouse lot, I said, “Okay, what’s the plan?”

“We’re going to find out if that lady, Ms. Hernandez, stole Paul’s packages.”

“Right, well, that’s more of a goal than a plan. I wish Paul had worked here longer; it would be nice to talk to another of the delivery drivers.” I frowned out the window. “I guess we could try to charm our way past the receptionist.”

Millie took off her sunglasses—dramatically enough, as a matter of fact, to make me turn. Something was different, and it took me a moment to understand what: she was wearing makeup. I mean, maybe she always wore a little makeup, but today she’d gone at it shovel and trowel. (Uh, is that an expression?) She looked pretty, don’t get me wrong. Actually, she looked beautiful. And then I added in the other things I hadn’t noticed because I’d been so preoccupied by her silence: she was wearing a cream-

colored satin blouse with black pants, and as I watched, she reached into the back seat for a gray blazer.

“Millie,” I said.

And then I stopped.

Because I might not be the sharpest knife in the drawer (that is definitely an expression), but I’d been alive long enough to realize it wasn’t a good idea to say things like Are you wearing makeup? or Why are you wearing makeup? or (God help you) You look different today.

“Uh, maybe we should—” I tried.

“We’ll figure it out,” she said and got out of the car.

I said a few choice words under my breath. See, I’d been snooping and sleuthing and investigating for almost a year and a half now. And let me tell you: We’ll figure it out never went the way you hoped.

On the other hand, Millie was power-walking, and she was already halfway to the loading docks.

When I caught up to her, I was out of breath (probably because these weren’t my jogging joggers). Millie, of course, looked as fresh as a spring morning—and she was wearing heels, another first. She charged toward the building, went up a flight of rickety metal steps to the concrete slab of the dock, and yanked on a fire door. If it had been me trying this, the door would have been locked, but for Millie, it opened easily.

It was totally unfair.

Inside, the warehouse was much more modern than I'd expected. Bright industrial lights hung overhead from exposed rafters, and the floor was sealed concrete painted with yellow lines that probably meant something to somebody. Much of the space had been given over to rows of metal shelving, where large wooden shipping crates and pallets of boxes were stored. Smaller sections of the warehouse were clearly workstations of some sort, with tables and equipment that I didn't recognize. The area immediately around us was cluttered with hand trucks and pallet jacks and a bag that had been cut open and was spilling foam peanuts onto the floor. It was cold, and the smells of cardboard and plywood met us. In the distance, a machine beeped in a familiar sound I recognized as something dangerous is backing up. To our right, across the warehouse, a door led into what I assumed were the offices.

A handful of men stood toward the back of the warehouse, all of them dressed in matching uniforms, all of them staring up at the rafters.

"—get in here because you leave the door open," one of them was saying. "Then they build a nest. Then they die and stink up the place."

"I'm telling you, it's not a bird," another one said.

"Find a ladder and we'll see."

At that point, one of them noticed us.

"Uh, Millie," I said. "We've got company."

Millie took off at a brisk clip toward the offices.

"Can I help you?" the man called.

Millie waved at him and smiled and kept walking.

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I said a few more of those words under my breath and hustled after her.

“Millie,” I said when I caught up, “we can’t just walk around in here—”

“Yes, we can,” she said. “I saw it on one of those old Matron of Murderepisodes. Genevieve Webster walks right into an office building like she owns the place, and when the security guard tries to stop her, she holds up her library card and says, ‘Winifred Rush, Securities and Exchange Commission. This is an unannounced inspection.’ And the security guards let her walk right in.”

My body kept moving while my brain tried to catch up.

“I’m sorry,” I said—but a small voice inside my head observed that I didn’t sound very sorry. It sounded like I was choking on my own rage. “Your plan is based on an old TV show, which in turn is based on Vivienne Carver’s books, where someone pretends to be a—a federal inspector by flashing their library card?”

“It worked for Genevieve Webster.”

“It’s not going to work here!”

Admittedly, that came out more loudly than I intended, but to my surprise we’d already gotten farther than I expected. The man who had called out to us hadn’t tried to stop us (maybe because he was so caught up in his bird conversation), and nobody else seemed to care who we were or what we were doing.

Millie must have recovered her spirits, though, because she just flashed me a smile,

patted my arm, and said, “Oh, Dash,” like I was—I don’t know. Being a ninny, I guess.

The door led us into a narrow hallway with worn carpet and dinged-up walls. It was warmer, and it smelled like a dusty furnace, and a framed picture on the wall showed a man dressed a little like Harry Truman (including a fedora) with a brass plaque underneath that said RICHARD MOORE, FOUNDER, FATHER, FRIEND. He looked like the kind of guy who’d dock your pay if you were a minute late, and I imagined every woman at Clatsop Parcel and Freight had probably been forced to endure Mad Men-levels of sexual harassment. A pair of restroom doors were immediately next to us, and beyond them, a door had a small sign that said LOUNGE.

Millie didn’t even hesitate. She pushed into the lounge.

Lounge wasn’t the word I would have used to describe it. Lounge suggested comfort. On one of my more generous days, I might have called it a break room, but honestly, it was closer to a weird kitchen-and-locker-room combo. There was a small, two-burner stove, a sink, and a stretch of laminate countertop. And there was a spavined sofa and a few tubular chairs with pilled upholstery. A sorry-looking Santa costume had been draped over one of the chairs, as though Santa had sat down for some milk and cookies (or a beer) and then evaporated. And some generous soul had left a stack of the National Enquirer on a beat-up coffee table. Apparently, Bat Boy was still on the loose.

Lockers lined two of the walls, and Millie moved straight toward these. The lockers were marked with masking tape that had been written on with a Sharpie. Millie stopped in front of the one that said PAUL. If there had been a lock, it was gone now, and when she tried the door, it opened.

There was nothing inside.

Millie frowned.

“I didn’t know Paul had a locker here,” I said.

“Neither did I,” Millie said.

“Then why did you—”

“Come on, Dash.HURRY!”

If nobody had heard us yet, I thought.

We returned to the hall and made our way along it. The next door was marked LOSS PREVENTION. Millie paused. We both listened, but I couldn’t hear anything. Millie gave me an inquiring look. I shook my head. Millie nodded. And then she opened the door.

(Honestly, did anybody ever lock any doors around here?)

It was a small office, with a second door on the far wall that I guessed, based on my mental map, connected directly to the warehouse. It looked like the rest of what I’d seen in the CPF offices: a drop-tile ceiling, walls that were probably supposed to be gray or cream but looked yellow under the fluorescents, carpet squares with a color and pattern combo that could best be described as “chili mac.” Some metal shelves filled with binders, a filing cabinet with a massive dent on one side, and a desk topped with a chipped walnut veneer were the room’s only furniture.

A woman was kneeling on the floor near the desk, an overturned can of Cherry Coke next to her. She wore work clothes, and she was solidly built, with a quiff of blond hair. Her mouth opened in silent outrage, and then she said, “Who are you?”

I opened my mouth, praying to the god of sweet, innocent little gay boys that a believable lie would miraculously spring to mind.

If the god of sweet, innocent little gay boys was listening, he (or SHE!) had a sense of humor.

Millie whipped something out of her pocket. I had a moment to glimpse HASTINGS ROCK PUBLIC LIBRARY, and then another moment to regret every life choice I'd ever made.

And then Millie barked: "Jinx St. James with the Ridge County Sheriff's Office."

Chapter 5

Millie's words hung in the air, and for a single, eternal moment, I wondered if this was a nightmare. Or if I'd died, and this was my personal, um, heck.

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The woman on the floor blanched. Her hand tightened around a clump of paper towels, which she'd apparently been using to try to clean up the spilled Coke. "I don't—"

"Are you Ms. Hernandez?" But Millie—uh, Jinx St. James—didn't give her a chance to respond. "Because I'd like to know why you've been withholding information about an ongoing investigation."

The woman finally recovered from the surprise enough to say, "I'm Luz Hernandez, but I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about PAUL NAUGHT," Millie said. "And I WANT SOME ANSWERS."

The woman got to her feet. And then her expression changed. "Jinx St. James, huh?" She jerked a thumb at me. "Who's he? Captain Underpants?"

For the record, these were my nice joggers. And it's not like she was dressed to impress either—for someone who was supposed to be in management, she looked younger than I expected, and she was dressed like she'd be more at home riding a forklift than sitting at a desk.

In a tone of absolute, complete dismissal, Millie said, "That's our intern, Chaz." I wanted to squawk. I wanted to object. I wanted to challenge anybody to find a nicer pair of joggers that were officially endorsed by the World E-Sports Confederation. But before I could do any of that, Millie continued, "You're Luz Hernandez?"

“You bet your butt I am,” the woman said, voice hardening as she seemed to recover her equilibrium. “And you’re not Jinx St. whatever. You’re Paul Naught’s sister. What are you doing here?”

Jinx St. James’s jaw dropped.

“We wanted to talk to you—” I said.

Luz snorted. “You wanted to talk to me, huh? So you broke into a locked office?”

“Your door wasn’t locked—”

“You want to tell me how you got in the building?”

“We’re just trying to help my brother,” Millie said. And then the professional façade crumpled, and she blurted, “He didn’t steal those packages.”

“As a matter of fact, he did,” Luz said. “And if he thinks wearing a stupid Santa suit is going to keep the police from identifying him, he’s out of his mind.”

“Wait, what’s that about a Santa suit?”

“He didn’t tell you? He thought nobody would be able to recognize him.”

A Santa disguise at peak holiday season did actually seem like a Paul Naught idea, but I filed that away for later. “Ms. Hernandez, Paul said it was only his packages that had been stolen. Is that true?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Doesn’t that seem strange? I mean, if Paul were the thief, wouldn’t he have taken

somebody else's deliveries?"

"Nobody said Paul had any brains."

"But what if it was someone else? Someone who knew when Paul was delivering valuable items?"

"Nobody knows when Paul is delivering valuable items," Luz said. "It doesn't work that way. It's not like we've got a list of what's inside every box."

"What about someone who knew his route?" Millie asked.

It was a surprisingly good question, and one I hadn't considered.

Luz frowned. She hesitated a little too long before she said, "No. Nobody."

"Not even you?" I asked.

"The computer plans those routes."

"But you have access to them."

It was the wrong thing to say; I knew it as the words were leaving my mouth. Luz's face snapped shut. "No. As a matter of fact, I don't. I work in loss prevention, not logistics, and as far as I'm concerned, Paul stole those packages. He has a record here; he tried to walk off with a video game that he took from an open package, and that was a couple of days after he started. He swore up and down it was a misunderstanding—"

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“It was,” I said. “He was trying to live stream it.”

“In an empty box he carried into the lounge? I should have fired him that day, but we’re shorthanded as it is. It was only a matter of time before he tried again.” She pointed to the door. “Now, get out. If I see you on CPF property again, it’ll be trespassing, and I’ll call the sheriff.”

“Ms. Hernandez,” Millie tried.

“Out!”

The rudest part was she didn’t trust us to leave on our own. (Okay, I mean, I get it.) Luz followed us to the front door, unlocked it, and gave us the bum’s rush.

Outside, the day had that diffuse brightness of a gray, cloudy day when the sun just won’t give up. Millie and I made our way back to the car. A semi rattled past us toward the loading docks, doubtless dropping off another load of packages to be delivered to eager residents of the Oregon Coast, and the smell of exhaust wafted up.

“That,” I said once we were in the car, “could have gone better.”

“She was DEFINITELY trying to hide something,” Millie said. “She was SCARED. And DEFENSIVE.” Eyebrows shooting up, Millie whisper-screamed, “WHAT IF SHE’S THE GHOST?”

I gave Millie a long—and significant—look.

“What?” she said.

“You know what.”

Millie squirmed in her seat. “She could be! And anyway it was a good plan. I didn’t know Ms. Hernandez would recognize me.”

“It was not a good plan,” I said. “It was a terrible plan. And you didn’t ask me. You didn’t even talk to me about it. God, Millie, we could have gotten arrested.” I tried to take a calming breath. I tried to let it go. “And Chaz, Millie? Really?”

“You look like a Chaz,” she said weakly.

“How dare you?” I took several more of those deep, calming breaths before I finally trusted myself to say, “Start the car.”

Millie reached for the keys, but her phone buzzed. She glanced at it, and her face changed.

“What?” I said.

“My mom’s asking if I know where Paul is.” Her head came up; worry tightened her mouth. “No one can find him.”

Chapter 6

In the end, Millie dropped me off at Hemlock House, and then she went to look for Paul.

I offered to go with her, but Millie insisted it would be better if she looked for him on her own. I thought part of that might have been because I hadn’t been thrilled with the

spectacle at Clatsop Parcel and Freight, so I apologized for getting upset, and I insisted I wanted to help. No matter what I said, though, Millie stayed firm: she wanted to look for Paul alone.

So, I ended up in the den.

Over the last year and a half, the den had become my unofficial—and, by now, my official—workspace. It was a beautiful room, with built-in bookshelves and wingback chairs and a window that looked out on Hemlock House's front lawn. I'd done some nesting: cozy blankets, notepads, a million pens, and a lot of half-finished and abandoned mugs of cocoa and coffee. Sometimes, Bobby didn't understand that nesting was an integral part of the writing process. Nesting was as important as brainstorming or outlining or—yes, even drafting. Nesting was essential. I'd tried to explain this to Bobby once, and he'd nodded, and then he'd made me take all the mugs to the kitchen and pick up the candy wrappers.

To my credit, I was making surprisingly good progress on my novel. Surprising in the sense that—well, okay, in a lot of senses. And despite the fact that it didn't exactly have a title yet. Or an ending. And it only sometimes had a middle.

But it was good. I could tell it was good. At least, on the days when I wasn't riddled with self-doubt, I could tell it was good. That's one of the weird things about authors—at least, about me, and I think it's true for some others. There are times when we're working—writing or revising or whatever—and that little voice, the one that says everything we've ever written has as much value as the jumble on the back of a cereal box, quiets down, and we can feel that something we're working on is good. It's not all the time. And it's not everything—I mean, I write my fair share of absolute trash. And this isn't taking into account all the days when I am riddled with self-doubt.

But the book was good. It was going to be good, I could tell. And that was the most

exciting feeling in the world.(Not counting when Bobby gives me that certain smile and rolls over in bed.) It was also, frankly, terrifying.

Because if it was good—and if I finished it—eventually, I'd have to send it to an agent.

That thought made me want to do some more nesting.

Instead, I snuggled up with my favorite blanket, grabbed my laptop, and set to work.

The problem I was currently struggling with was plot. Specifically, when in the story Will Gower (my intrepid detective) would find his first dead body. See, one of the staples in PI stories—and Will Gower was the most intrepidest of private investigators—was for the PI to get hired to do something (like take pictures of a cheating spouse, for example, or do a background check on an applicant) and, along the way, stumble onto a murder.

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Sometimes, that's intentional. For example, the client might be trying to frame the private investigator, to make him take the fall. And sometimes, it's bad luck—the PI has gotten caught up in something larger than himself. Cozy mysteries do it too, or anything with an amateur sleuth. Pippi Parker—one of Hastings Rock's local mystery writers—had a whole series of laundromat mysteries where the hapless laundress (is that the right word?) inevitably got caught up in murders she had no business solving. In *Laundry List Murders*, I think she was in charge of cleaning table linens for an American Legion banquet and when she showed up, she found a dead body stuffed in the bingo cage. (It must have been a huge bingo cage, but that wasn't my biggest problem with the story. And yes, I still read the whole book.) Sometimes the sleuth is happily going about their normal life, doing their regular job, and they find a body. Or sometimes a friend asks for a favor, and they find a body. But it always ended up being a body. It was always murder.

A little voice at the back of my head said, For example, maybe your friend asks you to help prove that her brother didn't steal some packages.

Except this wasn't like that at all, I told myself. This was just me helping Millie. This was real life, not some plotty little mystery novel. And anyway—proof!—we'd gone to the shipping warehouse, and we'd talked to Luz, and there hadn't been a single dead body.

There.

That was it.

The end.

I wiggled around some more, trying to get comfortable so I could focus on my manuscript.

Except—

No, I told that little voice in my head. Shut up.

Except now Paul was missing.

And let me tell you: I'm about as dedicated and committed and focused as they come, but if there's one thing that can really ruin a writing session, it's the possibility that the brother of one of your best friends has been murdered.

With a tremendous amount of regret, I decided I would have to stop writing for the day. There were more important things demanding my attention. Paul might be in danger. A fellow human being's life was at stake. Besides, I'd made some pretty good, uh, progress today. I mean, not that you could see it on the page, but it was there in the conceptual work, plus the mental effort I'd exerted, and the prewriting, etc., etc.

I checked the time on my phone.

If I left now, I could still take Christine up on her invitation to go to the Christmas tree farm with the rest of the Naught family.

Yay.

Chapter 7

GaGa's Christmas Tree Farm was located on a winding two-lane road, deep in the thick growth of Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine. It was only mid-afternoon, but the chilly gray of the day had darkened in the thick fog. Under the big trees, it was so

gloomy I almost missed the turnoff: a massive wooden sign painted with a rosy-cheeked Mrs. Claus. The drive was smooth, clean asphalt that turned silver where my headlights touched it. (Okay, technically Bobby's headlights, since I'd been forced to borrow his Pilot.) I drove for maybe another hundred yards through the fog, and then I cleared a line of cedars, and the tree farm appeared in front of me.

The phrase as if by magic popped into my head because, well, it did look pretty magical. Lights hung everywhere—overhead, in long strands of Edison bulbs, and with multi-colored holiday lights framing the tree farm's buildings. A big gambrel-roofed structure seemed to be the central location; it had been painted red, and it had the right shape and color for a barn, but it was too big and too new. On one gable hung a massive wreath with, yes, more lights. Firepits made little pockets of flickering orange in the fog, and a little farther, at the edge of my vision, I could make out the silhouettes of the rows of trees waiting to go home with a family.

It was harder than I expected to find a spot in the parking lot—which itself was nothing more than a layer of mulch bordered with old pine logs. Cars and trucks were coming and going, with families busily streaming to and fro; the ones coming back to their vehicles were, as often as not, loaded down not only with a tree, but with shopping bags and foam cups and s'mores wrapped in wax paper.

S'mores, my tummy said.

Ignoring it—kind of—I got out of the SUV and trekked toward the big red building. As I did, I worked my phone out of my pocket and texted Millie.

I'm here. When she didn't reply, I said, Where are you?

Seconds passed, and still nothing.

I pocketed my phone. In an ideal world, I'd wander around for a few minutes, find the

entire Naught family (including Paul), and ask him some hard questions—like why he'd lied about what had happened at CPF. If that was asking too much, I'd settle for confirmation Paul was still alive. I mean, someone in this family had to know where he was. Maybe it was just that I'd spent too long writing mystery novels. (And, frankly, doing my own snooping.) But that little plot-conscious guy in the back of my brain told me Paul's disappearance, under these conditions, was not a good sign.

On the other hand—as I frequently had to remind Fox—we weren't living in an episode of *Law & Order*.

When I reached the big red building, I did a quick pass, looking for any members of the Naught family.

No luck.

The usual mix of holiday-goers surrounded me. A woman was cleaning up her daughter after what looked like a delicious massacre of cotton candy. And what must have been a sibling group, all of them with the same coloring and the same nose and a flatteringly complementary color scheme, was trying to take a selfie with a not-to-scale plastic Santa (he was way too skinny, for one, and for another, he topped out at about five feet). A group of teenage boys, dressed in jeans and heavy coats and work gloves, were talking and laughing as they worked together to shear trees into that pleasing Christmas tree shape. (You didn't think they grew like that, did you?) The smell of cider and wood smoke and the clean sweetness of evergreen mixed pleasantly, and "Jingle Bell Rock" was playing over the loudspeakers.

It would have been a great place for a date. Bobby and I could have worn coordinating knit caps, and we would have walked through the trees (holding hands, obvs) until we were both chilly, and we would have gotten a selfie with that disproportionately small plastic Santa, and then we would have sat by one of the firepits, listening to Christmas classics, while Bobby prepared s'mores and I ate them (it's the natural

order of things).

The pang of longing was so sudden and so intense that it startled me. For a moment, I tried to fight it with logic. I couldn't miss Bobby; that didn't make any sense. We lived together. We shared a bed together. (In the Biblical sense, yes, but also in the literal sense.) Even when he worked doubles, I saw him most days.

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But when was the last time we'd done something fun? Something cute? Something for the two of us that wasn't squeezed into the few minutes before Bobby finished a shift and when he needed to go to sleep?

I took out my phone and started to text Bobby—nothing major, just I miss you.

But he was working.

And, anyway, what did I expect him to say? I didn't want him to apologize; it wasn't like Bobby wanted to work this many hours. He was exhausted, and on top of that, there was something weird going on with this whole detective thing. Not only our conversation the night before, when he'd been so...evasive. Bobby wasn't really an evasive person, and it wasn't like he'd totally avoided my question. But he hadn't answered it, either, not really.

I was still waffling when I saw Elliott, David (or whatever his name was), Kassandra, and Angeline. They were gathered around a firepit, drinks in hand, and if I hadn't known them, I would have thought they made a cute foursome.

"Ugh, she's the worst," Angeline said. "If she says one more time that she doesn't trust lawyers because she saw a TV show about a lawyer who did drugs, I'm going to tell Mom."

"She's probably the one who does drugs," Kassandra said. "I bet Keme's her dealer."

I considered stomping over there and doing something dramatic, something that would make a statement. I could picture myself standing over them, giving them a

piece of my mind, while they cowered and sniveled and realized what awful human beings they were. Of course, in real life, the words probably would have gotten stuck in my throat, or one of them would have started talking over me, or—the possibilities were endless.

“Did your bank ever figure out what happened?” David asked.

Angeline made a sound of pure disgust. “No. They say the ATM cameras were blocked. I keep telling them: I got hacked. I don’t know why that’s so hard for them to believe.”

“Maybe you didn’t get hacked,” Elliott said in a thoughtful tone. “I know this is going to sound awful, but as a lawyer, you have to learn to ask the tough questions. Do you remember if you ever left your purse in the same room as that boy?”

There was no doubt who that boy was, and I decided I was definitely going to give them a piece of my mind, only first I needed some cotton candy to get my strength up.

“Oh my God, you poor baby,” Angeline said. “What happened to your hand?”

Elliott’s answering laugh could best be described as phony. “My cat got a little too frisky.”

I hoped to God that wasn’t a euphemism.

That was when I saw Ryan.

He had his head down, his shoulders turned in, and he glanced from side to side and over his shoulder as he hurried away from the barn-like building. It was not the stride of a man leisurely picking out a Christmas tree with his family. No, Ryan’s scurrying

rush toward the trees was the behavior of someone who was determined to get a place on Santa's naughty list.

So, I went after him.

I'm not a master of tradecraft (in spy novels, that's what spies always call it). But fortunately for me, neither was Ryan. He walked in a straight line toward the trees, and although he did glance around and check behind him, all I had to do was stay back, drifting through the crowd of happy families, and not wave my arms or jump in the air or shout my name. (Also, I did pull my hood up, and it made me feel super cool.)

When Ryan reached the rows of trees, I marked the aisle he stepped into. And a few seconds later, I started down the next aisle over.

The change was immediate. The trees were placed close together, and they made the narrow footpath feel like it was cut off from the rest of the world—the sounds of laughter and music faded behind me, and the lights strung overhead thinned and then stopped completely. Even my footsteps were muffled by the thick carpet of evergreen needles. The smell of balsam and fir grew stronger, sharper, and while it was pleasant, it also seemed to activate some primitive part of my brain that knew being out alone in a forest, in the dark, was not a great way to keep the human race alive. My heart started to beat faster. The fog was wet on my face. And I was painfully aware of every tiny sound that broke the stillness: branches rustling, the scuff of something moving behind the screen of trees, the rustle of my clothing.

This didn't make any sense, I told myself. Someone should be out here. Families should be picking trees.

But was this the right spot? I hadn't really been looking at signs. Maybe this area wasn't being used right now; maybe that's why the lights weren't strung out

here.Maybe happy families shopping for happy trees were in another part of the tree farm, far away from here, which meant I was completely alone except—in theory—for Ryan, and if you’ve ever written a mystery novel, you know—

A scream broke through my thoughts.

For the record, I didn’t scream.Or jump.Or say any bad words.

I did, however, have a single moment of paralyzing panic, and then my body decided now was a great time to take an adrenaline bath, and my heart kicked into triple-overtime.

Somewhere nearby, someone was laughing.

“It’s not funny!”That was Ryan, and to judge by the ragged edge in his voice, I guessed he’d hit the pee-your-pants level of terror.Someone said something I couldn’t hear, and then Ryan said, “I know it’s a bird, dummy.”

If that scream had been a bird—in the fog, out in the middle of this dark, lonely forest—then GaGa needed to start doing a haunted house every year.

“What do you want?”Ryan asked.“What’s so important?”

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Fox had once told me that I had been, quote, born blessedly free of the curse of common sense, and that comment came back to me as I crept toward the sound of voices.

Someone answered Ryan, but their voice was too low for me to make out.

“This is stupid,” Ryan said.

That same low voice answered. I thought it had a familiar quality, but that might have been my brain playing tricks on me. Whoever it was, though, he—or she, or they—was clearly more worried about being overheard than Ryan, because they were practically whispering.

Whatever they said, Ryan didn’t like it.

“No,” Ryan said. And then, “I don’t care.”

I was close to the voices now. I got down and crawled toward the line of trees separating us—that’s tradecraft, by the way. Humans have a tendency to look at, well, eye level. So, if you want to spy on someone, being above them (or below them) gives you an advantage.

(These are the kinds of things you learn if you actively avoid sports.)

In the next aisle, Ryan stood with his back to me. He was blocking my line of sight, so I couldn’t see the person he was talking to—all I caught was a glimpse of their clothes.

Red velvet.

White fur trim.

A hat traditionally known as a Santa hat.

Santa—okay, the person dressed as Santa—said something.

“No,” Ryan said. “And leave me alone—”

Before he could finish, voices rose nearby.

Okay, a voice rose nearby.

A familiar voice.

“BECAUSE IT’S A TRADITION!”

I love Millie. I really do. She’s sweet. She’s kind. She’s scarily insightful sometimes, and she absolutely refuses to follow the agreed-upon human code of conduct of avoiding ever actually expressing yourself in a meaningful way. (Like the time she forced me and Bobby to talk about, ugh, feelings.)

But that girl does not have an inside voice. Not that we were inside, but—you know.

Ryan said something that bumped him several spots up on the naughty list.

Santa—or whoever it was—beat a retreat. I glimpsed a man’s face—and it wasn’t Paul. It wasn’t anyone I recognized, for that matter. Then the fog swallowed him. Ryan turned toward the next row of trees, pushed his way through them, and was gone.

“WE DO IT EVERY YEAR,” Millie was saying. “IT’S SO MUCH FUN!”

Keme said something in response; the words weren’t clear, but the tone suggested he didn’t agree with this assessment.

In a slightly—and I meanslightly—quieter voice, Millie asked, “Are you okay? What’s wrong?” Keme must have given a boy answer, which is to say, mumbling something completely noncommittal, because Millie said, “You’re not having a good time.”

Here’s the thing: Millie isn’t manipulative. (Not unless you count the time she forced me to talk to Mrs. Knight at the Cakery, because Millie thought I’d enjoy hearing about Mrs. Knight’s, quote, time in the service, even though I kept giving Millie the signal that I didn’t want to talk to Mrs. Knight.) So, I knew that the sadness in Millie’s tone wasn’t feigned, and it wasn’t a ploy.

And because Keme was a boy, he somehow managed to screw up enough, uh, gumption to say, “I’m having a good time.”

He didn’t even sound like he choked on the words or anything.

“No, you’re not,” Millie said. “You hate it. I’m sorry; we don’t have to stay.”

Keme’s labored “I don’t hate it” was actually physically painful to listen to.

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It's not like I was trying to spy on them; even though Millie is basically my younger sister, and Keme occupies a spot that shifts between feral wolf child and big brother who still gives wedgies. (And here's the deal: it's all fun and games, and everybody thinks wedgies are hilarious—right up until you actually get one, and he does it so hard that it gives you rug burn.) But Millie and Keme sounded like they were right there, in the next aisle over, and if I moved now, I knew they'd hear me—and, at this point, they'd assume I had been spying on them. The best thing to do, I decided, would be to stay here until they moved on, and then haul butt back to the barn.

"I don't hate it," Keme said again, and it even sounded slightly more believable. "I'm here, aren't I?" My guess was that Millie found that as unconvincing as I did, and Keme must have picked up on it because he added, "I'm with you. I want to be with you."

Sure, the delivery was awkward. And I don't think anybody bought the idea that Keme was having a grand time. But Keme was eighteen and pretty much the definition of keeps to himself. For the boy to put anything into words, much less something that felt so revealing, was actually kind of heart-melting. (In a good, Grinch way.)

"At least we're not with David and Elliott," Millie said.

Keme laughed. He honest-to-God laughed. It was this husky little thing that was so adorable I wanted to squeeze him until his eyes popped out of his head. (That's called cute aggression, and it's a real thing.) "David asked me, quote, 'What's the dealio on buying drugs?' Like I couldn't see he was recording me on his phone."

“Oh my God,” Millie said. “I’m going to tell Cassandra.”

“Nah,” Keme said.

“What’d you say?”

“I told him I knew a guy from when I was in jail. I told him where to meet him tonight.”

“KEME!”

“It’s that abandoned fruit stand outside of town. I bet he’ll show up, get spooked, and drive back here as fast as he can.”

Millie burst into giggles, and more of Keme’s raspy laughter joined hers.

After, they were quiet for a few moments. Too quiet. And they weren’t walking anymore; I wasn’t sure why they’d come all the way out here and then just stopped to stand around. And then I had the horrifying (and horrifyingly adult) realization that they might have snuck away to make out. For someone with the emotional maturity of an eighth-grader (AKA, me), that was high up the list of personal nightmares.

I was considering whether I might need to make a break for it—even if it did mean getting caught—when Keme said, “What about this one?”

“OH! THAT’S A GOOD ONE! You’re so GOOD at this!”

Keme’s silence had the quality of a shrug. I had no idea what he’d done—or in what way he’d been good at it—but it was hard not to enjoy his efforts not to be pleased with Millie’s praise.

“You’re good at everything,” Millie said.

“No, I’m not.”

“You are. You’re so smart. You learn things so quickly. You know so much about so many different things.”

I caught myself thinking, He does? I mean, I knew Keme was smart. And I knew he was tough and resilient and scarily strong—like, freakishly. Like maybe they were testing super soldier drugs in his Fruity Pebbles. But the fact that Keme knew stuff was...kind of a surprise. Maybe that was because he said so little and kept so much to himself. And my heart did that Grinch thing again when I realized he wasn’t doing that with Millie—he wasn’t holding himself back, wasn’t making himself less. She got to see all of him. And I thought about what that meant for both of them.

In a tone a little too casually off-hand, Millie said, “The application deadline is in a couple of weeks.”

The sound of a footstep crunching evergreen needles was the only answer.

“And I did some research,” Millie said. “There are lots of local scholarships. The Keel Haul even has one; I asked Dawn about it.”

Still nothing.

“And I bet Indira and Dash and Bobby would help—”

“I don’t know.”

“Come ON,” Millie said. “They’d LOVE TO HELP.”

The silence felt even longer this time.

“Even if you don’t want to ask them,” Millie said, “we can still make it work. It would be great. I think it would be REALLY GREAT.”

It was like words dropping down a dry well—a tumbling fall of sounds, and then nothing.

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“You know what we could do?” Millie said. “We could look at MAJORS! Then you could pick what you want to do, and you’d feel more excited.”

Millie’s expectation must have finally been too much for Keme, because it dragged a “Maybe” out of him.

I tried not to move. I tried not even to think. I didn’t want to risk any possibility of interrupting this moment. For the last few months, the Last Picks and I had been scrambling in that completely ineffectual way adults have, trying to figure out what to do with Keme after he graduated high school. Any attempts to have a conversation about it had been rebuffed. Even Indira and Bobby, who usually got more out of Keme than the rest of us, had been met with a wall of disconnect. I’d tried a few times myself. Each attempt had gotten progressively scarier; by the end, I came out of a fugue state and found myself in the kitchen after I’d eaten half a dozen of Indira’s whoopie pies. (Also, they were delicious, so I have zero regrets.)

So, I crouched on the cold hard ground, my hands and knees covered in needles and sap and dirt, practically holding my breath so that I didn’t cause even the slightest disruption in the universe.

Which was when I heard a familiar—and shrill—voice cry out, “MILLIE!”

I actually groaned.

Fortunately, the groan was covered up by Millie’s own grumpy-sounding exhalation.

I couldn’t see Keme, but I wouldn’t have been surprised if he looked like a man

who'd been spared by the executioner.

The sound of steps came through the dark, and then another piercing cry of "MILLIE!"

"OVER HERE!"

If there were any wild animals still living around here, I figured they were all packing up now to find somewhere quieter.

The rustle of branches mixed with huffs of exertion, and then Christine said, "There you are! We couldn't find you!"

"You told us to find this year's pinecone," Millie said. "Look at this one. Keme found it—isn't it GREAT?"

"You took too long. We had to decide all the parts in the Christmas pageant without you. Millie, you're a shepherdess."

"BUT MOM, you said I could be Mary!"

"Gracie Sterling is going to be Mary."

"BUT YOU SAID—"

"And I'm telling you," Christine snipped, "Gracie Sterling is going to be Mary this year."

Several seconds passed. I caught the faint notes of "Auld Lang Syne" drifting to us from the barn.

With a wobbly return to her former enthusiasm, Millie said, “Oh, Mom, Keme could help with the music. He’s SO GOOD at that kind of stuff—”

“Keme,” Christine said over her, “you’re the donkey.”

Okay, listen: I try not to take pleasure out of watching my friends suffer. Honestly. I want to be a good person. I don’t want to build my life on schadenfreude.

But Keme had called me a donkey so many times.

“Mom,” Millie said. “That’s not—” She stopped and tried again. “Isn’t there anything else?”

“I’m sorry, but if you two hadn’t dawdled, you could have picked parts with the rest of us.”

“But you said the boyfriends were going to be the Three Wise Men.”

“And David and Elliott are going to be Wise Men, dear. And we’re saving the third spot for Paul, since he couldn’t be here.”

“But you said it was going to be the boyfriends.”

“Paul’s not here, Millicent.” Christine’s voice had taken on the crisp, no-nonsense tone of a veteran parent. “And we can’t have four Wise Men. You don’t mind being the donkey, do you, Keme?”

It was the kind of silence on which episodes of *Dateline* are built.

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“All right,” Christine said. And then, “I’ll take that. I suppose it will have to do.”

Presumably, that was in reference to this year’s pinecone, whatever that meant. Her footsteps started to move away.

And I realized I was going to be right back where I started: trapped, with the possibility of an angry teenage make-out session holding me hostage.

I jumped to my feet and shouted, “Christine? Christine!”

“Who is that?” Christine called. “Hello? I’m right here!”

I pushed through the line of fir trees—remembering, at the last minute, the pine needles stuck to my clothes. I hoped it would be too dark for anyone to think too much about it. When I reached the next aisle, I threw a quick look at Keme and Millie. To say Keme was glowering would be an understatement; Keme was alight with the rage of a million slighted teenagers. And Millie didn’t look much happier, her mouth open with what looked like another objection or argument or fight. Millie had clearly dressed up for the night, in a pullover and leggings that managed to look chic (on me, it would have looked like I’d rolled off the sofa). Keme was in a hoodie and joggers, and he was channeling the rolled-off-the-sofa vibe.

Christine, on the other hand, looked like she’d stepped out of a Christmas movie. A Hallmark Christmas movie. Set in the 1990s. She was wearing a red-and-green sweater with little bells sewn all over it, and the sweater itself was a patchwork thing with lots of embellishments: wreaths and poinsettias and, yes, Christmas trees. I was starting to wonder if every night was ugly Christmas sweater night for the Naught family. She was

holding a pinecone, and although I wouldn't consider myself an expert, I had to agree with Millie—Kemehaddone a great job; it was a very nice specimen.

“Dash!” Christine beamed at me. And then she glanced around. “Are you solving a murder?”

“Uh, no.” At least, I sincerely hoped not.

With evident disappointment, Christine asked, “Then what are you doing here?”

“Oh, you know, picking out a Christmas tree. Waiting for a chance to meet Santa. Looking for an elf to beat up.”

Christine blinked.

Millie frowned.

Keme looked like he was thinking about beating someone up, and it wasn't an elf.

“I'm so sorry,” I said. “I have no idea why I said that. I wanted to talk to you, actually. Am I interrupting?”

“No,” Millie said.

Keme shook his head savagely.

“Not at all,” Christine said, with a little too much sugar on top. She even took my arm. “You can be a gentleman and walk me back to the barn, since no one else offered.”

Okay, zero schadenfreude that time—the way Keme's jaw sagged made me sick to

my stomach.

But I let Christine lead me down the path. It wasn't really meant for two people to walk side by side, which meant Christine walked in the center of the path and I stumbled along at her side, my arm in the motherly equivalent of a wristlock, getting hit in the face by apparently every branch on this tree farm.

"I don't know what she thinks she's doing," Christine said. "It's a disaster. This never would have happened if she'd stuck with dance. I told her to stick with dance, but she doesn't listen."

"What—"

"That boy," Christine said. "I mean, he's in high school, for heaven's sake. And so rude! And you know he broke all the windows at the Sandbergs' place. Threw rocks while they were out of town. He's a vandal. And he won't open his mouth to say two words. I think if someone invites you over for dinner, you ought to at least make polite conversation, don't you?" Before I could answer, she patted my arm and said, "I wish you would date her."

"Right, well, I'm gay. And I have a boyfriend. And Millie's only a friend. So many reasons, really—"

"It's because she's desperate."

Okay, that didn't exactly boost my self-confidence, but I was too caught up in a wash of fatherly-brotherly rage. "I think Keme and Millie are a great fit. I know you don't see it yet, but that's only because you haven't had a chance to get to know Keme. He's one of the best people I know. I love Millie, and I want her to be with someone as amazing as she is. You just need to give Keme some time."

Christine sighed and, with what sounded like affectionate fondness—like I was a slightly dull nephew who was, nevertheless, pleasant to be around—said, “You’re so young, dear. You don’t understand. That boy is a menace.”

“I do understand, actually. And as Keme’s friend, I need you to know that I’m not okay with you talking about him like that—”

“Well—” And she broke off for a bosom-heaving sigh that drowned me out. “—I suppose there’s nothing either of us can do about it except wait to pick up the pieces.”

I opened my mouth.

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And I realized I was about to try speaking louder.

What would it be like, I wondered, after twenty-odd years of this? I wasn't sure I wanted to think about that question too closely. On the other hand, I also found myself suddenly thinking of how Millie had been acting tonight. The dwindling reserve of false cheer, the gradual surrender. The Millie I knew didn't surrender. And she didn't have to pretend to be excited. I couldn't help remembering a few hours before, at the freight warehouse, and the contrast. I can tell you this much: Jinx St. James wouldn't have put up with any of that bull plop.

But that was neither here nor there; right now, I had more pressing issues to focus on.

"Christine," I said, "I was wondering if you knew where Paul was."

"Don't get me started," she said. "I love those boys, but they are never going to grow up. I told Paul we were getting the Christmas tree today. I told him. And instead, he goes haring off." In a surprisingly dour voice, she added, "To play Nintendo."

"So, you do know where he is?"

"If I knew where he was, that young man would be in for the spanking of a lifetime."

Ah, yes—the Naught Brothers' claim to fame. "I really need to talk to Paul." If, I added mentally, he was still alive. "Are you sure you don't have any idea where he could be? If he asked you not to tell anyone, I understand you might feel like you need to keep it a secret, but this is important. Even if I could just talk to him on the phone."

“Dash, he could be anywhere. You know how boys are.”

That was simultaneously a staggering mistake on Christine’s part—all anyone had to do was look at my love life to understand very clearly that I did not, quote, know how boys are—and a bizarre dismissal of what was becoming an increasingly strange situation. True, Christine didn’t know Paul had been fired. And she didn’t have my, uh, writerly instinct that something bad was happening. But didn’t she wonder where her son had disappeared to? Didn’t she find it strange that he hadn’t answered calls or messages? Wasn’t she curious? The practical part of me, though—after a few hours with the Naught family—suggested that having to deal with two decades’ worth of Paul and Ryan’s playing turning into wrestling turning into fighting turning into crying, all staged in the center of the living room, might have generated the need for a certain *laissez-faire* approach to child management—primarily because the alternative involved a blow dryer and a bathtub.

As we stepped free of the trees, I decided to switch tracks.

“If he does get in touch,” I said, “would you let him know I need to talk to him?”

“He’ll be at the Christmas pageant. Speaking of which.” She swiveled toward me, a terrifying calculus happening behind her eyes. “You don’t have a part yet.”

“Oh, I don’t need—I mean, I’m not religious—I mean, it’s your family—”

“You can be the manger, or you can be the innkeeper’s wine barrel. It’s in storage in the stable. That’s called a vivid detail, Dash—it’s all part of the rich tapestry of character. You could use that in your writing.”

I did some silent squawking. (It’s a real thing—you’ve done it too, I’m sure.) Finally I managed to squawk externally: “A barrel?”

“The manger it is, then. Oh my God, you’re going to look so cute holding baby Jesus. Poor Bobby isn’t going to know what to do with himself. Don’t blame me if you’ve got a ring on your finger by New Year’s!” She gave a laugh and wagged a finger at me, as though I were being naughty, which all around was a confusingly mixed message. Then she gave a brisk clap. “Now, hop to it and solve your murder so you’re free for rehearsals!”

“I’m not solving a—what rehearsals? I’m going to pretend to be a manger for—wait, how long is this thing?”

“Two hours. And that’s entirely the wrong attitude, Dash. A real actor doesn’t pretend to be anything. A real actor inhabits the role. They become the part.”

That was when I realized instead of quibbling about rehearsal time, I should have clarified that I would not be playing the role of “Manger” in the Naught family’s two-hour-long production of the Nativity story.

I opened my mouth. And then something caught my eye—a hunched figure moving through the throngs of happy families.

Ryan.

And he was getting away.

“Excuse me,” I managed to say, and then I broke into a run.

But running—as always—was a mistake. Because by the time I got to the parking lot, Ryan was gone.

Chapter 8

As I drove home, I took inventory.

I hadn't found Paul.

Ryan had managed to sneak away before I could confront him about the conversation I'd overheard.

I was covered in evergreen needles and sap and dirt. I was cold. The fog had settled into my clothes, and even with the heater running, I couldn't seem to shake the damp and the chill.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:30 am

I had been drafted into the Naught family's Christmas pageant.

And I was starting to seriously suspect I'd made a mistake when I'd chosen manger instead of barrel. Barrels didn't have to hold babies. Barrels could probably close their eyes and take a quick power nap and nobody would notice.

But it was hard to hold on to all of that when I reached Hemlock House. It looked magical—trimmed in lights that Bobby had hung (while I helped by reminding him repeatedly how dangerous it was to be on a ladder), the windows varnished with a warm, yellow glow, with wreaths and bows to add a touch of holiday color. Its weird chimneys and turrets poked up like ruffled feathers, which only added to the effect, so that the house looked like something you could have plucked out of Dickensian England. (With less tuberculosis and child labor—although if you asked me and Keme, when Bobby really got going on his chore list, we could have used a little more child labor around the joint.)

Inside, the scent of coffee and the sound of voices drew me toward the servants' dining room. Fox and Indira were sitting at the table there. Fox wore a candy striped pinafore over a whispery concoction (that's the kind of word you use, as a writer, when you don't know exactly what something is called) of green velvet. Their hat, which presumably completed the ensemble, sat on the table—it looked like a clock had exploded inside a giant red bird, all plumes and gears and heavy enough to cause serious damage to the cervical vertebrae. I decided I'd tell Fox about the exploding clock description later, when they needed a pick-me-up, because (I'm being one hundred percent serious) they would be thrilled. Indira, in contrast, wore an oatmeal-colored sweater that managed to look chic and fuzzy at the same time, with a pair of jeans.

I had caught them unawares, and for a moment, the two of them existed in their own world. Fox was laughing at something, and Indira wore a smile that seemed strangely...unguarded. She sat there, hands wrapped around her mug, and looked happy. Not that Indira usually looked unhappy. But sometimes, it wasn't until you saw the difference that you understood what you'd been missing.

"There he is," Fox said and burst out laughing again.

Indira's smile grew wider, and she ducked her head to take a sip of her coffee.

"Great," I said. "What now?"

"Mr. Cheek was at the market," Fox said through fits of giggles. "He said—he said—he said if Deputy Delectable was going to throw his life away with a little tart who would never be able to make him happy—that's you, by the way—"

"Yes, thank you," I said. "I got that part."

"—the least Mr. Cheek could do was make sure the little tart was dressed appropriately."

I didn't groan. Not out loud. But I did wonder what this meant. Mr. Cheek owned Fog Belt Ladies' Wear, and he'd had a not-so-secret crush on Bobby since, well, forever. I wasn't worried; Bobby had laid down some, uh, clear parameters for Mr. Cheek, and when Bobby used his deputy voice, people listened. (Including me.) This new information, however, was worrisome. Not least because what came to mind, when I tried to picture Mr. Cheek's idea of the height of male fashion, was Catwoman meets an aging Liza Minnelli. But gayer.

"How was the market?" I asked, instead of following up on that nightmare.

Indira and Fox had spent the day there; Indira made her living—from what I could tell, since she'd told me to mind my own business—from selling her baked goods at various local markets. This time of year, when a holiday market was open every day in Hastings Rock, was a windfall for her, although it also meant she was busier than ever. Fox sold some of their art at the markets, but often they did other things too—activities for children, little crafts or games. You might have thought children would find Fox off-putting, what with the exploding-clock-bird hat (or, on another memorable occasion, what could only charitably be described as a Willy Wonka suit, but with more garters). Not the case—kids loved Fox, and from what I could tell, the affection was mutual.

“Busy,” Indira said.

“Exhausting,” Fox said. “Summon a chamber boy to draw me a bath.”

Sometimes, you just had to ignore them.

But now Indira was looking at me more closely. “What happened to you?”

“I got into a fight with a pine tree,” I said.

“A pine tree is like the aging twink of the tree world,” Fox declared.

This was what I was talking about: sometimes you just had to let it flow past you.

“Are you all right?” Indira asked. “What’s going on?”

I told them about my visit to GaGa’s tree-farm-wonderland-whatever-it-was-called. I left out the conversation between Millie and Keme because I still wasn’t sure what to make of it, but I explained how I’d gone there looking for Paul, overheard Ryan’s strange conversation with a man I didn’t recognize (in a Santa suit, no less), and then

lost Ryan before I could talk to him.I must have been on a roll because I even (unintentionally) told them about the Christmas pageant.

“Always pick barrel,” Fox said.“Rookie mistake.”

I nodded glumly.

“Do you really think something’s happened to Paul?”Indira asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.“I do think it’s strange.All of it, actually.Paul getting fired, but not seeming to care.Paul not being worried about the package thefts.And then Millie and I go to ask a few simple questions, and Paul disappears.Whatever is going on with Ryan is super strange too.Hard to believe it’s not connected.”

Indira’s eyes were unfocused as she looked out over her mug of coffee.In a distracted voice, she said, “Those two have always had a way of getting into trouble.Millie had her hands full getting them through high school.”

“Not to mention the sisters.”

Indira wasn’t one for making faces.But she did take a communicative sip of her coffee at that moment.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:30 am

“Getting them through high school?” I said.

“Millie’s probably the only reason the two of them graduated,” Fox said. “Paul and Ryan, I mean.”

“Why?” I said. “I mean, I know why they needed help. They’re practically the definition of numbskulls.”

“They’re the definition of toddlers.”

“But what about Christine?”

Fox glanced at Indira, who was still peering out over her coffee, lost in thought. “Well,” Fox said slowly, “Christine is, uh, hands-on, as I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“I’m playing the role of a manger,” I said. “Trust me: I noticed.”

“Right, well, Christine is hands-on about her...projects.”

“The girls,” Indira said absently.

“And the girls,” Fox said. “How to put it to a young person—”

“I’m not that young,” I said.

“I know,” Fox said and mimed touching their jaw. “Your jowls.”

I squawked.(Silently.)

“Christine only sees—and hears, and talks about—” Indira said.

“And cares about,” Fox put in.

“—the things she cares about.”

“And she always gets her way.”

I thought about what I’d seen at Millie’s family dinner.And then again at the tree farm.“She does seem to be a bit of a...steamroller.”

“A bit?”Fox asked.“She was the student council president in high school—”

“Hold on, you knewMillie’s mom in high school?”

“—and I remember once, the principal at the time, Mr.Westergaard, was trying to suggest a theme for the winter dance, and Christine waited for him to finish, turned to the rest of the group, and told us what we were going to do.And it wasnotMr.Westergaard’s vision of ‘An Evening in Paris.’”

“The point is,” Indira said, “Christine’s not going to be worried about Paul and Ryan until they get in the way, so to speak.Whatever her current project is, that’s what she’s focused on.”

My initial impulse was to say that she was a terrible mother.And maybe she was—I didn’t love how she’d treated Millie the few times I’d been around her.But in terms of what I’d seen so far, it didn’t seem quite so cut-and-dried.Sure, Paul hadn’t shown up to pick out the Christmas tree.But maybe Christine thought he was working.Or maybe she was used to her boys failing to show up at family events.The only reason I was

worried was because I knew about the package thefts and because—let's be real—I'd made a massive leap in logic.

"I'd say," I said slowly, "Christine's current focus is trying to get Kassandra and Angeline hitched."

"I hear Angeline's dating a lawyer," Fox said with a grin. "The girls take after their mother, you know."

"Oh my God, not you too."

"Is the other one really a rock star?" Indira asked. At my surprised look, she said, "Everyone was talking about it at Krabby Kuts."

"Well, he'd probably be offended if you said 'rock' instead of whatever weird music he plays. I get the impression that he's a star the same way every teenager with a phone is an influencer."

"Mee-aow," Fox said.

"I guess it's good for Christine to be so focused on those two," I said. "I hate to think what she'd do if she didn't have something to keep her occupied."

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Indira composed her face into smoothness.

Fox's mouth tightened with a hint of sourness. "Keme?"

"Yeah, she doesn't like him. And if this is a passive effort at getting rid of him—which it kind of seems like it is—then I'd hate to see what happened when Christine brought out the big guns."

"Did Keme—" Indira began. She stopped herself. Her hands were very still around her mug. "How is he?"

"I mean, he hasn't tried to cut her hair while she was asleep or climbed on her back and used her ears to steer her." (Both of which, I feel the need to add, he had done to me.) "He's been pretty quiet, from what I can tell. Even for Keme."

"A quiet boy without a prestigious career, without even the prospect of one, who makes zero effort to schmooze the mother," Fox said. "If Christine weren't trying to get those two serpents out of her nest, she'd be boiling in her own rage."

"I think she might be doing a little boiling already," I said. "It's so weird. I mean, most of the time, she acts like Millie's not even there; why does she care who Millie dates?"

"Because Christine wants to control everything," Fox said. "And Keme doesn't fit into her plan."

Indira set her coffee down. "That's not fair. People are complicated. I'm sure Christine

loves Millie deeply and is worried about her. She doesn't know Keme except for stories she's heard around town. He's not like the young men her other daughters bring home. I'm not saying she's right, or that she's acting appropriately, but she's not a monster."

I stared at her. "This is Keme and Millie we're talking about."

"I know, Dash."

"It's not fair."

"No, it's not."

"I don't want to sympathize with her as a human being. I want to talk crap and point out all her failings and pretend I'm perfect."

As Indira stood, she patted my shoulder. "Life is full of disappointments."

I had a response to that—something about Indira challenging Christine to pistols at dawn—but before I could say it (probably for the best), the back door opened, and Keme stepped into the house. His hair was down, wet from the fog, and where the light bent along one long, dark wave, it had an iridescent shimmer. He looked at each of us, shoved his hands into the pocket of his hoodie, and headed into the kitchen.

We watched him go.

For a moment, in his wake, Indira's façade cracked, and a hint of heartache showed.

Fox snapped his fingers at me and hissed.

"What am I—" I began.

“Get in there,” they whispered furiously.

It wasn’t fair. Indira was a mature, responsible, emotionally stable adult. And Fox was so much older than me.

But Fox kept staring at me. And Indira looked so sad.

I dragged myself into the kitchen.

Keme had pulled a plate of sandwiches from the fridge, and he was transferring what looked like the bulk of them to a separate plate. His shoulders were high and tight, his body rigid—pretty much all the signs that he knew I was there and was hoping I would spontaneously combust or get picked up by a tornado and dropped in Oz or, maybe ideally, drop dead on the spot.

“Hey,” I said.

He dropped a final sandwich on his plate, returned the rest of them to the fridge, and headed straight for the door. It was simultaneously defensive and combative—shoulders slumped, cradling his food, eyes fixed on something behind me, but walking with a grim determination like he was going to plow through anything, including me, that got in his way.

“I was wondering if you wanted to play Xbox—” I began.

“Move.”

Ladies and gentlemen: I moved.

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He passed through the servants' dining room, and the sound of his steps moved upstairs.

I slunk out of the kitchen. Indira was collecting mugs from the table. Her face was back in its usual impassive control. Fox was glaring at me like I'd done something wrong.

"I tried," I protested.

"You tried," they said scornfully.

"What did you do? You just sat there!"

"I was guarding the back door." And then, a heartbeat too late: "And providing moral support!"

"It's all right, Dash," Indira said. "I'm sure he's fine. It can be stressful, meeting a new partner's family. And Millie's family is close-knit and very involved. And it's the holidays, which means lots of demands on their time. He only needs to make it through a few more days."

Neither Fox nor I had anything to say to that.

Indira headed into the kitchen, carrying the coffee mugs. Fox rubbed their face and said, "What are you going to do now?"

"Oh, I'm definitely sending Bobby to talk to him. The last time Keme cornered me

alone, he tried to stick my head in a toilet. The only reason I escaped was because Millie was laughing so hard she fell down, and Keme was so worried about her that he forgot about me.”

Fox stared at me for several long seconds.

“You meant about Paul,” I said.

“Never mind,” they said. “I don’t want to know.”

“I’m going to find Ryan tomorrow and make him tell me what’s going on.”

“You’re going to make him?” Fox got to their feet, stretched their back, and in a tone that was insultingly amused, added, “I hope he doesn’t shove you in a locker.”

As Fox sauntered into the kitchen, I called after them, “Very funny, but this isn’t high school.”

On the other hand, Ryan did seem like the type. And he and Paul were, like, always wrestling.

So, great. I had a new fear to contend with.

I went into the den and tried to write for a while. I didn’t get far; I was still trying to figure out when Will Gower would find his first dead body. (Well, I was also trying to figure out who was going to get murdered, but that seemed like something I could figure out down the road.) I didn’t make much progress, though; I couldn’t focus, and I found myself replaying the events of the day—my little bout of failed corporate espionage, learning from Luz that Paul had lied to me, and of course, the weird stuff at the tree farm. In the end, I left Will Gower where he was (brooding in his office, waiting for a client to hire him for some innocuous task), and I went upstairs to get

ready for bed.

Bobby came home when I was brushing my teeth. He looked good in his khaki uniform, with his duty belt and his gun and the unmistakable air of authority, which was only slightly undermined by the fact that he'd already shed his boots and was standing there in his socks. He also looked tired, which made sense, since he'd worked sixteen hours.

"Hi," he said and kissed my cheek.

I mumbled a hello around the toothbrush, and Bobby started changing out of his uniform.

I got a slightly longer—and more interesting—kiss when a naked Bobby padded past me to take a shower. I washed my face. I took a peek in the shower, and Bobby grinned at me before he stuck his head under the spray.

"You need to talk to Keme," I said.

"What happened?" he asked as the water sluiced away soap.

I told him.

"Tomorrow," Bobby said and grabbed his shampoo.

I let Bobby finish his shower, and I got in bed. I fluffed the pillows. I thought about picking up my book, and then I thought maybe I'd wait and see. I mean, there was tired and there was tired.

When a naked—and now clean—Bobby emerged from the bathroom, he took one look at me and burst out laughing. "Babe, I'm beat."

“What?I didn’t—I wasn’t—” It was better to end on a note of outrage: “I never!”

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“You never, huh?” he asked as he climbed into bed next to me.

“Never ever,” I said. I had to pause while he kissed me again, and I wondered if this was some sort of mind game—if so, I was into it. “How dare you?”

His answer was to scoot both of us around until we were lying down together, my back pressed to his chest. He did a little more wiggling. He made this sound of pure contentment that, I had to admit, raised certain ideas again.

“You had a long day,” I said, and I brought his hand to my mouth and kissed his knuckles.

“I’m going to turn into one of those hunched-over old men if I keep sitting in that cruiser,” Bobby said. “I think I need to see a chiropractor.”

“Want to go tomorrow?”

“Can’t.” A yawn interrupted him. “Salk is sick.”

I tried not to groan or moan or protest that this wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair to Bobby. It wasn’t fair to anybody in the sheriff’s office, who were all pulling extra shifts. But the part I was particularly emotional about was that it wasn’t fair to me.

Keep your mouth shut, I told myself. Be supportive, I told myself. The last thing Bobby needs is someone nagging him about how much time he spends at work. And it’s not like he wants to do this.

“I know you were busy,” I said, “but did you get a chance to submit your application for the detective position?”

Bobby made a sleepy sound. “Didn’t have time.”

“When’s the deadline?”

Another, even sleepier noise.

“Bobby?”

Several seconds passed before, a little too clearly, he said, “What?”

“When’s the deadline to apply?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“That’s what I said.”

It was such a strange, un-Bobby-like thing to say. With a strange, un-Bobby-like edge. I thought I could feel the tension in his body, but then I realized I couldn’t tell because I was so tense.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “I thought you wanted to apply.”

Bobby’s breathing changed. After several seconds, he rolled onto his back and adjusted his pillow. Finally, he said, “Yeah.” And then, in that same tight voice, “Can I turn off the light?”

I nodded. He must have seen the movement, because a moment later, darkness swallowed us.

It felt like a long time before his hand slid across my stomach in a silent question. I laced our fingers together and squeezed, and he squeezed back, and his breathing softened into sleep.

But I was awake for a long time.

Chapter 9

The next morning, I woke up stiff, cranky, and miserable. Then I stayed in bed too long, which only made me feel worse, and when I finally dragged myself into the shower, all the little things began: I dropped my bottle of body wash, and the cap broke. I slipped in the tub and banged my knee. We were down to the little bit of toothpaste at the end of the tube, and for some reason, the thought of trying to squeeze it out filled me with near-murderous levels of rage.

By the time I made it downstairs, my disposition could be generously described as sour.

Indira had already gone to the holiday market, but she'd left a crock pot full of steel-cut oats on the kitchen counter. I added maple syrup and brown sugar (the best oatmeal-flavoring combo except possibly brown sugar and cinnamon), ate, and thought.

It was hard not to think about last night. About Bobby. How much he was working. And how distant he seemed. The last time things had been like this, it had been after Bobby's breakup with West. Bobby had been picking up a lot of extra shifts. Every extra shift, as a matter of fact. All the shifts he could. So that he wouldn't have to deal with the real problem.

So, what was the real problem?

The obvious answer—based on last night’s interaction—seemed to be me.

The steel-cut oats slid down my craw in a thick glob.

Well, I definitely didn’t want to think about that.

Instead, I tried to drag my mind back to my investigation, if that’s what you could call it. I was half-tempted to tell Millie I was done. We’d already talked to the people at the freight company. Paul, it seemed, had lied to us and then, as the Brits say, done a runner. There wasn’t any reason for me to continue to poke my nose in where it didn’t belong.

Unless something had happened to Paul.

If I could just find him—or, barring that, convince myself nothing bad had happened to him—I could call the whole thing off. I would call the whole thing off.

As soon as I was sure Paul wasn’t, you know, dead.

I considered texting Millie, but then I decided against it. I wanted to talk to Ryan, and I had the sneaking suspicion that having Millie there might make Ryan clam up. Between bites of oatmeal, I dug out my phone and looked up the number for Pirate’s Cove Laser Tag and Mini-Golf. It was listed on Google as an entertainment multiplex, which sounded like the name for a movie theater in the ’90s. I placed the call and navigated my way through the automated system by screaming, “Agent,”

every time it asked me for a choice.(You'd be surprised how often it works.)

Sometime around my third "Agent!", Keme appeared in the kitchen doorway. The boy was still in board shorts, but today's outfit consisted of sneakers that I was pretty sure Indira had gotten him for his birthday, and a flannel I knew Bobby had given him. His long hair was tied back. He gave me a considering look and then started typing on his phone.

"Pirate's Cove," a voice brimming with excitement said. "Avast, me matey, how can I help you?"

"Is Ryan Naught there?" I asked. "He asked me to look at a go-kart."

"Yep! He's here. Hold on, let me—"

I disconnected.

Keme looked up from his phone. There was judgment in his eyes as he said, "You're going to fix a go-kart?"

"I'm going to get some answers out of Ryan Naught if I have to beat them out of him."

I'm not even joking: Keme's eyes literally brightened. He raised his phone hurriedly, tapped out a few more words, and shoved it in a pocket. When I passed him on my way out of the kitchen, he followed me.

"No," I said. "You're not going."

He kept following me.

“Absolutely not,” I said when we got to the front door.

Halfway across the lawn, I said, “I’m putting my foot down.”

When we were both settled in the Pilot, I said, “Listen to me, young man—”

“Please.”

I sensed a trap.

Shifting in his seat, Keme fiddled with his seatbelt as he muttered, “David and Elliott are taking Millie’s parents to a winery.”

I waited, but that was it. “And if I don’t give you an excuse not to go, Millie’s going to drag you along.”

He shrugged and stared down at his lap.

I thought about my chances of surviving the next sentence, and then I decided to go for it. “Is everything...okay?”

Keme’s head came up slowly.

“I just mean,” I said in a rush, “I know relationships are complicated, and I’m definitely not great at them, but if you ever need to talk...”

I trailed off because, well, his face.

His eyes were huge.

His nose was scrunched up.

His mouth hung open.

“Right,” I mumbled. “Never mind.”

We drove north into Hastings Rock. The day was still gray and foggy, and the first stretch of our drive, through a forest of Sitka spruce and lodgepole pines and thick walls of ferns, was a dark, drippy tunnel. Pretty, yes. Beautiful, actually, especially if you—like me—were into vampires and werewolves and, oh yeah, the wonders of nature. But it didn’t do all that much for my mood.

Hastings Rock, on the other hand, looked like one of those hand-painted postcards: the pleasing asymmetry of the skyline, the picturesque downtown jumble of old Victorian houses and timber-frame businesses, everything decked out for the holidays with an abundance of red and green. You could still see the artificial (but environmentally friendly) snow they’d laid down over the weekend, when Hastings Rock was temporarily turned into a winter wonderland. Even from a distance, it wasn’t hard to tell why tourists flocked here to indulge in the spirit of the season (and in artisanal cheeses, chocolates, and glassware).

Our route took us farther north, past the scenic downtown and toward the industrial side of Hastings Rock. Although most of the town’s income now came from tourists, a

few major businesses still operated—some commercial fishing, the timber yard, and the shipping terminal. They were built up along Hastings Bay, which was decidedly less scenic.

We didn't have to go quite that far. Pirate's Cove was comfortably settled in a strip mall in one of Hastings Rock's residential neighborhoods. The entertainment multiplex (or action park, or whatever we were calling it) occupied a large, concrete building that anchored one end of the strip mall. The building itself was painted a dingy gray, but the awning and sign that said PIRATE'S COVE were a little jazzier—there were even some flashing lights in there.

I parked, and Keme said, "When are you going to get your own car?"

"Rude. When are you?"

"Bobby said when he gets a new one, I can buy the Pilot off him."

"When's that going to happen?"

Keme smirked. "Bobby didn't tell you?"

"Bobby tells me everything," I said—a little haughtily, but I couldn't help myself. Before Keme could call me on it, I dropped out of the Pilot and headed for the building.

Inside, Pirate's Cove was more or less what I remembered from similar venues at middle-school birthday parties. It was a large open space full of people, noise, and machines—a perfect cocktail to send my oh-so-mild social anxiety into turbo drive. (Was turbo drive a thing? I refused to ask Keme.) The area where we stood, near the doors, had been given over to a ticket counter, where a girl with braces, glitter strands in her hair, and what appeared to be a genuine gusto for Pirate's Cove was

helping a mom and her daughter—it took me a second glance to recognize Tessa, Millie’s boss from Chipper, and her daughter.

The rest of the entertainment multiplex had been divided up into sections. Closest to us were the arcade games, where lights flashed and bells dinged. A group of high school boys were chasing each other around the machines, laughing manically, apparently trying to swat each other’s hats off their respective heads. Then there was the indoor go-kart track (remember, the whole point of this place was for tourists to visit on those rainy Oregon Coast days), where a surprisingly long line of people waited for their turn. There was a concession stand, and there was a ropes course, and there was—obviously—mini golf. On the course, a tween in tween-sized camo fatigues was jumping, hands in the air, cheering, as another girl—younger, and based on the resemblance, probably her sister—putted her ball into the hole. A buck-toothed boy, hands full of tickets, streaked past us to the prize counter. Two teen girls sat on a table, sharing a slushy and watching the boys who were trying to knock each other’s hats off. The whole place smelled like rubber and the kind of cheese that comes in a bag.

Even with my internal I’m-going-to-scream meter inching up toward the red, I had to admit: I remembered how magical a place like this had felt when I was a kid.

Keme poked me.

“Ow. Why are your fingers so sharp—”

And then I saw Ryan.

He was dressed in khakis, a polo with the Pirate’s Cove logo on its breast, and a Pirate’s Cove baseball cap. With a clipboard in his hands and a radio clipped to his belt, he looked about as managerial as anyone could under the circumstances.

Unfortunately, he saw me at the exact same time. And he turned and ran.

Okay, he didn't run. But he did...bustle. Like, imagine it's a hot summer day, and the only thing you've wanted all day is ice cream, and your friends made you go to the beach so Bobby could surf, and you see Two Girls and a Scoop (which is the best ice cream truck in the world), but then it starts to pull away, and you know if you run, Keme will make fun of you for the rest of your life.

That kind of bustle.

(Also, that example was completely hypothetical.)

I charged after him.

For the first few seconds, I thought I was gaining on him—Ryan had to slow down when a family of four moved into his path carrying pizza and drinks from the concession stand. But then I had to lurch to a stop to avoid a collision with a pair of Mean Girls who strolled in front of me (they looked like they were twelve years old, and they were terrifying). By that point, Ryan was pivoting to get past an older woman who had stopped to tie a child's shoes. I made up some of the distance and then had to slam on the brakes when a blinky-eyed dad type suddenly stopped walking in front of me. (He was playing a Switch.) The whole thing might have been slightly embarrassing except for the fact that somehow Keme got stopped by a man in his seventies who—to judge by my brief glance back—wanted directions to the restroom.

Fortunately, I turned my attention forward again in time to see Ryan slip into the laser tag arena.

The path ahead of me cleared.

I sprinted after him.

And a brick, uh, craphouse of a teenager stepped in front of me.

“Excuse me, sir. You have to check in at the desk.”

Ryan had already disappeared down the corridor to the laser tag arena.

“Okay, fine,” I said, patting myself down for my wallet. “How much is it?”

“Oh, you have to have one of our guest cards from the front desk,” he said. “You pay them, and they give you a card, and then you bring the card here—”

“Can’t I pay you?” I asked, leaning to look past him. “Cut out the middleman?”

“No, sir. See, you have to have a card, and then that card is yours, and you pay—”

“Yes, yeah, I get it. Look, I don’t even want to play, I just need to talk—”

I tried to sneak around him.

It didn’t work well.

“Sir,” the gargantuan teenager said, “you need to go to the front desk and—”

“Hey Randall,” Keme said. He held out a plastic card with the Pirate’s Cove logo on it. “For both of us.” And then, to me, in the unmistakable tone of someone who

suspects he's going to be cheated: "You're paying me back."

"Oh, hey, Keme," the giant—apparently Randall—said. "Cool."

He scanned the card. And then he waved us through.

We ran down the corridor. It forked, so Keme went right, and I went left. When the corridor turned again, it opened into the waiting area, where the blasters (AKA the guns) and the vests and the headbands were racked and charging. I didn't bother to put on a vest or a headband—those are the dumb parts of the game, because that's where you get shot.

I did, however, help myself to a blaster.

Did I need it?

No.

Was it the best use of my time?

No.

But listen: it was freaking laser tag.

Armed, I ran through another opening and into the arena itself. I glimpsed a pimply girl in a Pirate's Cove polo who was waving her arms and calling, "Mister! Mister!"

I kept running.

The arena was a maze; it was designed to be that way. It was also pure chaos. Teens and preteens sprinted around me, screaming and blasting. Sound effects blared

overhead. Each room was different from the next—one designed to look like an urban wasteland, another that might have been a factory or a warehouse, and then a futuristic one that could have come from some really bad 1970s sci-fi. The lights were dim, and everywhere, black lights lit up white and neon and fluorescent strips. It smelled powerfully like an overworked fog machine—and like overheated children. One little girl, who couldn't have been more than seven, had me in her sights and was shrieking as she unloaded shot after shot into me.

I shot her back, and she screamed with excitement as her vest flashed.

Like I said, it's laser tag. No mercy.

I was struggling against a current of flushed and sweaty tweens, working my way through what was someone's idea of a medieval castle, when I glimpsed Ryan. He was trying to open a door hidden in one of the walls, glancing frantically from side to side. I cleared a cloud of boys who clearly hadn't been giving it their all in eighth-grade PE, and a path opened up for me.

Ryan must have caught my movement out of the corner of his eye, though, because he spun around, a gun in one hand.

It was not a laser tag blaster.

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It was a pistol, and it was matte black, and it was compact. In the dark, I couldn't make out any more details, but what I saw was enough. I slowed to a stop.

"Go away," Ryan said. "If I talk to you, they're going to kill me too!"

Behind Ryan, movement drew my attention. A shape was wriggling through one of the arrow slits in the castle wall. It was weirdly gratifying to see that Keme, too, had stopped long enough to pick up one of the blasters. It was also terrifying to know that Keme was walking straight into danger. I tried to signal him, but I didn't want Ryan to notice him. If Keme saw my tiny gesture, he didn't acknowledge it.

"Who's going to kill you?" I asked to fill the growing silence. "What's going on?"

"Just leave me alone!"

"Ryan, who are you scared of? I can help you. I mean, not me personally, but Bobby—"

As Ryan opened his mouth—he was apparently unimpressed by my offer to get my boyfriend to help—Keme snuck up behind him. In one smooth movement, Keme brought the blaster back like a baseball bat. And then he swung.

The blaster struck Ryan in the back of the knee. Ryan lurched. His hand holding the gun moved forward, and the pistol kicked in his hand.

Something hit me in the chest.

Ryan crashed to the floor, and Keme stood over him, blaster raised like he might do some more clubbing.

Pain was starting to spread through me.

My only clear thought was: He shot me.

I looked down.

There, caught in the fold of my tee, was a little plastic airsoft round.

“How did you know it was airsoft?” I asked Keme. “How did you know that wasn’t a real gun, and he wouldn’t kill me?”

To judge by the expression on Keme’s face, that question hadn’t occurred to him.

Then he shrugged.

Chapter 10

“Ow, ow, ow,” Ryan said. “I think you broke my leg.”

“You’re lucky Keme didn’t break your head,” I said. “What were you thinking, pulling a gun on me?”

We were sitting in the manager’s office—Ryan had told us, twice, that it was the manager’s office. In case we didn’t understand the honor being bestowed upon us. It was a cramped room, with the usual particleboard furniture and a strong aroma of Hot Pockets. (I don’t have anything against Hot Pockets—at one point in my life, before I had to worry that my boyfriend might start looking for greener pastures, I’d even considered Hot Pockets one of the four main food groups. But they do contain trans

fats and, well, despair.)

Massaging the back of his knee, Ryan said, “I’m not going to be able to walk.”

“You walked fine from the laser tag arena to your office.”

“No, I didn’t. It hurt.”

“You shot me,” I reminded him.

But he directed his look at Keme. “I’m going to tell my mom.”

Keme’s face, which was set in a mixture of annoyance and please let me hit him again, didn’t change.

“She is going to be mad,” Ryan said, drawing the word out with the kind of glee that only elementary schoolers can manage.

“Ryan,” I said, “I need you to focus. What’s going on? Who’s going to kill you?”

“The same people who killed Paul.”

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I waited, but nothing more came. “What happened to Paul?”

“Uh, they killed him.”

I drew a deep breath. “Are you sure he’s dead?”

Ryan rubbed his knee some more. Finally he said, “I mean, he’s not answering his phone or anything. And nobody can find him. And you were helping him, and everyone knows that you’re, like, a jinx, and that’s why people always die when you try to investigate a murder.”

My jaw dropped.

“A jinx?”

Keme shrugged.

“In the first place,” I said, “people don’t die because I’m investigating. They die because there’s a murderer trying to cover his tracks. Or her tracks.” I tried to stop there, but more burst out. “And I don’t try. And it’s not always murder!”

Ryan did that thing that drives otherwise sane, reasonable people to homicidal sprees: he shared a look with Keme and rolled his eyes. Then, his expression changing, he said, “That was pretty dope how you snuck up behind me. How’d you do that?”

“Window,” Keme said.

“Nice.I never thought of that.”

“It’s called an arrow slit,” I said.

“Bet you could sit up there and snipe all day,” Ryan said.

“I did that once,” Keme said.“On top of the wall.”

“Holy—” Ryan broke off and looked at me, of all people, and then mumbled, “—uh, shoot.That’s so fire.”

“Behind the crenellations,” I said.

“How’d you get up there?”Ryan said.And in what he probably considered his manager’s voice, he said, “You’re not supposed to go up there.”

“There’s this spot,” Keme said.“You can use one of the lights to brace yourself.”

“That is seriously so dope,” Ryan said.

Keme shrugged.

“Like parkour,” I said.

They both looked at me.Silently.For what felt like a long time.

Let me tell you: it was not flattering.

Finally, Ryan turned to Keme and said, “What’s his deal?”

“Books.”

Ryan made a sound, like this one-word response from Keme had somehow explained everything.

“Okay,” I said, “if we could get back to the topic of, I don’t know, your brother’s murder that you don’t seem all that torn up about.”

“Are you kidding?” Ryan said. “I’m a wreck. I can’t sleep. I can’t eat.”

And yet, I thought, Hot Pockets. “Based on what you told me, it sounds a little premature to decide he’s dead. Unless there’s something else?”

Ryan’s head moved in a slow, uncertain no.

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“Why don’t you start from the beginning,” I said, “and tell us what’s going on?”

“I don’t know, man. Paul disappeared yesterday, and then Anthony said if I didn’t pay up, bad, uh, stuff was going to happen, and then—”

Ryan didn’t actually gulp when he cut off, but it seemed like a close thing.

“And then what?” I asked.

But Ryan closed his mouth and shrank in on himself. He even forgot about soothing his injured knee.

Keme was the one who broke the silence: “Anthony Turnley?”

Ryan nodded miserably.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Uh, the Turnleys,” Ryan said.

I took another deep breath. Several, actually. I found myself—to my own surprise—feeling a sudden pang of sympathy for Christine. And, even more so, for Millie. Finally, I managed to say, “Who?”

“Big family,” Keme said. “They live by the river.”

“They’re—” Ryan gave me another of those worried looks and settled on

“—buttheads.”

“What kind of buttheads?” I asked. “Murdering buttheads?”

Keme didn’t respond except to narrow his eyes in consideration of the question.

Ryan, on the other hand, nodded frantically.

“You think they had something to do with Paul disappearing?” I asked.

“Maybe,” Ryan said. “I don’t know.”

“You said this guy, Anthony, he talked to you?”

More enthusiastic nodding. “At GaGa’s. He was there, and he said we had to talk, but not in public, so I was supposed to meet him back in the U-cut trees.”

The look on Keme’s face was one of wonder—primarily, I suspected, at how Ryan had managed to stay alive this long.

“What was he wearing?” I asked.

“This stupid Santa suit,” Ryan said. “He looked like such a jerk.”

“Okay,” I said. So far, Ryan’s story lined up with what I’d seen, so I asked, “What next?”

“He said he wanted to talk to Paul. He said he’d been looking for him.”

“Did he say why?”

“No, he just said Paul owed him.”

I looked at Keme, but there was nothing there. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. That’s what he said: Paul owed him. And then he kept asking where Paul was. I told him I didn’t know, and he said I’d better find him, or I was going to have to pay up.”

I thought about that for a few seconds. “If they’re looking for Paul, it doesn’t sound like they killed him.”

“Oh dang,” Ryan said. “I didn’t think about that.”

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That was probably the truth; I suspected Ryan didn't think about a lot of things.

"What else?" I said.

"That's pretty much—"

"No, it's not, because you started to tell us something and then you clammed up."

Ryan made himself even smaller. He squirmed. He rocked. He did micro-spins from side to side, and the office chair squeaked under him.

"Fine," I said. "Keme?"

Keme didn't even move.

"All right!" Ryan's voice held a note of genuine panic. "I'll tell you."

You should have seen Keme's face. My general opinion with Keme is that he needs to be taken down a peg or two, especially when he thinks he's really tough, like that time he pushed my head between the cushions on the chesterfield. But today, I figured he probably needed this, on account of the whole donkey thing.

Ryan wheeled the chair over to a filing cabinet. He unlocked it with his manager keys—he paused to tell us this—and opened a drawer. From inside, he drew out a stack of cash. And then another. And then another.

For several long seconds, I stared.

And then I said, “How much is that?”

“Ten thousand dollars,” Ryan said in what was practically a whisper.

“Where did you get it?”

He hesitated again, but only for an instant. “The trunk of our car. Where we keep the spare tire.”

“Why were you looking in there?” Keme asked.

“That’s where we keep our smokes.” In a rush, he added, “Don’t tell our mom.”

There was something to be said about men in their twenties who hid cigarettes, called them our smokes, and worried about their mom catching them. But I focused on the more pressing issue: “When did you find it?”

“This morning,” Ryan said. “I know what you’re thinking, but there’s no way this is Paul’s.”

“Why not?”

“Because he would have told me!” With an unexpectedly self-aware grin, Ryan added, “And we would have spent it.”

Maybe it said something about the company I’d been keeping, but strangely enough, I believed him.

Of course, that meant there was a much bigger problem.

First, the stolen packages.

Now, the money.

Someone was trying to frame Paul.

But for what?

And where in the world was he?

Chapter 11

I called Bobby.

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Big surprise: Ryan didn't like that.

He only tried to run away once. He made it as far as the door before Keme grabbed his collar, and then he gave up immediately.

I was starting to think Keme had a future in a field that generously rewarded physical violence. MMA, maybe. Or the military. Or what did you call those guys in the mob who broke your leg if you didn't pay up? An enforcer. My adopted son-slash-big brother would make one heck of an enforcer.

When Bobby got there, he heard us out. He looked at the money. And then he and I stepped outside while Keme fell into the natural role of prison guard.

"Are you going to arrest him?" I asked.

"For what?"

"I don't know. Keeping secrets. High treason. Criminal abuse of a Hot Pocket."

"How much syrup did you put in your oatmeal?"

"Bobby!"

"I'm not going to arrest him."

"Are you going to arrest me?"

“For what?”

“Uh, snooping?Sleuthing?Playing laser tag without a vest?Impersonating a police officer while under the influence of Jinx St.James?”

Sometimes, when Bobby gets quiet, it feels like he’s quiet for alongtime.

“It was getting interesting there at the end,” he said in what I—a writer!—would have called a deadly tone. “Keep going.”

“What about the money?”

“When did you impersonate a police officer?”

“I was really more of an accomplice. That’s not a crime.”

“It is a crime. It’s actually its own crime. It’s called being an accomplice.”

“Bobby: the money?”

He gave me a look that suggested the previous conversation was not finished, but he said, “I’m not going to do anything about the money. Sure, it’s weird that Ryan found it in his car. And I believe you when you say this might be someone’s attempt to frame Paul. But think about it like this: all we know for a fact is that Ryan found some cash. No one has reported that money missing. No one has accused Paul or Ryan of a crime. It’s not a crime to have a lot of cash on hand. And it’s not a crime to hide it in weird places.” Bobby put his hands on his hips. It’s a good look on him; he’s got broad shoulders and a trim waist, and when he puts his hands on his hips, it accentuates the defined vee of his body. It also emphasizes his gun, which—even though I don’t like guns and don’t want guns and don’t have any general, uh, truck with guns—still has an effect. “What I don’t understand is why everyone was so fixated on Paul in the first

place.”

“Because it was his packages that were being stolen. Only his packages.”

“But see, that’s just not true. I mean, maybe a higher number of Paul’s packages were being taken than, say, another random delivery driver. But porch piracy is a big—and I mean big—problem. We’re talking billions of dollars a year. I understand Paul had already made a dumb mistake at work. They had him pegged as potential trouble. Maybe they felt like they needed to make an example. Or maybe they really did think Paul was stealing those packages.”

I could hear something else trying to nose its way out from between Bobby’s careful sentences. “But?”

Bobby glanced around, but we were still alone in the small staff parking lot behind the strip mall. “Do you know how porch pirates work?”

“I mean, they take packages off of porches, right?”

“Right. Sometimes, it’s a crime of opportunity—someone passes a house with packages on the porch, and they run up, grab them, and leave. But other times, it’s planned. For some people, this is their equivalent of a full-time job, so they have strategies, and they know what works. They might dress up as a delivery driver, for example, and drive an unmarked van, so it looks like they have a reason to be carrying packages to and from the porch. Or they dress up as an employee from a utility company, or something else—something nobody would look twice at. Sometimes, they follow a delivery truck and grab anything that isn’t brought inside right away. And sometimes, they work in groups.”

“So, somebody could have been following Paul, and that’s why it was only his packages—” The rest of what he’d said caught up to me. “Wait, groups?”

“It’s a multi-billion-dollar industry, if you want to call it that. Some people get organized about it.”

Farther down, one of the back doors set into the strip mall opened, and a middle-aged guy came out lugging a bag of trash.

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“Please don’t tell me it’s the Turnleys,” I finally said.

“We’ve successfully prosecuted three of them,” Bobby said. “But they’re like cockroaches—turn on the light, and they all scatter.”

I was still trying to make sense of this. “Yeah, but a porch pirate family?”

“More like a clan, I think. Lots of cousins, and you can never tell who’s related to whom. And it’s not only stealing packages. The juveniles do a lot of shoplifting—and I’m talking a lot, Dash. They also hit storage units, warehouses, that kind of thing—anywhere with minimal security but the prospect of high-value items. Around here, that includes vacation homes, rental properties. Remember when you first moved here, and you caught a burglar in the house? At the time, I thought it was one of the Turnleys.”

I nodded—that particular memory was still nice and fresh. It hadn’t been one of the Turnleys, though; it had been Vivienne, and she hadn’t exactly been burgling. All I said, though, was “They sound charming.”

“They’re not. They’re dangerous. One of the dads or uncles—depends on who you’re asking—is in prison for armed robbery, and we’re pretty sure a couple of others held up a bank in Washington five or six years ago.”

“Jeez.”

“If they’re involved—and it sounds like they are involved—this isn’t just asking a few questions to help a friend. This is serious. And it’s dangerous.”

“But why are they involved?” I asked. “I mean, what do they want from Paul? Was he working with them? Does he owe them money?”

“Good questions,” Bobby asked. “Very good questions for the sheriff to ask as soon as this becomes an official investigation. Meanwhile, you can go home and keep working on your book.”

The thought of pounding my head against that particular wall made me shudder. (Why was it so freaking hard to decide where a body might show up in a mystery novel? The whole point was for bodies to show up. As frequently as possible, in my opinion.) But I said, “I’m worried about Paul. He’s gone, and nobody knows where he is. Millie’s worried about him too. Even Ryan’s worried about him, and he’s got the brains God gave a chinchilla.” (Apologies to all chinchilla enthusiasts out there.) “I want to talk to the Turnleys.”

Bobby set his jaw. For the first time, I noticed that he looked tired. Of course he did—working double shifts and then coming home and having to deal with my nonsense would do that to anyone.

“Just talk,” I said. “I promise.”

“Just talk,” Bobby said in an unflattering tone.

“I won’t make any wild accusations. If I suddenly make an important breakthrough in the case, I won’t let them know. I won’t reveal anything that would make them want to silence me, probably by killing me and burying my body in a part of the forest no one will ever find.”

Bobby stood there for probably eight or ten seconds, hands still on his hips. And then he reached for his radio.

“If you’re going to have a deputy arrest me, can it please be Dahlberg? Salk is super nice, but I think he’d want to wrestle or something.”

Radio halfway to his mouth, Bobby paused. Probably considering if he should have me locked up. Or if this was yet another sign that a new boyfriend was in the near future.

Then he did the radio clicky thingy and said, “Jaklin, this is Bobby. I’m going to take my lunch now. Over.”

Slightly too long passed before Jaklin said, “Roger that, Bobby.” I got the feeling that Deputy Bobby Mai taking a lunch break was not the norm—and probably something that would be much discussed over the next few weeks.

“Have I ever mentioned you’re the best boyfriend ever?” I said.

Bobby gave me that goofball grin.

Chapter 12

We went in Bobby’s cruiser, and we left Keme to take the Pilot home. I tried to make a bet with Bobby that Keme would immediately go find Millie and show off his new wheels. Bobby said something to the effect that he hadn’t been born yesterday. Then he said I still owed him a hundred million dollars from the time I’d bet him I could eat an entire batch of Indira’s chocolate chip cookies, which goes to show that you can never really trust someone.

It was a quiet drive. The tension from the night before—if it had even been tension, and not just Bobby being tired and ready for sleep at the end of a long, hard day—was gone. Bobby put his hand on my leg. I pretended I was a normal human, like this wasn’t one of my favorite things in the whole world. Other people probably got used to it, but I couldn’t imagine ever not loving how casually Bobby did it, and the weight

of his hand, that feeling of connection.(Plus, I got to watch Bobby drive, his body loose but in control, with that easy, confident way he steered, only one hand on the wheel—look, I like what I like.)

Then we got to the Turnleys.

They lived in what could only appropriately be described as a compound. Think, off-the-grid prepper meets Montana Militia with a dash of cousin-lovin'. The property was located near what had to be the eastern limits of Hastings Rock, and although there was no fence topped by razor wire, it was impossible to miss the boundary: tattered, sun-bleached NO TRESPASSING signs had been stapled to the ragged line of pines that intersected the dirt road. Beyond the trees, several single-story buildings were visible. There wasn't any sense of order or arrangement; it looked like the structures had gone up wherever it was convenient, and clearly in stages—the newer ones looked like they still possessed some degree of structural integrity, but the older ones had bowed siding and drooping gutters and—most worrisome of all to a homeowner like myself—the sagging roofs that suggested untold amounts of water damage. Algae covered the siding, and moss spider-webbed across the shingles. Strands of Christmas lights glowed wanly in the weak daylight. Somebody had started with big, old-fashioned, multi-colored bulbs. Then they'd switched to the little white ones. And then, halfway along the first house, they'd given up.

It was the kind of place that looked lived-in, and not in a good way. Battered garbage cans, overflowing with black trash bags, lined several of the buildings. It was obvious that raccoons, or some other wildlife, had become accustomed to an easy dinner, because the bags were torn and had spilled garbage across the ground. A four-wheeler was snuggled up under the shallow eave of another building, half-covered by a blue tarp that flapped in the wind. Lawn chairs, their polyester webbing disintegrating in the sun, huddled around a firepit that was overflowing with ash and half-burned logs. And there was nobody out and about, which only made the whole thing creepier.

As Bobby drove us onto the property, I said, “When you told me they were more like a clan, I wasn’t expecting—”

“This?” Bobby asked.

“Yeah.”

He sounded surprisingly grim when he said, “Wait for it.”

We pulled to a stop in front of one of the oldest structures. It was painted blue, with board-and-batten siding and a single-pitch roof that made me think of an overgrown shed. Two large windows were set into the front of the house, and they were made up of lots of small panes of glass that looked thin and wavy. The door was the same—splintered wood, peeling white paint, and lots of panes of glass. Trying to keep the place warm this time of year was probably a nightmare.

Bobby killed the engine and looked over at me.

I made the Scout sign. “I will be super-duper careful.”

“It’s three fingers,” he said.

“It is? Wait! Were you a Boy Scout?”

“There’s zero chance I can talk you out of this?”

I thought about how to answer that. Finally, I said, “It’s Millie.”

“That’s what I thought,” he said and got out of the car.

As we approached the house, a skinny girl who looked about twelve years old came outside. She was bundled up in a man’s canvas work coat that fell almost to her knees,

faded blue jeans, and the kind of ugly black boots meant for stomping. Her hair was hidden by a watch cap. She dragged an old cooler out from the side of the house and sat. And then she produced a pipe and a tobacco pouch.

“Sissy,” Bobby said.

The girl kept her gaze on the pipe as she packed it. Her voice was high when she said, “Deputy Mai.”

And then she went on packing the pipe.

I waited a few seconds, but Bobby didn’t say anything, so I asked, “Is Anthony around?”

“What do you want him for?”

“We’re looking for Paul Naught,” Bobby said.

The girl—Sissy—made a sound of acknowledgment. She worked a box of matches out of her pocket, struck one on the narrow concrete apron, and went to work lighting the pipe. If you’ve never seen a twelve-year-old do it, it’s really something.

“Could you get him?” I asked. “You wouldn’t have asked why we wanted to talk to him if he wasn’t here; you would have told us he wasn’t home.”

Bobby opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, the girl shouted around the stem of the pipe, “Anthony!”

The wind picked up, and overhead, power lines swayed. I hadn’t noticed them until now—black cables running from building to building. Something told me that Pacific Power hadn’t been the one to hook them up. Part of it had to do with how low to the

ground the power lines ran. Also, the fact that one of them was propped up with a forked branch.

Steps shuffled toward us from inside the building, and a moment later, a man appeared. He wore a coat over a hoodie, with joggers and unlaced boots. He had his hood pulled up, and to judge by his mussed hair and puffy eyes, Anthony had just been rudely awakened. He was taller than me, and he had the rawboned look that made me think of country boys. I put him at somewhere in his early twenties. He was definitely the man I'd seen talking to Ryan.

Anthony looked to Sissy first, then me, then Bobby. He mumbled, "Deputy Mai."

With a nod, Bobby said, "Hi, Anthony."

"They want to ask you something," Sissy said. She struck another match and turned her attention back to her pipe.

"We're looking for Paul Naught," I said.

Anthony stared at me. Through me, actually. Like I wasn't even there.

"I understand you're looking for him too," I said. "I wanted to know why."

Anthony still had that half-asleep look in his eyes. After a couple of seconds, he turned to Sissy and said, "Am I looking for Paul Naught?"

Sissy shook her head.

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“I’m not looking for Paul,” Anthony said.

“Well,” I said, and I glanced at Bobby for help.

“Ryan Naught told us you approached him,” Bobby said. “He said you wanted to know where Paul was, and you told him Paul owed you.”

Anthony checked Sissy, but she was still focused on her pipe. He turned back to us and said, “He’s lying.”

“He’s not lying, actually,” I said. “I was there, at the Christmas tree farm. I heard you.”

“Nope,” Anthony said.

“That was some other guy,” Sissy said.

“Must have been some other guy,” Anthony said. “Genius must have struck because he added, ‘Somebody who looked like me.’”

“All right,” Bobby said. “Thanks for your time, Anthony.”

After a quick glance at Sissy, Anthony shuffled back inside.

“That was amazing,” I said. “Are you a Jedi? Was that a Jedi mind trick? ‘These are not the droids you’re looking for.’” A more worrisome thought occurred to me. “Are you a Sith Lord?”

“He’s the one that keeps catching all those killers?” Sissy said to Bobby.

“He’s the one.”

Sissy frowned around her pipe at me. “Scrawny, isn’t he?”

“Hey!”

“Cute, though. Like someone tried to drown a kitten, and somehow, he got out of the bag.”

“Okay, first of all, thank you. I think. Second of all, you should not drown kittens. You give them to the Humane Society or—I don’t know, somebody.” I drew myself up. “Bobby, arrest her.”

“Sissy,” Bobby said in a surprisingly conciliatory tone, “this is more of an unofficial visit—”

“And circling back to the scrawny comment,” I said over him—because now I was in the full glory of my righteous indignation—“at least I don’t look like I’m late for the middle school 4-H club.”

Bobby’s eyes widened.

Sissy, in the act of adjusting her pipe, froze.

I realized—as the rush of my righteous indignation faded—that maybe, possibly, it was significant that Anthony had been taking his talking points from this girl.

Who was not, I was beginning to suspect, late for the middle school 4-H club.

And then Sissy laughed. It was a weird, cackling laugh, high-pitched like her voice, and distorted by the pipe in her mouth. Then she started to cough, so she plucked the pipe away but kept on laughing. Bobby still held himself like he thought he was going to have to draw down on her, but as the moments trickled past, some of the tightness in his shoulders loosened.

“Good God,” Sissy said when she could breathe again. She put the pipe back in her mouth and considered me again. “You’re something, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I’m really something.” And then, to Bobby, “She’s in charge, isn’t she?”

Still a little wide-eyed, Bobby nodded.

“Figures,” I said. To Sissy, I said, “Does it help if I tell you I didn’t know?”

“Is it better if you thought you were arguing with a middle-schooler?”

“Um, maybe?” I didn’t pursue that line of thought, though. “Is it too late to apologize?”

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She waved the words away and puffed on her pipe, but amusement—and a dangerously sharp interest—lingered in her face as she studied me.

“You’d better tell him about the cats,” Bobby said, “or he’s going to keep worrying about it.”

Sissy’s eye roll wasn’t exactly flattering. “I don’t drown kittens. It was a figure of speech.”

“Besides,” Bobby said, “she helped the animal shelter build their cat wing.”

“That was an anonymous donor,” Sissy said, and there was no missing the warning in her tone.

Bobby nodded, but one of the things I liked about Bobby was that he could nod and be polite and try to keep the peace, and you never once got the sense that anybody was pushing him around. Nobody, I suspected, had ever compared him to a bedraggled kitten.

“Why do you want Paul?” Sissy asked.

“Because I’m worried something bad happened to him,” I said. And then I laid out the bare bones of what had happened so far: the stolen packages, Paul’s disappearance, the conversation I’d overheard with Anthony. When I was done, I said, “Like I said to Anthony, I wanted to know why you were looking for him. And if you knew where he was.”

“And if we’d killed him,” Sissy said drily. Then she was silent again. Smoke rose in little curling wisps above her, and I was surprised to find the smell strangely pleasant. “This is an unofficial visit, you said?”

“I’m on my lunch break,” Bobby said.

“If somebody around here was looking for Paul—and that’s if, got it?—they’d be looking for him so they could help him understand that he needs to stay out of the neighbor’s yard, so to speak. And make restitution.”

“For trampling the flowers,” I said.

“Exactly,” Sissy said. “For stomping all over a nice, neat flowerbed.”

“But Paul didn’t steal those packages.”

At least, I didn’t think he did; I didn’t want to get into the possibility with Sissy that maybe, yes, he had stolen them.

All Sissy did, though, was shrug. “I said if.”

“And you don’t know where he is?”

“If somebody was looking for him,” she said, “they wouldn’t know where to find him, would they?”

“I guess not.”

I glanced at Bobby; I couldn’t think of anything else to ask. (My remaining questions were personal rather than professional, like, How did you become so terrifying? and Teach me your ways.)

Bobby was studying Sissy with an expression I'd seen a few times before. It was somewhere between How did these crumbs get in the bed? and I just came up with a new exercise plan for Dash. "I don't suppose you'd consider providing some information in a professional capacity."

Sissy's face went cold and flat. "I'm not a snitch."

"I meant more like a consultant. A specialist. Share your expertise—with the understanding that anything we talk about would be purely theoretical."

"Purely theoretical," Sissy said slowly, some of the ice thawing. "It wouldn't look good, me taking money from a deputy."

"What about a charitable donation instead, then? The Hastings Rock Animal Shelter is doing their holiday fundraising drive."

The wind picked up again; the air was so wet that it speckled my glasses, and I fought the urge to take them off and wipe them. After letting another cloud of smoke snake away on the breeze, Sissy said, "What kind of expert consultant?"

"Assume Paul isn't actually the one taking these packages," Bobby said. "What could explain why all his packages are the ones going missing? We already talked about the possibility that someone is following his truck. But what else could it be?"

Sissy puffed, eyes turned up as she thought. "If it's not someone following the truck, it might be someone who had another way of knowing where he'd be. Or where he'd been."

"Maybe someone chose Paul for a reason," Bobby said. "Someone at CPF who knew he'd already gotten into trouble, so when the thefts were reported, Paul would be the obvious suspect—especially if they only hit his deliveries."

I thought of Luz Hernandez. Paul had suggested her as the culprit from the beginning, and she hadn't exactly earned any brownie points with me when I'd tried to interview her.

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“Maybe Paul gave someone a reason to target him,” I said. “He did that stupid livestream of himself with that copy of Super Smash Bros. Ultimate.”

“That idiot livestreams everything,” Sissy said.

I opened my mouth—and then I stopped.

Please, Paul, I thought. Please don’t be that stupid.

But I took out my phone and started to search.

He probably streamed other places, but I found him on YouTube first. His username was naught_paul_blart. I wasn’t sure if it was because he loved the Paul Blart movies or if it was—well, honestly, I had no idea why anyone would have chosen that name. But the videos were there. A quick look told me he’d been streaming regularly, multiple times per day: at home, at work. One was titled I COULDN’T FIND MY SOCK and then a bunch of emojis I couldn’t parse.

And a lot of the videos he’d streamed while he was working.

I played one of the work recordings. Paul’s face filled the screen. From what little I could see of the background, he appeared to be in the back of a delivery truck.

“Merry Christmas,” Paul said with a grin, and the expression made the resemblance to Millie even stronger. Then the angle of the camera shifted, and he held up a large brown box. The delivery label was visible and legible—name, address, everything. And then Paul gave the box a shake and said, “Best Buy. I’ve delivered,

like, ten of these. Someone is totally getting an Xbox.”

Chapter 13

“How stupid is he?” I asked as we drove back to town.

“It wasn’t a good choice,” Bobby said.

“A good choice? You can say, ‘That wasn’t a good choice’ when someone orders an oatmeal raisin cookie, Bobby. This is a different order of magnitude.”

“I like oatmeal raisin cookies.”

“Bobby, they have raisins. They’re practically a fruit. And fruits are practically vegetables. Why would anyone do that to their cookie?” I could hear my volume rising, so I drew a deep breath. “I’m just saying chocolate chip never let anybody down.”

Bobby was wise enough not to respond to that—yet another sign that he was the man for me.

The road back into town wasn’t the smoothest, and Bobby’s cruiser lacked the Pilot’s gentler suspension. After bouncing around in my seat for a while, I said, “I mean, I knew Paul wasn’t the smartest—”

Then I stalled out.

“You want to say cookie, don’t you?” Bobby asked.

I glared, but it rolled right off him. Finally, I gave up and said, “I mean, what was he thinking?”

“He wasn’t thinking. His prefrontal cortex isn’t entirely developed.”

“That’s not the only thing that’s not developed.”

A quicksilver smile darted across Bobby’s face. “Did you know one time, I got a call-out to the boardwalk? He and Ryan were fighting about who got to drive a dune buggy.”

That got a reluctant laugh out of me.

“We learned something useful,” Bobby said. “That’s good.”

“Yeah, we learned that literally everyone knew Paul’s route,” I said sourly. “He live-streamed it for the entire world.”

Bobby laughed. “Who is his target audience, anyway? Other delivery drivers?”

“It’s like one step above the people who love unboxing videos: people who love boxes. Like love them.” I glanced over at—yes, I’m going to say it—my man. He was resting one elbow on the car door and driving with one hand again. And I’ll just say God knew what he was doing the day he invented khaki polyester. “Hey, you were really good with Sissy, by the way.”

“Hmm? Oh. Yeah, that’s kind of the job. Community relations are important.”

“Yeah, but you’re good at it, Bobby. And you didn’t interrogate her. You built trust with her. You used that trust to get her on our side. She wouldn’t have helped us if you hadn’t gotten on her good side. Oh my God, I’d love to use that in a book.”

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“I was already on her good side by default,” Bobby said. “I didn’t make that crack about the 4-H club.”

“Yeah, but you’re missing my point: you’re so good at this. You’ll be such a good detective.”

The tires hummed on the worn county road.

Then he said, “Thanks.”

It was like the night before all over again, except now we were in a car.

If you, unlike me, don’t experience a constant, low-grade panic about all social interactions, especially ones with your significant other—if you’re not constantly analyzing and reassessing and trying to decide if you made a mistake or if someone is mad at you or if you missed some key social cue—it’s hard to explain how a short silence and a one-word answer can set off your internal alarms. All of them. Every. single. one.

“What?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Thank you for saying that. I appreciate that.”

“You’re upset.”

“I’m not upset.”

We drove for maybe half a minute before I said, “I don’t understand what happened. I think you’re good at your job. I think you’d make a great detective. You’re the best deputy with the sheriff’s office, and that’s not just me talking as your boyfriend. Everybody knows it. What you did today, with Sissy, that’s proof.”

This time, he took a breath.

“Bobby—” But I stopped.

He looked over. He switched hands on the wheel so he could squeeze my leg. He even smiled. “Thank you. That means so much to me. I love you. I’m so lucky to have somebody as supportive as you.”

I must have mumbled something, because the moment passed, and then it was over.

We drove the rest of the way without talking. He kept his hand on my leg, and his face was smooth.

I tried texting Millie, but she didn’t answer, so Bobby took me back to Hemlock House. When he stopped at the front door, I waited for...something. But he leaned in for a kiss, and then I found myself moving automatically: reaching for the door, throwing it open, scooting out of the cruiser.

“That was definitely longer than a lunch break,” I said. “Is anybody going to wonder where you were?”

Bobby’s grin was boyish—and full of trouble.

“Oh my God,” I said. “That is not what I meant. I meant people are going to talk.”

Bobby’s grin got bigger.

“I’m done with you,” I said as I shut the door. “Goodbye.”

And all of that was normal. All of that was easy and light and the way things always felt between us.

It was so normal and easy and fun and light that I spent the next half an hour jamming thumbprint cookies in my face.

You can only do so much of that, though, before you either go into a diabetic coma or you run out of cookies. I ran out of cookies. I checked my phone, but I still hadn’t heard back from Millie. She was probably doing more Christmas stuff with her family. I tried Keme, and I didn’t hear anything back from him either. That wasn’t actually all that surprising. One time, I’d seen his phone. There were, like, three hundred unread messages from me. And they were important, too, like Can you bring me a Coke from the kitchen? and How much cake is left? and Are these my socks or yours? and I will do all your chores next week if you tell Bobby I went to the gym.

A quick lap of the house confirmed that I was home alone—Indira and Fox were still at the market, and although I found the keys to the Pilot in the den, Keme must have brought the SUV home and left again. I thought about playing Xbox—there’s nothing quite like mindless violence for self-soothing—but a voice that sounded suspiciously like Bobby’s pointed out that this was prime writing time, and I’d regret it if I wasted it.

Which was how I ended up in the den, in my favorite chair, with my favorite blankie—and yes, with some hot cocoa—staring at the screen while I tried to get my favorite fictional detective to do something.

Something was wrong with the plot; that was the problem.

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The other, bigger problem was that I didn't know what was wrong with the plot.

People approached plotting a novel in a lot of different ways. Some of them were meticulous planners. Others wrote without any preparation at all (what other writers called pantsers, in the sense that they wrote 'flying by the seat of their pants'). I was definitely of the let's-not-do-extra-work school of thought, and so I hadn't written an outline. Which, for me, was probably best. You know what I figured out about myself early on? If I didn't want to write, the best excuse was I'm still working on my outline. See, that's the beauty of outlines. They always need more work. They're a perfectionist's best friend (and, for that matter, a procrastinator's). Of course, then I figured out what was even better than working on an outline: video games.

But even if a writer didn't outline, most of us had some sense of a story's structure, which was largely determined by its plot. And something was wrong with mine.

See, plots are made up of big events and little events. The big events are the ones that change the trajectory of the story—like, the detective goes to meet an informant, only to be cornered by thugs from the local mob. That's a big event. Those were the ones that needed to be absolutely right. And in a murder mystery, the big events usually had to do with, well, a murder.

And that was where I was running into a problem.

It might sound simple. You might be thinking, Put the dead body at the beginning, dummy. But it's not that simple. Sure, in some books, that's how things start. One of the Travis McGee books kicks off when a woman tries to hire Travis and gets killed while she's hiring him. (Then the body disappears—it's a good book.)

But sometimes, the first dead body doesn't show up until later. Matt Scudder books usually work this way—someone hires him, and then while Matt's wandering around New York, he finds a dead body. In one of them, he helps a woman escape from her, uh, night entrepreneur, but then she gets killed. (And then Matt is determined to get justice for her, obviously. Also a good book.)

And sometimes the dead body showed up even later. In Vivienne's *Death in the House of Mirrors* (that's Vivienne Carver, by the way—the one who tried to kill me), Mrs. Minty is the first victim, and she doesn't die until halfway through the book. And because Vivienne was a better author than she was a murderess, it's fantastically well-timed—the midpoint of the book is often called the mirror moment, when a disaster forces the protagonist to see themselves anew and face (or begin to face) some hard truths. In *Death in the House of Mirrors*, Vivienne's protagonist, Genevieve Webster, has to confront her own overconfidence as the Matron of Murder, which has led to Mrs. Minty's death. (It's a watershed moment in the series, and it's Vivienne at her best.)

There were even some stories that put the first death or murder before the book even started. How's that for mind-blowing? Rebecca is like that, because Daphne du Maurier was a genius. Rebecca's death, which happens before the book begins, shadows every single event that comes after. Cold case mysteries also work that way. Agatha Christie's *Nemesis* is another great, Golden Age example.

All of which was to say: I had too many options.

(Also, I had a momentary flash of what I thought was genius—what if the murder happens after the book is over??? Then I realized that made no sense.)

Let's be frank: it wasn't a productive day.

And believe it or not, eventually, if you waste enough time, you really can read

everything on Crime Cats (it's a website, and it's exactly what it sounds like). (Also, side note: there was a whole article on a tabby who committed grand theft gato, and it was as cute and clever as the title suggests.)

Which was how I ended up thinking about that idiot Paul again.

Part of me wanted to call it quits. From the beginning of this, Paul had been less than helpful. He'd lied about the incident at work with Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. He'd disappeared. And now, I learned, he'd been broadcasting his deliveries—with guesses about what was inside each package—to the entire universe.

Although—as Bobby had pointed out—it was more likely that the live stream had gone out to the grand total of three people who were bored or stupid enough to watch Paul's live stream.

(And yes, I'm aware of the irony, with me reading Crime Cats, etc., etc.)

An idea popped into my head, and I struggled to sit up. (Crime Cats is best read lying down, snuggled up, and in what is generally the coziest of all human positions.) I grabbed my phone, found Paul's YouTube account, and clicked on his followers. Well, tried to click on them. Because YouTube is rude, it wouldn't let me see who Paul's eight followers were.

When I played one of Paul's videos that he'd recorded in his truck, though, the comments were a different story. Public opinion to the contrary, I'm not a super sleuth, and I don't spend my time doing brilliant, super-sleuth things (like anagrams or mathematical proofs or unbreakable encryption). But you didn't have to be a genius to figure out that naughtymommy71, for example, was clearly Christine. (Her only comment on the video was Don't forget to stop for milk and eggs on your way home.) I was willing to go out on a ledge and say user frenchfryanOR was, well, Ryan. He'd commented, everybody subscribe to my channel too!!! Paul sucks!!jk. (Ryan was not

my favorite, er, french fry, but I had to admit that was a cute name.) And naught.millie was, well, Millie. Her comment was...extensive. She started off by talking about Paul's hair, and by the end, the comment had wandered down memory lane to talk about a time Paul had gotten in trouble for breaking a window. It was what the brother- and sisterhood of writers would generously call stream of consciousness.

The only other comment was from muskyotter5796, which suggested either someone with a love of otters or (please, God) someone who had used some sort of random generator to come up with a name. The comment said, any jewelry?

Well, if that didn't make all my super-sleuth alarms go off.

Paul's reply was slightly more eye roll-inducing: I got you! Thanks for subscribing!

I tried to backtrack muskyotter's profile, but it was a dead end—the account was set to private, and even if it hadn't been, it was clearly a throwaway account.

When I examined Paul's videos again, I didn't see any comments from Paul's other subscribers. But I did find several more comments from muskyotter. They were...incriminating, to say the least. They were always short. Always to the point. Always—to probably anyone except Paul Naught—clearly bad news. Like Hold the box higher and We can't read the address and How do you know it's electronics?

How had this not come up before? But I had my answer almost immediately: because no one had looked for it. The people at CPF had either been involved at some level—I still hadn't gotten over my vibe that something was off with Luz Hernandez—or had genuinely suspected Paul from the start. No official complaint had been made to the sheriff's office, which meant there hadn't been a law enforcement investigation. And since nobody but Paul had been reading his YouTube comments, there hadn't been any reason for someone to suspect.

Of course, there was the rather obvious other question: how had Sissy known about Paul's videos? Sissy was clearly smart. She was also—apparently—a criminal mastermind. She claimed that her family had only gotten involved to warn Paul off their territory, but had she shown us Paul's live streams to throw us off the scent, so to speak?

I didn't know. I would have liked to talk to Paul. Preferably with a length of rubber hose.

But what I did know was that several people in the Naught family had known about these live streams. And I was starting to suspect someone in that house was lying to me.

Chapter 14

Since the Naught family had apparently made an outing to a winery that day, I had some time to kill before I could interrogate—er, interview them. And I had an idea of how to do it.

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I made the drive out to Clatsop Parcel and Freight again. The old warehouse and attached office building didn't look any better today. Those dismal strands of tinsel fluttered dispiritedly in the breeze. The warehouse parking lot held a mixture of cars—drivers and warehouse workers who were still trying to fulfill last-minute deliveries. The office parking lot, on the other hand, held a single car, which caught my attention—what had dragged in an office employee on a Saturday?

My last, unauthorized entrance to CPF hadn't exactly gone as planned. I thought an encore might lead to me spending my first Christmas in the county clink. And while there was something romantic about that idea—me, a rebellious trespasser, and Bobby, the servant of law and order, two star-crossed lovers holding hands on Christmas Day through the bars of a cell door—I think Bobby would have preferred a non-incarcerated boyfriend for our first Christmas together. So, I parked in the office lot and tried the front door.

It was locked.

On the other side of the glass, the office was dark, but if I shaded my eyes and smushed my nose against the glass, I could make out someone moving around inside. I knocked. Then I rapped a little more insistently on the glass. And then I shouted, "Hi! Hey! Hello!" It was the kind of assertive social interaction that made me break out in hives.

I could barely make out the figure inside waving for me to go away.

I kept up my tapping-rapping-hallooing.

Let me tell you: two minutes of that kind of stuff feels way longer than you'd think.

Finally, the person on the other side must have realized that dealing with me, however annoying in the short term, was infinitely better than putting up with that for the next hour. They moved toward me, and a deadbolt thunked back, and the door opened a few inches.

She was White, middle-aged, and she had graying hair cut short and combed into stiff little wings on either side of her head, which kind of looked like a flight helmet and kind of looked like the standard haircut some ladies got after A Certain Age. She had a phone pressed to her ample, uh, bosom, as she said through the cracked door, "We're closed."

"I just need to talk to Luz. To Ms. Hernandez, I mean."

She gave a scoffing little laugh. "Good luck."

"It's very important."

"I'm sure it is," she said, trying to close the door.

I gripped the handle and did my best to keep it open.

"Excuse me," she said. "I'm handling an emergency."

"Is there anyone here who can help me?"

"No," she said. "Now please let go—"

At that exact moment, I saw Luz. She was hurrying across the warehouse parking lot toward a beat-up old Civic. I released my grip on the door, and the woman let out a

startled cry as the door slammed shut.

I hurried after Luz.

Her blond quiff looked bedraggled in the sunlight—with a distinctive orange tint that no real blond had ever had. She was jingling a set of keys in her hand, and she walked with her head down and her shoulders turned in.

“Luz?” I called.

No response.

I picked up the pace, and as I drew closer, I called again, more loudly, “Luz?”

She flinched and whirled around. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she had that rough, overnighter look that no amount of coffee can totally get rid of. She held her keys in a fist, the sharp edges turned out like an improvised weapon.

Holding up my hands, I said as calmly as I could, “Hey, it’s me. Dash. Uh, Chaz, remember? From yesterday?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Funny you should ask. Hoping to talk to you, actually.” The breeze picked up, and the cold cut through my coat and made me shiver. “Do you have a minute? Maybe we could step inside?”

“No!” The word was too sharp and too fast. She took a breath, wiped her free hand on her thigh, and said in a painful attempt at normal, “No, I can’t. I’m—I’ve got to go.”

“Uh, right. Well, I wanted to ask you about the drivers’ routes. I know you don’t know

their routes, but I was wondering who might—”

“I can’t talk to you.” She hurried around to the driver’s side, the keys clinking as she sorted through them. “I’ve got to go.”

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“I just wanted to know who assigns—”

“I’m sorry,” she said as she threw the door open. “I’m late.”

Before I could argue, she threw herself into the Civic, slammed the door, and sped away.

I tried not to dwell on it, but the fact that the Jinx St.James plan had worked better than mine was a bitter pill to swallow.

Without any other genius ideas, I wound my way back to Hemlock House and convinced myself to take advantage of the time. I needed to make some progress on this novel. At the bare minimum, I needed to make some decisions about the plot. And I was going to make those decisions today. I was going to be efficient. I was going to be pragmatic. I was going to lock down this outline so I could start writing.

At least, that was the plan.

Quicker than I could believe, night had fallen, and it was time to pay a visit to the Naughts. The glow from the Christmas lights softened the shadows behind me as I drove away from Hemlock House, and then I entered the forest, and darkness closed around me.

It had been a gray, gloomy day, and it made for an even gloomier night. The fog was thicker than usual among the Sitka spruce. And even though it was cold enough that I had the Pilot’s heater all the way up, it apparently wasn’t cold enough for ice, because when the headlights swept across ferns and hanging moss, drops of water

glistened. I thought about turning on the radio or playing some music on my phone. But I didn't. Instead, I started thinking about Bobby again.

Until now, I had successfully avoided ruminating on the absolute weirdness of our interaction in the cruiser earlier that day. But now, alone in the SUV, I couldn't avoid it anymore. What had happened? I'd complimented him on how he'd handled Sissy—I mean, I thought it was a compliment. I knew Bobby was good at his job. I knew Bobby took pride in being a good deputy. And while I knew comparisons could be seriously bad news, I couldn't help thinking about how Bobby's ex, West, had been so unsupportive of Bobby's career. They'd fought about it. A lot. If you could call it a fight, when West got angrier and angrier, and Bobby nodded and agreed and got quieter and quieter.

Like how in the cruiser that morning, he'd said, Thanks.

And then that was it. The conversation had pretty much been over.

It made me want to say all the words that would have gotten Rudolph kicked out of the reindeer games. It didn't make any sense. Bobby and I hadn't been fighting. We'd been doing the opposite of fighting. (Actually, maybe the opposite of fighting was, um, adult time, but you know what I mean.) I'd been trying to be positive and supportive and encouraging about Bobby's career. I had always tried to be supportive. Even when Bobby and I had only been friends, I'd known how much it meant to him to be a good deputy.

Oh my God, I thought. Were we in a fight?

The thought was so disorienting that I actually couldn't think of an answer. With West, it had been obvious because West had been so vocal, so angry. But Bobby's behavior had been the same. I remembered the way he'd said, Can I turn off the lights, and I felt that same sense of disorientation as another thought spun around me:

Was Bobby fighting with me?

No.

That was—

I mean.

But he couldn't. Bobby didn't pick fights. Bobby didn't get mad. Bobby was patient.

I took several deep breaths. My heart was racing. My hands felt stiff, and my joints throbbed like miniature pulse points. Flop sweat had broken out under my arms, and that familiar tightness closed around my chest.

Maybe it was because of Ryan's stupid username, but the realization that bubbled up was: You're about three french fries short of a full-blown panic attack.

(People say that, right?)

Part of me thought I should pull over. Another part of me thought if I pulled over, I would have a full-blown panic attack. Instead, I lowered the window. The cold air rushed in, wet and bracing with the smell of balsam. Against my flushed face, it felt wonderful. My eyes stung, and I blinked them clear. Then the tires bounced as I started to go onto the shoulder, and a fresh—and more immediate—fear ran through me. I brought the Pilot back onto the road.

Drive, I told myself. Just drive.

It wasn't as easy as that. Thoughts kept bubbling up. But I drove, and I managed to stay on the road.

When I pulled up in front of Millie's house, I parked and killed the engine. My hands had stopped shaking; now they felt numb. I couldn't tell if my pulse was racing. My eyes were so dry they felt gummy, and I realized one of the Pilot's vents was blowing right in my face. I angled it away from me.

I should go home, I thought. I wasn't in any condition to be investigating. I should go home and call Bobby and—

Apologize? For what?

But Bobby wouldn't be home. He was working another double, and then he'd have Christmas Eve off, which worked out perfectly because he had to work on Christmas, so we were going to do all our celebrating on Christmas Eve, and—

And I could see it, everything we'd talked about and planned, not only Christmas but—but everything. Everything I'd planned, even if I hadn't said it to him. Hadn't said it aloud to anyone. Because Bobby was a prize, and I didn't want to scare him off by saying something insane like, You're perfect, and I'm never going to let you go.

And at the same time, I could hear him rolling over in bed, in the dark. Hear him saying, Thanks.

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How long had that kind of stuff been going on with West before Bobby reached his breaking point? How long before even Bobby, who was so responsible, who was so controlled, who wanted so badly to do what was right, which for Bobby meant fixing things—how long before even Bobby couldn't do it anymore?

I reached for the keys that were still in the ignition; I didn't have a plan, but going inside was better than sitting here.

And that was when the front door of Millie's house opened.

In the yellow rectangle of light formed by the doorway, Christine appeared first, then Millie. Christine called back over her shoulder, "We'll be back in one minute. You keep playing!"

Then the door swung shut, and Millie and her mom stood there. In the porch light, they were like partially finished drawings: the outline of their heads, their shoulders, a hint that the artist was going to play with shadow and light.

If you ever needed proof that I'm a bad person, here it is: I slid down in my seat.

"What is wrong with you?" Christine said. Millie didn't respond, and there was a sharp sound that at first I thought was a slap, and then I realized it was Christine clapping her hands. "You can't stop talking for five seconds, and now you don't have anything to say? I asked you a question."

"But he's cheating—"

“No, he’s not!” It was close to a shout. When Christine spoke again, it was with the only slightly lower volume of someone who was almost literally trying to swallow their anger. “No, he’s not. And even if he was, who cares, Millie? It’s a game. Elliott is your sister’s guest.”

“And Keme is my guest.”

It wasn’t a tone I was familiar with from Millie—a surprisingly adolescent challenge.

But Christine clearly was an old hand at it. “We’re not talking about that boy. We’re talking about—”

“His name is Keme.”

“We are talking about,” Christine repeated, enunciating each syllable clearly, “your behavior tonight. When we were having a very pleasant conversation, you wouldn’t stop interrupting—”

“Because nobody was asking Keme any questions.”

“And then you kept asking those ridiculous questions—”

“Because it doesn’t make any sense. He said his condo had a view of the river, and then he said he could see the Rose Garden. He can’t have both!”

Another of those sharp claps came again. The silence that followed made me think of the way candles guttered.

In what Will Gower would have called a lethal tone, Christine said, “You have been unbearably rude tonight. Jealousy is not a good look on anyone, Millicent. You might think about how it makes you look to behave like that in front of that boy.” I heard the

front door open, and Christine said, “Do you know what would be nice? It would be nice if once—once!—somebody else could be the center of attention.” Then, she called out with artificial cheer, “Elliott, don’t go anywhere! I want you to tell Matthew all about that stock thingy you were explaining to me.”

The door shut, and then there was silence.

And more silence.

Was she crying? I couldn’t hear anything, but I thought she was. She must be, right?

I didn’t have much experience with Millie crying, but I suddenly realized one of my core convictions in life: anybody who made Millie cry deserved to be slowly flattened under a steamroller.

I probably would have sneaked a peek—or done something even stupider like gotten out of the SUV to check on her—but I’d sunk down so far that my spine was L-shaped and I was mostly in the footwell.

That was when I heard the front door open and close again.

On a night as still as this one, even Keme’s voice carried. “Are you okay?”

“Oh yeah,” Millie said, her tone too bright and teetering. “I’m fine.”

Then no one said anything.

“I was about go back inside—”

“She shouldn’t talk to you like that.”

More of that silence.

Look, I didn't want to eavesdrop. If anybody else had overheard my most intimate conversations with Bobby, I would have spontaneously combusted, and then I would have collapsed into dust, and then my ghost would have swept up my remains and dumped them into a dustbin. (It's from an episode of *The Simpsons*.) But I couldn't run. I couldn't hide. I couldn't even turn on music or try to read because I was on my way to becoming permanently pretzel shaped.

"It's fine," Millie said with that same see-sawing certainty that everything is okay. "She's just stressed about Christmas."

"She's not just stressed. She does it all the time." He paused. "I'm going to say something."

"No, Keme, come on. It's not a big deal."

"It's a big deal to me." And then, his voice husky with emotion: "I love you. Everything about you is a big deal to me."

"I know. I love you too. I just want everyone to have a nice Christmas and get along."

"We can't get along. Not when she—she bullies you like that. Not when your sisters are mean to you right in front of me. And they all pretend I can't hear them, like I'm not even there. Jeez, Millie, your mom wants me to be the donkey."

"This is a big change for them," Millie said. "They don't know you yet. They're going

to love you once they get to know you.”

Keme’s silence was its own answer.

“We have to keep trying,” Millie said. And then in a burst of enthusiasm I was more familiar with, “We can tell them you applied to ARCADIA!” I didn’t hear anything, but Keme must have shaken his head because Millie said, “Why not? Everyone will be so excited for you—”

“No, Millie. They won’t. And I don’t know why you—” Keme cut off with a sharp sound. “I thought we were done with that. I’m not doing that. I’m not going to that stupid school.”

“Keme, that’s what people do after high school.”

“Not you.”

“But that’s because I’m not smart.”

“Yes, you—”

“You’re so smart, Keme. You’re a million times smarter than me. You have to go to college.”

“Why? So I can get a job? So I can make a lot of money? So I can end up like those two jackanapes in there?”

(Side note: Keme didn’t say jackanapes.)

“That’s not—” Millie tried.

“So your mom will finally like me because I drive a Range Rover?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying you don’t want to end up like me—”

“Quit saying that!” Keme’s shout made me start, and I cracked my knee against the dash. When he spoke again, his voice was only slightly more under control. “The only reason you say stuff like that is because of your mom.”

The silence grew. And grew. I could almost see it, spreading outward from the epicenter.

“I think I’m going to call it a night,” Millie said, the words stiff.

“I’m trying to help you—”

“No, you’re not. You’re mad because you never have to do anything you don’t want to do, and now you do. Well, don’t worry about it. You don’t have to be in the Christmas pageant. You don’t have to spend time with my family. You don’t have to go to college. You can do whatever you want, Keme.”

The boy didn’t answer.

Then his steps started to move away.

Millie called, “Where are you going?”

But there was no answer again.

“You can’t walk.I’ll give you a ride home.”

Nothing.

“Keme, come on.It’s freezing.”

I inched up from my seat in time to see Keme’s silhouette shrinking toward the end of the block.His back was to us, and he was shaking his head.Millie, with the grainy porch light still sifting down onto her, stared after him.And then she went inside.

Somehow, I managed to unbend my spine.I got upright in my seat and reached for the Pilot’s keys.I couldn’t drive right up and offer Keme a ride; he’d immediately suspect something.But I could loop around, wait for him to come out on a bigger street, and happen to drive by...

Yeah, I thought.That’ll work.

Honestly, it probably wasn’t ahugedeal.Keme would be able to get back to Hemlock House.He had his own ways of getting around Hastings Rock that he’d never shared with me—I wanted to think he owned a bike, but I had the terrifying suspicion that hitchhiking was more likely.Either way, the reality was that unless Keme called or texted for a ride, there wasn’t much I could do.If I showed up unexpectedly, he’d probably indulge in every hitchhiker’s favorite pastime: killing the driver and hiding the body.

Still, it wouldn't hurt if I stayed in the area, in case he needed something—and so I could make sure he got home safely.

Before I could start the Pilot, though, the front door to Millie's house opened again, and Millie emerged. She glanced left and right and then hurried toward the street.

I watched her and tried to figure out what I was seeing: her head was down, her shoulders turned in, and she was carrying a plastic bag close to her side. The word that came to mind was furtive. The second word that came to mind was sneakery.

And Millie wasn't a sneak. I mean, it was almost biologically impossible for Millie to be a sneak. (Imagine a spy who did all his work through a megaphone.) Millie was transparent to a fault, as a matter of fact.

So, what was she doing?

My first thought was that she was going after Keme. But if so, she wouldn't look so... suspicious, would she? Where else could she be going? If Millie were a different type of person, I could see her going to a bar after a fight with her boyfriend. Or to a girlfriend's house. Or maybe a late-night, uh, rump call. (Is that the polite term for a booty call?) But Millie wasn't that kind of person. Millie was a Last Pick, which meant I knew all her friends, and I had the sneaking suspicion she wasn't going to visit Indira so they could drink wine and give each other mani-pedis while they watched... I want to say Clueless? (That's my new ship, by the way: Mindira.)

Millie's Mazda3 started up. The headlights came on. And she pulled away from the curb.

I sent up a silent prayer for forgiveness from all earnestly good and patient deputy-boyfriends everywhere, and then I started the Pilot and went after her.

Chapter 15

Millie drove north, toward the commercial side of Hastings Rock. Cute, well-tended homes gave way to single-story brick warehouses and office buildings. This part of town wasn't run-down, exactly, but under the dusty sheen of the security lights, it did look old. We passed a low, flat-roofed building with a sign that said Daugherty Asphalt Maintenance. Then a fence with a sign that said Hastings Rock Heavy Equipment, and a gravel lot where backhoes and bulldozers and other big, dangerous-looking machines were parked. (I imagined a young Bobby had probably owned little yellow-plastic toys of the same equipment; there was something intrinsically appealing about construction work to Bobby Mai, I was fairly sure.) Lance E. Anderson's Heating and Sheet Metal had a wood-shingle bonnet roof and plank siding, and it looked like you could have dropped it into the background of a spaghetti western without raising any eyebrows. I even spotted Newsum Decorative Rock (owned by Brad Newsum). There was, as you can probably guess, a lot of decorative rock stored in the lot.

If Millie noticed I was following her, she didn't give any sign of it. I stayed back as much as I dared, but the reality was that Hastings Rock was a small town, and this wasn't a busy section of it, so we were the only two cars on the road. At this point, there wasn't much I could do about it—either Millie knew I was tailing her, or she didn't, and all I could do was see what happened.

What happened was: Millie turned in to a self-storage facility.

A chain-link fence with a barrier-arm gate surrounded the facility, but they looked nominal more than anything serious—I didn't see any razor wire or gun turrets or bloodthirsty Dobermans. Behind the fence, cinderblock buildings had been painted white, with orange roll-up doors. A few security lights were positioned around the facility, but I guessed that these, like the fence and the gate, were mostly for show—they were spaced too far apart, and they left deep shadows. Identical signs had

been posted on each of the cinderblock structures: THIS PROPERTY IS UNDER 24-HOUR SURVEILLANCE. I had my doubts about that too. When Millie's headlights swept across the lot, they picked out a crumpled paper cup, winter-brown weeds, and a dumpster with a sofa's hind end sticking out of it.

I could not—for the life of me—think of why Millie would have a reason to come to a place like this.

She drove straight up to the gate and punched in a code. The gate's little wooden arm went up, and Millie drove on. She didn't hesitate. She didn't show any sign of uncertainty. I stuck to the road and slowed the Pilot so I could watch her through the fence. Millie drove to the end of the facility and turned down the far aisle.

As soon as her car was out of sight, I parked, jumped out of the SUV, and sprinted after her on foot. Damp cold met me, but I barely noticed; I was too focused on trying to make as little noise as possible, which is harder than it sounds when you're in a full-on sprint.

I raced around the gate and toward the far side of the facility. The sound of the Mazda's engine died, and then the distant glow of the headlights snapped off. The only illumination now came from the security lights, and they left long pools of shadow to wade through. Over the sound of my running, I strained to catch the rattle of a roll-up door. But either I was too loud, or Millie hadn't opened her storage unit yet.

When I came around the corner, I got my first look at the final aisle of storage units. I registered Millie's Mazda3 parked next to the fence. And then my attention fixed on the row of orange doors. One of them was halfway open.

Millie crouched beneath it. Weak yellow light came from inside the storage unit, painting her face in profile. Her jaw sagged, and then she brought her hands up,

holding them in the air as though she didn't know what to do.

“Millie?” I called.

She didn't look over. She just kept staring at whatever was in front of her inside the storage unit.

I broke into a run.

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By the time I reached Millie, she was pulling her phone out of her pocket. Her hands were shaking so badly that she couldn't unlock it. I had the half-formed idea of taking the phone from her to help, but then I got close enough to see what was inside: the storage unit was small, with boxes and plastic totes and a workbench making the floor space even smaller. I had the impression of feathers and glue guns and approximately a million beads.

Paul lay on the floor, on his back, dressed in a coat and hoodie and joggers that wouldn't have drawn a second look anywhere in town. His face was covered with blood. More of it matted his fair hair. A broken nose for sure. A laceration across his forehead, running up into his hairline. If you spend enough time at the dinner table talking about autopsy reports and forensic pathology, you get to become a kind of armchair expert on these kinds of things. That was how I knew I was looking at a wound delivered by a blunt object. Someone had hit Paul in the face, and the impact had shattered cartilage and split the skin wherever it didn't have enough give.

Someone had gotten close enough to hit him in the face, I thought.

And then, more clearly, I thought: someone he knew.

Paul murmured something, and I realized his eyes were open—barely a crack in the mask of blood, but open.

“Yes, we need an ambulance,” Millie was saying into her phone, her voice thready. She rattled off an address. “I don't know what happened. He's hurt.”

“He's conscious,” I told her. “He was hit in the head.”

She repeated those facts to the dispatcher—probably Jaklin Ruiz—while I crouched next to Paul. None of the visible injuries looked life-threatening. Head wounds bled a lot, and his nose was going to need some work. The real danger, though, was concussion, swelling of the brain, all the stuff I couldn't see.

“Okay,” Millie was saying. “Okay, okay. Please hurry.”

I hurried to the Mazda3 and found Millie's first aid kit under the driver's seat. When I got back to the storage unit, Millie had one of Paul's hands clasped in hers, while she kept the phone to her ear and murmured answers to whatever the dispatcher was asking. There was blood on Paul's hand, too. Blood drying around his nails. When his limp fingers shifted, he left crimson marks wherever he touched her.

The first aid kit had several gauze pads, and I opened these and pressed one against the laceration on Paul's forehead.

Paul groaned and shifted, and Millie pulled the phone away from her ear long enough to say, “Paul, STAY STILL!”

Believe it or not, that worked.

Settling onto the concrete slab, Paul began to mumble again.

“Hey,” I said, “it's okay. Everything's going to be okay.”

I couldn't catch all of it, but words floated up out of the slurry of speech. Plaintive. Defensive. “—just playing, Millie, we were just wrestling—”

Tears spilled from Millie's eyes, and she squeezed Paul's hand harder as she shook her head.

I'm not exactly the most physically affectionate person—ask Millie sometime for her history of our first thirteen hugs, each of which was excruciatingly and somehow more awkward than the last—but I patted Paul's chest and said, "You're not in trouble. You're fine. Just relax."

Something inside his coat rustled under my hand.

In the distance, the first sirens began.

Millie turned toward the sound, answering another question in a low voice. I took the opportunity to reach into Paul's pocket.

It was a long, narrow sheet of paper that had been folded twice, the kind that comes on a pad with a magnet so you can hang it on the fridge, the kind that always makes me think of grocery lists. I unfolded it. At the top, there was a flowery C, and it didn't take a deductive genius to figure out whose fridge this paper had been hanging on. Below the C was a list of names done in an almost unreadable scrawl that had to be Paul's handwriting. Most of the names had been crossed out.

The sirens were louder. Closer.

I worked my phone out of my pocket and took a picture of the list. Then I folded it and returned it to Paul's pocket as flashing lights grew outside the storage unit, and the sound of crunching tires announced the first vehicle.

Chapter 16

A few hours later, we were all at Klikamuks General Hospital.

All meaning: the Naught family, the Naught family boyfriends (Elliott, David, and yes, even Keme), the sheriff, and me.

Bobby, naturally, had been the first deputy on the scene, and after Millie and I had told him what had happened, he'd done a sweep of the storage facility. By then, though, whoever had done this to Paul was gone. When the paramedics took Paul, Bobby suggested I drive Millie; he stayed to secure the crime scene.

At the hospital, we had to wait before we heard anything. And then we had to wait some more. The good news was that the doctor had done a CT scan, and Paul's brain didn't appear to have any swelling. (I'd been tempted to ask if they'd seen a brain, which was mostly nerves, but also partly due to the fact that Paul had been such an idiot.) The bad news (if you were the friendly family sleuth) was that Paul was only allowed one visitor at a time in the ICU. And Christine and the sheriff were taking turns hogging him.

Not that Christine didn't have a right—I mean, this was her son, after all—and obviously the sheriff needed to see if Paul could remember anything. But it meant I couldn't get in there and do top-notch investigative work—which, in my mind, meant shaking Paul by the shoulders and shouting, What in the world were you thinking?

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To be fair, a part of me knew this was classic displacement. I wasn't actually angry with Paul. I was angry at myself. Millie had asked me to help him, and what had I managed to do? Stumble around, talk to a few people, and—I was beginning to suspect—alert the real thief to the fact that someone was looking for answers. It wasn't much of a stretch to figure that my bumbling investigation had led directly to Paul being attacked. And as much as I wanted to blame Paul for lying to me and then disappearing, I was fairly sure nobody would have gone looking for him if I hadn't kicked over so many anthills.

It also didn't help that, with Christine still hogging Paul, the rest of us were stuck in one of the hospital's waiting rooms. It wasn't bad as far as waiting rooms go. The hospital must have undergone a facelift recently, because everything was Scandi-chic, with lots of pale birch and white pine and so much creamy beige. The minimalist chairs were surprisingly comfortable. A TV mounted in the corner was showing golf—I didn't think it was live, since it was almost ten o'clock at night, but the guys on the green looked like they were playing in clear, sunny weather. Was it on the other side of the planet? Was it a rerun? Did they show golf reruns? And if they did, who would watch them?

A more pressing question was: what was with all the gnomes? They seemed to be the hospital's answer to a perennial holiday problem: how do you put up cute stuff without it all being vaguely Christian? Gnomes had never registered on my radar, but here they were. Gnomes on the windowsills, gnomes on the little magazine tables, even a gnome on the mounting arm for the TV. They were all pleasantly plump and had big white beards and there was something about their eyes that made me very much not want to get trapped in this hospital overnight, or on any Fridays that also happened to be, you know, the thirteenth, or during any full moons or new moons or

lunar eclipses.Or solar eclipses, for that matter.David and Elliott, clearly bored with playing the parts of Supportive Boyfriend 1 and Supportive Boyfriend 2, were tossing one of the gnomes back and forth.Nobody in the Naught family seemed to have noticed, but Keme was giving them his level nine-point-five glare, which had been scientifically proven to be hotter than the sun.

To be fair, I didn't entirely blame David and Elliott.Millie had been sobbing the whole time, and Angeline and Kassandra had been on their phones, and Ryan had shambled around the room kicking things (no gnomes were hurt in the making of this waiting room), and Matthew had immediately hidden behind a copy of Popular Science.It was from February 2014, and one of the cover lines asked, Could we finally have a cure for cancer? Hopefully this wasn't a spoiler for Matthew, but I was pretty sure the answer had turned out to be no.

When the first visitor arrived, the rest of us didn't openly sigh with relief.But it was a close thing.JaDonna Powers did clerical work for the county and had the most remarkable church hair I'd ever seen.She looked at Millie, who was still sobbing, and she might have taken a step toward her, except Keme actually, literally bristled—I swear to God, his hackles stood up.JaDonna changed course for Angeline and Kassandra.

And I realized I had my opportunity.

Ignoring Keme's glare—level nine-point-seven-five, we're talking past the point of nuclear fusion—I dropped into the seat next to Millie.She had her face in her hands, and her whole body quivered every time a sob rolled through her.

"Millie," I whispered.

Millie kept crying.

Keme did something with his eyes that made it extremely clear what would happen if I kept pressing my luck.

JaDonna was saying something to Angeline about her hair. Cassandra perked right up and started telling JaDonna—and everyone else in the room—about her hair.

“Millie!” It was still a whisper, but only barely.

Keme kicked my ankle.

“Oh God—” But Millie looked up, and I swallowed the rest of my agony. “Millie, I know you’re upset, but I need you to talk to me.”

“It’s my fault,” Millie said, the words threatening to tip over into a wail.

“It’s not your fault,” Keme said. And then, to me, he added, “You can talk to her later.”

“I’m talking to her now because this is important,” I said. “Millie, take a deep breath. You’re doing this for Paul, right? You want to help him. You did such a good job at the storage unit. You stayed calm. You called for an ambulance. That’s what I need from you right now, so you can keep helping Paul.”

She sniffled a few more times, but when I expected the next sob, it didn’t come. Finally, her voice scratchy, she asked, “But I don’t know what happened to him. I just found him like that.”

“But you know why he was there, don’t you? You know what Paul was doing at that storage unit.”

Millie dabbed at her eyes with a wad of tissues. Her gaze was unexpectedly sharp

when she asked, “What were you doing there?”

“I followed you.”

She seemed to consider that before asking, “Why?”

With Ryan and the rest of the Naught family—my current crop of suspects—in the room, I settled for saying, “I can’t tell you right now, but I promise I’ll tell you later.”

“I didn’t steal those packages.”

“I know.”

“Paul didn’t steal those packages.”

“I know.”

“He didn’t, Dash. He wouldn’t do that. I don’t care what anybody says—”

“Millie, I said I know.”

For some reason, that earned me a fresh glare from Keme, even as he rubbed Millie’s arm.

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All Millie said, though, was “Oh.”

“What was Paul doing at that storage unit?”

“I told him he could sleep there.”

It’s hard to feel like a super-sleuth when the best thing you can come up with is “You did?”

Millie nodded. “It’s my storage unit.”

“It is?”

(I know: it wasn’t my best work.)

“She makes her jewelry there,” Keme said. “And that’s where she keeps all her supplies.”

“There isn’t enough room at the house,” Millie said. “Paul said he couldn’t come home until he figured out who was stealing the packages, so I said he could sleep there. You’re not supposed to, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt for a night or two. But I didn’t think he’d—I didn’t think—it was supposed to be safe.” Instead of a wail, this time her voice constricted until the last word was thin and small. With what must have taken an effort, Millie continued, “If he hadn’t been there, nothing would have happened to him.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said. “I wouldn’t be too quick to blame yourself. How

long have you and Paul been in contact?”

That was the moment I learned Millie would never be a world-class poker player.

“The whole time?”

The words were louder than I intended.

Kassandra looked over—mid-explanation about her conditioner—and snapped, “Excuse me.”

“This is a hospital,” Angeline added.

Elliott gave a disappointed shake of his head.

David squeezed a gnome until I was surprised his little beard didn’t pop off.

“The whole time?” I asked again—more quietly, but with some extra, uh, vim.

“Not the whole time. I really did think he’d disappeared, but then he called me and said he needed help and told me not to tell anybody.”

It took me several seconds—and a long breath through my nose—before I finally managed to ask, “Seriously, Millie? Why?”

“Because he’s my brother—”

“Not why you were helping him. Why couldn’t he come home?”

“Oh.” Millie gave a helpless shrug. “I don’t know. He just said he couldn’t.”

“What was he doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Millie, I swear to God.”

Keme tried to kick me in the ankle again, but this time, I was ready.

“I promise I don’t know. He said he wasn’t going to go to jail and that he couldn’t come home until he figured out who was doing this.”

I thought about returning to the fact that Millie had known where Paul was and hadn’t bothered to tell anybody, but I knew I wouldn’t get anywhere. (Plus, Keme and I had watched this ’80s kung-fu movie where one of the guys breaks another guy’s finger by bending it all the way back, and I didn’t want to give Keme any reasons to try it out for himself.) So, instead I asked, “What happened tonight?”

“I was taking Paul some food from the house, so I waited until I knew nobody would notice.” Millie blushed, and there was something about how she didn’t look at Keme that would have tipped me off even if I hadn’t accidentally overheard their argument earlier that evening. Keme, for his part, looked even more morose than usual. Millie continued, “When I got there, the door was open, and the light was on. I was going to tell Paul off because I thought he’d forgotten to close it. And then I saw the Santa, and everything felt wrong, and when I got out of the car, I found Paul.” She stopped, tears welling again, and she blotted her eyes with the tissues again.

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“What Santa?” I asked. “You saw someone dressed as Santa?”

Millie sniffled and nodded. “Going around the far corner. I only got a quick look, and then he was gone.”

“Height? Age? Race?”

“He was Santa.”

“Did he have a bowl full of jelly?”

Millie frowned. “No, he was skinny.”

“Anything else?”

“I don’t know. He had the red suit and the beard and the hat.”

“Okay. Did you tell the sheriff?”

She nodded.

“Good. If you think of anything else—anything, Millie—tell the sheriff immediately.”

“Okay.” Her expression tightened with a fresh wave of emotion. “See? It really is my fault—”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” The words came from the opening to the waiting room, where

Christine stood. “This isn’t your fault, Millie. It isn’t anyone’s fault except Paul’s.”

Even Cassandra and Angeline looked up from their phones at that.

Ryan’s jaw dropped. “Mom,” he said. But that was all.

“Close your mouth before you catch a fly, Ryan. And Millie, you couldn’t change clothes? Wash up a little? My God, you’re covered in blood. And your hair.” Christine didn’t miss a beat before wheeling toward Keme. “I suppose it was too much for you to help her.”

Keme didn’t blush easily, but color rose in his cheeks now, and he dropped his gaze to the floor.

“Kassandra, Angeline, thank you for holding things together while I was gone.”

“The nurse was superrude,” Kassandra said.

Angeline piped up with “I think I left my straightener plugged in.”

Christine dismissed this with a wave as she crossed the room. Holding out both hands to JaDonna, Christine crooned, “You are an angel.” And then, confusingly: “I’m sorry you were stuck out here.” And then even more confusingly: “Matthew, you better not have been bothering her.”

“He had his magazine,” JaDonna informed Christine.

For some reason, that made both of them laugh.

I was considering laughing too—if only because it felt like I’d stepped into an episode of *Looney Tunes*—when Christine noticed me. The politest word for her

expression was frosty, and there was a winter crackle in her voice when she said, “Why are you here?”

Can you believe my mind literally went blank?

Apparently, my celebrity status as the town sleuth no longer carried any weight with Christine because she said, “Paul wants ice cream.”

It seemed like a non sequitur until Angeline made a little sound of contempt and Cassandra rolled her eyes and Millie poked me and Keme gave me this look like he was begging me, this one time, to be a normal human.

“Oh, you want me to—” I stopped. “Uh, right. Where do you get ice cream—”

“I don’t know, Dashiell,” Christine said with the exaggerated delivery of someone whose patience had run thin. “If I knew, I wouldn’t need you to get it.”

Ryan nodded like this made perfect sense.

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Matthew's head was bobbling behind his Popular Science.

"Sure—" I began.

Christine made a shooining gesture—along with this noise I'd heard a lady in a park make once when she didn't want her dog to doo-doo in a flower bed—and I found myself rising from my chair and stumbling toward the door.

"He hasn't solved a murder in months," Christine was saying to JaDonna, who was offering sympathetic sounds. "It's like he's not even trying."

Because I am a man of dignity and quiet self-respect, I didn't look back.

I did find a vending machine, though, and I bought myself a Cloud Cake. It was a Twinkie knockoff, so you know: chemical sponge wrapped around sugary goop. I gave it an eight out of ten. I deducted one point for presentation and another because, honestly? It just wasn't sweet enough.

After I'd done some responsible, healthy, mature self-soothing—I mean, how frequently did she want me to solve murders? Every month? Every week? Every day? It wasn't sustainable!—I ambled around. I wasn't in any hurry to find Paul his ice cream, but I figured I'd better find something. I mean, I didn't want Christine to be any more disappointed in me than she already was.

When I realized that thought had passed through my head, I decided I was starting to get an idea of what living with that your whole life might do to a person.

I don't like hospitals. I mean, nobody does except weirdos. But I really don't like them. I have too many bad memories of feeling alone and scared and abandoned, most of that coming from the time my parents had, well, abandoned me so they could run off to the Edgar Awards.

Wandering the halls brought it all back: the smell of disinfectant, the unrelenting buzz of TV, distant voices. I tried to think about it as a writer. I didn't love the idea of putting Will Gower in the hospital (that didn't feel right for my cozy noir), but some authors had their characters end up in the hospital every book. Sadists, I imagined.

But still, an opportunity was an opportunity, and at some point, Will Gower might get hurt, or he might need to visit a client who was in the hospital. What could I capture? What details could I carry over to my story to make it feel real and vivid and immersive? I passed a nurse's station, where mellow little icicle lights outlined the desk. A pair of high heels peeked out from behind one of the chairs. Maybe someone had to do a quick costume change at the end of their shift, although I couldn't imagine where they'd be going. Or maybe it was more of a morale booster to keep the male patients' spirits up. A paper Santa had been taped to the particleboard, but instead of Ho, ho, ho, he was saying, Whoa, whoa, whoa—in my imagination, because the reindeer were getting a little too frisky. Leaning over the counter, a Black woman with her locs tied back was doing something on a chart; she didn't even glance up as I passed.

No ice cream machines, by the way.

Slowly, what was bothering me worked its way to the surface: Paul wasn't dead.

I didn't like that.

Okay, that didn't come out the way I intended, but you get the idea. Someone had attacked Paul. And I suspected whoever had attacked him would have finished the job

if Millie hadn't arrived when she had. On the one hand, this was good news. (I mean, not for Paul.) It was good news because it meant that we finally had proof that someone else was behind all of this. It was bad news because—well, because I had no idea what all of this actually was. Would someone actually kill to cover up the theft of a few packages? Maybe. People killed for all sorts of reasons.

The other, bigger problem with Paul being alive was that nobody had died yet. (And yes, I know how that makes me sound.) I didn't want anybody to die. I love people. I mean, in theory. I'm a people person. I'm a people pleaser. I'm pro people, so long as they don't call me or visit me or come to my house. And stay off my lawn, you dang kids! But leaving my personal feelings about people aside, I'd been to this particular rodeo before, and I had a sense for these things, and the fact that a body hadn't turned up yet was making my hind end itch. (Is that a mixed metaphor?)

I was still thinking about how pro people I was when a familiar voice called, "Dash."

I figured they might have meant some other Dash—hey, anything's possible—so I power-walked toward an intersecting hallway, where I could cut right and—

"Mr. Dane."

I didn't exactly groan or stomp or slump. But I did have to remind myself I wasn't four years old.

Sheriff Acosta was a stout woman with her dark hair in a sensible ponytail. She was kind. She was patient. And she was a consummate professional, which was why she'd won the election hands down and was officially the sheriff, not just acting sheriff anymore. She had this little scar near her hairline, and I desperately wanted to know the story behind it. I guessed that either she'd been a wild child growing up and tried to jump off the swings, or she'd done undercover work, probably drugs, and earned it in a back-alley knife fight. (Okay, look, I desperately wanted to know.)

As she came toward me, a little hint of a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“I almost made it,” I said.

The smile was almost there. And then it was gone. “How are you doing?”

“All right. I feel bad for Paul.”

“He doesn’t look good, but the doctors say he’ll be all right.” If you spent enough time around law enforcement, one of the things you quickly learned was that they have this magical ability to make you feel like you’re under a microscope. I suddenly had the sense that I was being examined at 100x power. “Do you want to tell me what’s been going on?”

I didn’t. But I told her anyway.

“That’s more or less what Bobby told me,” she said.

“Excuse me, are you using my boyfriend to double-check me?”

I got that corner of a smile again. “I want you to know that we’re going to investigate the attack on Paul and what the connection might be to these package thefts.”

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“That’s great.I still don’t know why the freight company didn’t make an official complaint.I mentioned I’m highly suspicious of someone working there, right?”

“You did,” she said.And she even managed to make it sound like this was an ordinary thing that ordinary citizens said to her all the time.“We’ll take a look.”

“At least you can clear Paul from your list.I didn’t want to say anything to Millie, but I was starting to have my doubts.”

Sheriff Acosta didn’t say anything to that.

“Wait a minute,” I said.“Are you serious?You still think Paul might have done this?Someone tried to beat him to death.Or do you think he bashed his own face in?”

Sheriff Acosta didn’t say anything to that, either.

After a few seconds, I mumbled, “Sorry.I ate a Cloud Cake, and there’s still a bit of a sugar high going on.”

“I don’t think Paul attacked himself.But you have to consider how the attack looks.”

“How it looks?What does that mean?”

“Paul was fired for stealing packages.Then Paul disappeared.Then Paul was attacked at a storage unit—”

“His sister’s storage unit,” I put in.

“—where, conceivably, Paul might have been storing those missing packages.”

“But Paul didn’t—” I stopped. “But Millie would have told us.”

Sheriff Acosta nodded, but it was sympathy more than agreement.

“So, what?” I said. “You think Paul did steal the packages, and someone attacked him—why?”

“It could have been a crime of opportunity,” the sheriff said. “Someone was passing by and saw the contents of the storage unit.”

“That doesn’t make sense with Millie’s timeline. And someone who happened to randomly be in a Santa suit?”

“Or it might have been professionals.”

“Professionals like the Turnleys?”

“I’m not suggesting anyone in particular. I’m only saying that someone might have wanted those packages for themselves. Another possibility is that Paul was trying to sell the contents of those stolen packages, and his fence turned on him and robbed him instead.”

They were all logical explanations. They were all, as the sheriff said, possibilities. Aside from Millie’s eyewitness account, there wasn’t any evidence that things hadn’t played out the way the sheriff suggested, and I knew that, at least for now, the sheriff couldn’t simply take Millie’s word for it. And if I hadn’t already been up to my eyebrows in this mess and felt the general weirdness of it all, I probably would have agreed with the sheriff—Paul was the most likely suspect for the package thefts, and the fact that it had come back to bite him probably shouldn’t have been a

surprise.

“I’ll be in touch if I have any additional questions,” the sheriff said. “Do you feel up to driving yourself home? I can call Bobby.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine. Thanks.” I hesitated. And then I said, “Sheriff, I heard you’re hiring a detective.”

“That’s right. We’re making some changes. I think it’ll be for the best.”

There were probably more eloquent (or at least subtler) ways to go about it, but I was exhausted, so I blurted, “You should hire Bobby.”

The sheriff’s eyebrows went up.

“He’d be great at it. He’s super smart, and he’s good with people, and he’s observant and analytical. He’s your best deputy, and I’m not the only one who thinks that.”

Sheriff Acosta nodded. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

“I know what you’re thinking. I know I’m a problem, and I’m always butting into sheriff’s office business, and you think I’d take advantage of my relationship with Bobby somehow and get inside information or something like that. But I wouldn’t. And it’s not fair to punish Bobby because he made the very questionable decision to date me. This is his dream. You have to hire him. Please.”

A smile—a real one—spread across the sheriff’s face. “Dash, if I hired Bobby as a detective, I’d like to see you try to get information out of him.”

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I had to think about that for a moment before I said, “Hey!”

Her smile quickened, and then it was gone. “Thank you for telling me Bobby’s interested in the position. I’ll take what you said into consideration. Goodnight, Dash.”

“Night, Sheriff.”

She left me there.

I waited until the sound of her steps had faded before I took out my phone.

My mind had already jumped back to the investigation. Paul had been trying to figure out who had stolen the packages; that’s what Millie had told me. And that meant Paul—God bless him—had come up with an idea or a plan or something. I understood that the sheriff had to consider all the possibilities. But I didn’t.

I unlocked the phone, pulled up the photo I’d taken of the list of names I’d found in Paul’s pocket, and I tried to figure out what Paul had been doing.

Chapter 17

When I woke up the next morning, my head felt like it was packed with birdseed. (And in case the simile isn’t clear, that’s not a good thing.) It was ungodly early—before nine!—and somehow, I was even more exhausted than the night before. My joints were stiff, my eyes were gummy, and my skin felt like I’d traded down to a smaller size.

Normally, after a night as bad as the one before, I would have lazed about. I would have stayed in bed, staring up at the canopy, thinking about why Nathaniel Blackwood hadn't installed one of those airport-style people-movers to carry me to the kitchen, and in general, feeling sorry for myself.

But I couldn't do any of that because Bobby was asleep next to me, breathing softly. And since Bobby had to go to work in a few hours, I was determined not to wake him. That meant no binging Netflix, no mindlessly scrolling on my phone, no flopping onto my stomach and then onto my back again, pretending I was trying to sleep. Instead, I slipped out from underneath the covers as smoothly as I could—which wasn't all that smoothly, actually; it took me a couple of weird, shimmying humps because I was trying not to pull the blanket off Bobby. By the time I finally got free, I was exhausted and thought I should probably lie down for a while.

But no, I told myself. My personal watchword was resolve. And fortitude. And resilience.

Besides, I could take a nap on the chesterfield.

I showered and dressed in my usual assortment of joggers, T-shirt (this one had the cover art for the original Super Mario Bros.), and a hoodie, and then I went downstairs.

Low voices came from the kitchen, and when I pushed through, the smell of coffee and freshly baked sugary something met me. Fox and Indira were packing up loaves of Indira's cinnamon streusel bread. Fox was dressed like a merchant marine had somehow conceived a baby with a T.rex. Their top layer was some sort of voluminous, pebbly trench coat thing that looked like maybe it was alligator skin (but was probably vinyl, because Fox wouldn't have worn alligator skin), and underneath, they wore some kind of stiff white suit coat, complete with epaulets and brass buttons. They even had a jaunty little cap. Indira, on the other hand, wore her usual

sweater and slacks.

I opened my mouth to inquire about the bread.

“On the counter,” Indira said.

I wasn’t quite ready for words, so I shambled over, helped myself to the waiting loaf of cinnamon streusel bread, and poured myself coffee from the carafe. As the sugar and caffeine hit my bloodstream, I made a noise.

“You slept ten hours,” Fox told me.

“No, actually, I didn’t.” I helped myself to another slice of bread. “I did that thing where it looks like sleeping, but you only feel more awful in the morning.”

“We heard about Paul,” Indira said. “Fox checked on Christine at the hospital, and I talked to Millie this morning.”

“You checked on Christine?” I asked.

“Did you know,” Fox said with a smirk, “you’re apparently not much of a sleuth?”

I groaned.

“If you can’t find ice cream in a hospital—”

“It was ten o’clock at night,” I said. “Where was I supposed to find ice cream?”

“—how are you ever going to catch a murderer?” Fox’s grin got bigger. “Not that you’ve caught one in months.”

They even sounded a little like Christine at the end—simultaneously scandalized and satisfied, the way people sounded when you failed to live up to their expectations exactly as they'd suspected all along.

Changing the subject seemed wise, so I asked, “How’s Millie?”

“She’s not doing well,” Indira said. “She seems to think this is all her fault.”

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“Yeah, I talked to her about that. It’s not her fault. Whatever happened last night—” I stopped myself.

“What did happen last night?” Fox asked.

I told them about finding Paul and Millie’s report of seeing someone in a Santa suit.

“Why were you following her?” Indira asked.

So, I told them about Paul’s social media.

“You think Millie stole those packages?” Fox said. “Millie wouldn’t steal a stick of gum.”

“No, I don’t think Millie did. But I thought someone in the Naught family might be responsible. I was going over there to talk to them, and then Millie came out, and she was acting so suspiciously... I don’t know, I wanted to see what was happening.”

“You thought someone in the family was stealing those packages? Or you still think that?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure. It didn’t come up when I was talking to the sheriff last night, but—” I stopped, took a bite of bread, and chewed slowly. After I’d swallowed, I said, “Is it crazy to think it might be Ryan?”

“Yes,” Fox said.

Indira's expression, though, became thoughtful.

"I like the Naught boys as much as anyone," Fox said. "They're big kids—all they want to do is play, and once you get past their manic energy, they're sweethearts."

"In that case, you probably like them more than most people," I said. "I saw them fight over a Happy Meal once."

"They're definitely not burdened with a lot of higher-order thinking," Fox said. "And what you're describing—watching Paul's live streams to learn about valuable packages, then stealing the packages, and then tracking down Paul and attacking him to cover it all up—it's way too complicated for Ryan."

"Okay, that was my thought too," I said. "But then, last night, Paul was still kind of conscious when we found him, and he was trying to tell Millie something like, 'We were wrestling.' That sounds like he got confused, but he remembered Ryan."

"It sounds like he got smashed on the head," Fox said. "That boy was out of his gourd; he could have said he was Princess Diana."

I looked at Indira.

She still wore that distant look, but she shook her head. "I don't know. It's hard to imagine Ryan doing it." She hesitated, and then she said, "The sisters, on the other hand."

"Oh my God," I said. "I didn't even think about the sisters."

"Because of your internalized misogyny," Fox said.

"I'm not a misogynist!"

“Oh, then it’s just because you’re a bad detective.”

I stared at them. Agape.

“Don’t tease him,” Indira told Fox. “He had a hard night.”

“Plus he’s got the yips,” Fox told Indira. “That’s why he hasn’t solved a mystery in so long. Couldn’t even find the ice cream.”

“There wasn’t any—it was ten o’clock—it hasn’t even been two months!” I finally managed to sputter my way to “And why doesn’t anybody give Bobby trouble about not solving a murder?”

“Because Bobby doesn’t sit around all day picking lint off his underwear.”

“That was one time! And I was trying to decide if I could save them!”

“All right,” Indira said. “Fox, would you take these out to the van?”

Fox was grinning as they grabbed the tray of bread and headed for the door. Their vinyl-alligator-skin-cape-thingy-slash-trench-coat made a lot of crinkling noises as they left.

Then Indira looked at me.

So, I know I go on and on about how sometimes she has this really witchy energy. It's the look of white hair, sure. And it's the fact that sometimes, she literally knows what you're thinking. And sometimes it's because when she looks at you, it's like you're being hypnotized, and I found myself about to spill everything, what was actually bothering me: the weird maybe-fight with Bobby, and the fact that I hadn't seen him, really seen him, in so long, and how it all made me think about that horrible time after he'd broken up with West, and basically my working theory that somehow Bobby and I were making all the same mistakes, and even though I could see what was happening, I couldn't seem to stop it.

Instead, I blurted, "Millie and Keme had a fight. A real one."

Indira's dark eyes softened. Her mouth relaxed, and I realized a moment later that it was shock.

I knew it wasn't any of her business. But it wasn't mine either. And in its own way, it had been as upsetting as my own uncertainty about things with Bobby.

"I don't get it," I said. "They're obsessed with each other. Keme literally waited for years to date her. And now it seems like they're arguing all the time."

Indira began gathering up waxed paper and rolls of cute holiday tape and foil bread pans—all the accessories for packing up the bread—and arranging them neatly at the end of the counter. When she spoke, her voice had a control and detachment that I recognized, but that I hadn't heard in a long time from her.

“Dating someone is very different from being their friend, as you know.”

“Well, yeah.” I mean, I did know that. It just sounded extra...wise when Indira said it. “But it’s like they’re talking past each other, or like they can’t even hear each other. And they used to be best friends.”

“Every relationship is complicated. And I’m a firm believer that unless you’re part of that relationship, then you don’t have a full picture of what’s going on. You overheard a couple of conversations, Dash. If someone happened to overhear a couple of conversations between you and Bobby, isn’t it possible they’d walk away with a mistaken impression of your relationship?”

I wanted to say no. I wanted to say that if someone overheard my conversations with Bobby, they’d probably come to the perfectly correct conclusion that, to borrow a Fox-ism, my cheese done slid off my cracker, and that Bobby could (and probably should) do a lot better.

But what about over the last few days? The way Bobby had asked if he could turn off the light. The way he’d said, Thanks.

Indira must have read the emotion on my face because she said, “They’ll be all right, Dash. They’re still figuring things out.”

“But I don’t want them to figure things out. I want them to be young and happy and in love. I want things to be easy for them because they’re so cute together and because they’re perfect for each other.”

Indira nodded. She smiled, and it was a small, sad smile. And then she stroked my hair.

It wasn’t something she did often—I wasn’t even sure if she’d ever done it before. But

all of a sudden, I was about to cry.

“Things are going to be okay,” she said, drawing me into a hug. “Did you hear me?”

And because I never quite recovered from being thirteen years old, I mumbled, “Yes, ma’am.”

Laughing, Indira squeezed me once more and let me go. She checked my face, her own expression growing serious again, and she said, “Do what you can do, Dashiell. You have to learn to let the rest go.”

I nodded, and she left.

It was one of those conversations that feels heartwarming and encouraging and reaffirming until two cups of coffee later, when you realize you can’t actually do anything.

First, I wanted to talk to Paul, but I had the feeling that getting past Christine—not to mention trying to find a way to get him alone so I could squeeze some answers out of him—would require either a flamethrower or a magical sword (+3, minimum. Vorpal optional.) (That’s from Dungeons and Dragons.) (God, how am I such a nerd? If Bobby ever finds out, I’ll probably never have sex again.)

Talking to Ryan was an option, but while it would be tempting to ask him where he’d been when Paul was attacked, I didn’t know how I’d confirm his answer. The same problem went for Angeline and Cassandra. The Naught household was too busy, and if one of them had wanted to slip out, it would have been easy to disappear for a while without anyone noticing they were gone.

Since going back to the CPF warehouse seemed like a good way to get myself arrested, and going back to the Turnleys seemed like a good way to get myself killed,

I decided my best option was to stick with my original plan: Paul's list.

Besides, it was better than another day spent hitting my head against the wall with my manuscript.

Once I was settled in the den (blankie, coffee, etc.), I pulled up the picture of Paul's list and read over it again. I recognized a couple of the names, but none of them was anyone I knew well. Most of the names didn't even ring a bell. Hastings Rock was a small town, but it wasn't like I was a social butterfly, and I tended to know only the people who moved in my circles. (Which sounds better than saying I hadn't met anybody I hadn't been forced to meet.) About two-thirds of the names had been crossed off, which suggested to me that Paul had been working his way down the list.

I picked the first name I recognized—Dawn Skidmore, who owned and ran the Keel Haul General Store with her husband Eddie—and placed a call.

Dawn answered on the second ring with a none-too-enthusiastic "Keel Haul."

"Hi, Dawn, this is Dash Dane. I was—"

"I told you: they don't make those candles anymore. They were for kids' birthdays, and they were a fire hazard."

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Once—one time—I had politely asked if the Keel Haul could order me some of the trick candles that light themselves again when you try to blow them out.

“Okay, well, I’m pretty sure they’re not only for kids’ birthdays,” I said. “That’s like saying those bouncy castles are only for—” I heard myself getting off track. “And with appropriate adult supervision—” It took an effort to drag myself back to the matter at hand. “Actually, I was calling about something else. Did Paul Naught stop by to talk to you yesterday?”

In answer, I got a grunt.

“I don’t know if you heard last night, but Paul was attacked, and I’m trying to find out—”

“He get killed?”

That cranked her motor. (God, please let that not mean something, uh, adult.) Gone was the sullen reserve. In its place—and not much better—was ghoulish interest.

This was the woman who thought she was the expert on children’s birthday parties.

I mean, on general birthday parties. For people of all ages.

“No,” I said, “Paul’s fine.”

If you’ve never heard a disappointed grunt before, they’re really something.

“But I was wondering if you could tell me what he wanted to talk to you about.”

“I’ve got customers,” Dawn said.

“Right.Fine.Well, I’ll be right down so I can ask you in person.”(Talk about an empty threat.) “Oh, and I’ve got the mail-away for those self-lighting candles from an oldMADmagazine, so I’ll bring that too.”

She said something not quite under her breath that was definitely not appropriate for a kid’s birthday party.“He was asking about that package.The one that got stolen.”

“What about it?”

“He wanted to know if somebody stole it.I said yes, that’s why I reported it stolen.”

“That’s it?”

A few hacking noises came in answer.Then she said, “He kept asking questions.Wouldn’t leave it alone.I told him what I told the company: some bozo in a Santa suit grabbed it off the porch.”

“You saw him?”

“Doorbell camera.I’ve got a line of people waiting, you know.”

It took me a moment to reorient myself to that particular sentence.I had my doubts about throngs of customers queuing up for service at the Keel Haul, but I figured that meant my time was running short.

“That’s it?”I asked.“Anything else?”

“He wanted to know what it was.”

“That you got delivered?What was it?”

“Not that it’s anybody’s business,” Dawn said with a little snip, “but it was a waffle iron.A real nice one, too, from Williams-Sonoma.”

“Do you know—” I began.

But there was the distinct clatter of a receiver dropped into its cradle, and the call disconnected.

I sat back in my chair.It was tempting to let my thoughts turn to the trick candles—I mean,everyoneliked magic tricks and surprises and cool stuff like that.Why would you market them only to children?For heaven’s sake, why would you stop making them?But I forced myself to focus.

Paul had been talking to the people whose packages had been stolen.And he’d wanted to make sure the package had actually been stolen.And what was in it.

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I mean, maybe he wanted to confirm the package hadn't been misplaced, or that someone hadn't found it after filing a claim. I toyed with the idea of fraud—maybe Paul had suspected people were lying about their packages being stolen? But Dawn Skidmore didn't lie. (Not even in the polite, we're-a-society-so-let's-get-along way. One time, I'd asked her about day-old discount muffins, and she said—prepare yourself to gasp—You don't need them.)

The phone call hadn't exactly cleared anything up. But it had made me curious, and I began working my way down the list. I'd wondered if I might have a hard time finding the people I didn't know, but it turned out not to be hard in a town the size of Hastings Rock. Normally, I would have asked Millie, but I decided to leave her out of it for now—in the first place, because she had to be exhausted and stressed after what had happened to Paul the night before, and, more importantly, because I wasn't sure who I could trust in her family, and there was a high possibility of Millie accidentally revealing what I was up to. (Honestly, it makes it even more shocking that she kept Paul's secret for as long as she did.) So, instead, I did what any sensible person in Hastings Rock did when they wanted information about the town's residents: I called Cheri-Ann Fryman, owner of the Rock On Inn and Hastings Rock's single biggest gossip.

Each call went more or less the way the first one had, albeit without Dawn's less-than-helpful attitude. (I was going to call it her'tude, because I think that's what kids say, but then I imagined Keme reading this.) A pattern began to emerge—the stolen items were all relatively valuable, ranging from Dawn's pricey waffle iron to Nike sneakers to a new tablet. A television had been stolen, which made me think that Santa must have put it in his magical sack of presents in order to carry it away by himself. Shelby Sellers had a two-thousand-dollar LED face mask from Sephora

plucked off the porch—apparently, even Santa worries about fine lines and wrinkles. With Cheri-Ann’s help, I managed to talk to everyone on Paul’s list.

Almost everyone.

The only person I couldn’t reach was Three.

His real name—what Paul had written on the list—was Paxton Peabody III, but since you’re a human being and you have a heart, you understand why he’d chosen to go by a nickname. Three was a nice guy. He worked at A Whale of a Tale Books and Curios, and he was friendly and always had good recommendations. He was also a fellow gay, which meant that the Last Picks and I bumped into him from time to time at the Otter Slide.

I didn’t have his number, but instead of calling Cheri-Ann—which would have meant coming up with another excuse for why I needed a phone number—I called the bookstore.

A man’s voice answered, “A Whale of a Tale Books and Curios. This is Stephen. How may I help you?”

“Hi, Stephen. It’s Dash. Is Three there?”

“Well, hi, Dash.” Cue the tremulous enthusiasm. “He’s not here, I don’t think. Do you want me to check? I’ll check.”

What was he going to check, I wanted to know. It was a storefront bookstore; either Three was there or he wasn’t. But before I could say any of that, the phone clicked, and Stephen was gone. Ever since I’d failed at proving Stephen was a murderer (but succeeded at proving he was a thief), Stephen had acted like a baby bird pushed out of his nest every time we interacted. It was—frankly—exhausting to be so terrifying,

and it was one of the many reasons I tried to do all my bookstoring via Three.

Several seconds later, Stephen returned to the phone, out of breath, to gasp, “He’s definitely not here.”

“Right, thanks. I need to talk to him—”

“He’s probably at home. Is it something I can help you with?” And then, without missing a beat: “Did someone get murdered?”

“What is going on with this town? What is this morbid fascination with—” I cut myself off. “No. Nobody got murdered. I just need to ask him about the package he reported stolen.”

“Oh, his book.”

“Do you have his number—wait, what book?”

“His book. The one that got stolen. That’s what you said, right? The package that got stolen?”

“Yes. It was a book?”

“Yeah.”

My brain tried to run ahead of my mouth, and the question that came out wasn’t exactly graceful. “An expensive one?”

Stephen laughed. “Not unless you count shipping. You know, normally we’d order it for him through the store, but this was one of those manga, and he wanted it straight from Japan.”

“Like, a rare edition? Or something new and exclusive?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, those print runs are pretty big; I think it’s a popular series. He didn’t want to wait for the US release.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

A book didn’t make any sense. A book broke the pattern.

Of course, the porch pirate wouldn’t have known that he was stealing a book. He would have grabbed the package, whatever it was, and taken it. If it was junk, he’d trash it later. There was probably some perfectly rational explanation for why he’d targeted Three. Maybe Paul had said something about the package being from Japan in one of his videos. I could go back and check—

But my gut told me no.

Until now, Paul’s guesses had been uncannily accurate. (Maybe, I thought in an aside, he had a future on *The Price is Right*.) The proof was in the porch pirate’s success so far—a series of high-ticket items that could be resold for hundreds or thousands of dollars. I mean, Good God, the waffle iron cost more than the Nikes. Not a single miss or flub. Until now.

“Dash?” Stephen asked. “You know, if it is a murder, Pippi would love to talk to you about a sequel—”

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“Not a murder,” I said hastily, but my brain was still elsewhere. I made the decision in a heartbeat: a phone call wouldn’t be enough. “Stephen, do you have Three’s address?”

Chapter 18

The cottage was barely visible from the street, even though the day had reached eye-watering brightness. In part, that was because of all the brush growing where a front yard should have been—several bushes in the mix clearly had aspirations of becoming trees. And in part it was because of the house’s color. If they ever started making a lime-flavored Laffy Taffy, I thought, that’s what it would look like. But the mailbox had the right number on it, and although the cottage looked old, it also looked well-maintained. There was no clutter, no trash, no weeds. The driveway had been freshly swept.

I parked the Pilot and began searching for a front door. A worn concrete walk forked off from the driveway, and after pushing my way through most of a rhododendron, I found myself in front of the porch.

(Also lime green, in case you were wondering.)

With the brush screening the sounds from the street, the silence thickened. No sounds filtered out from the house. I knocked, and the thud of my knuckles against the wood seemed smaller than it should have.

The door flew open.

It took me about half a second to swallow my scream. Then I settled for a glare.

Three was one of those middle-aged guys who never actually look middle-aged. He was White, a little taller than me, and he typically dressed in what might best be described as gay chic. Today, that meant pointy black boots, tight black jeans, a boxy black blazer, and a T-shirt that said HIGHLY FUNCTIONING INTROVERT. (Yes, the T-shirt was also black.) He wore little steel-rimmed glasses that somehow looked cool and futuristic, and his fade was so tight, I was pretty sure barbers wept when he passed them on the street.

“Oh. Hey, Dash.” Three glanced past me—although what he thought he might see, with all those bushes in the way, wasn’t clear to me. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m sorry to drop in like this. I needed to ask you something in person.”

Three’s eyebrows went up. And then they went up some more. “I thought—I mean, I assumed—you and Bobby—”

It was actually a little insulting.

“Not that,” I said. The relief on his face was even more insulting, so I rushed ahead with “I had a question about your package that got stolen the other day.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah. Wait, did somebody get murdered?”

“This freaking town,” I said, only partially under my breath. “No, Three. I just wanted to ask you about it. Could you tell me what got stolen?”

“That’s what’s so annoying; it was only a book. I mean, it’s going to be an inconvenience to get it again, and I’ll have to wait. Meanwhile, I hope that guy who took it is excited to read the thirty-seventh volume in a gay manga about a werewolf

who can only eat fish and a sushi chef who can only walk backward.”

“I—” But then the summary caught up to me. “What?”

“It’s so good!”

“Uh huh. I don’t suppose you know if the package had anything on the outside that might make it appear valuable.”

“No, it was your standard padded envelope. I’ve never had anything happen like this before; I mean, people can’t even see my porch from the street.”

I gave another look over my shoulder. Three was right. I hadn’t been able to see the porch until I’d gotten past the rhododendron. That didn’t necessarily mean anything; if whoever was stealing these packages had been watching Paul’s live streams, then they wouldn’t have been operating like an ordinary porch pirate, and so the cover provided by the bushes wouldn’t have made any difference. The same was true if this was some kind of inside job through CPF. If nothing else, it reinforced my suspicion that this wasn’t chance and it wasn’t run-of-the-mill package theft—but I suppose the attack on Paul had already confirmed that.

I was still trying to decide if what Three had told me was actually helpful when Three said, “I’ve got to be honest, it’s been kind of scary.” With a sheepish grin, he reached through the door and brought out a curling iron. “Home defense. I can’t get over the fact that this guy walked right up to me in the middle of the day. I like my privacy, but the fact that nobody even saw it happen is making me think maybe I should trade some privacy for some safety.”

It took me that long to process what he’d said. “Wait, you saw the thief?”

Three considered me. “I thought that’s why you were here.”

“What happened?”

“I was off that day, doing stuff around the house. You know how exciting it is when one of your favorite series has a new book come out? So, I was kind of waiting for the delivery. And it's not like I get a lot of people coming up to my door, so when I heard someone on the porch, I knew that's what it was. I went outside, and I picked up the envelope. And then this crazy Santa came charging out from behind the blackberry bush.”

“Santa?”

“The hat, the suit, the whole thing.”

“Okay. What happened next?”

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“He ran straight up onto the porch and grabbed the envelope. I was still in shock. I tried to hold on, but he shoved me, and I stumbled and let go. Then he ran off.”

A million questions raced through my head. “What did he look like?”

“Santa,” Three said miserably. “I keep trying to see his face, but he had one of those big fake beards.”

“White, Black?”

“White, I’m pretty sure.”

“How big was he?”

That got me an even more miserable shrug. “I mean, I think I thought he was big. But that was probably the suit. When I try to think back—I don’t know. It all happened so fast.”

I nodded, but I was trying to make sense of what he’d told me. Why risk an assault—in broad daylight, for that matter—for a gay manga? Why risk an assault at all? The whole point of package theft was that it was supposed to be low risk. That’s why so many porch pirates pretended to have a legitimate reason for being on the property: in case they got spotted, they’d have an easy out. Dressing up like Santa and wrestling a delivery out of someone’s hands wasn’t just dumb, it sounded like—

It sounded—if I were being totally honest—like the kind of thing Ryan would do.

I dragged my attention back to the conversation. “Did you report this to the sheriff?”

Three shook his head.

“Why not?” I asked.

“I don’t know. At first, I was in shock. And then I was kind of embarrassed—I mean, he took it right out of my hands. I know I should have reported it, but...I don’t know. It’s hard to explain. I finally decided I’d report it missing to the delivery company. Because it was missing. And they’ve got insurance for that kind of thing.”

“I think you should call the sheriff now. I get it, Three—it’s scary when something like that happens, and it makes you feel vulnerable, and I understand wanting to move on with your life. But if you don’t report it, the sheriff can’t do anything about it.”

He fiddled with his glasses and then sighed. “Now it’s going to be even more embarrassing.”

“It really won’t be. Everyone knows how it feels.”

Three glanced off into the distance, his expression tight.

“You’ll call it in?”

“Yes, Dash.”

“Thanks. I can stay with you if you want.” A thought occurred to me. “Actually, I might take a look around while you make the call. Can you show me where he was hiding?”

“The big blackberry bush right there.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Grimacing, Three nodded as he took out his phone.

As I stepped down from the porch, Three began to speak into the phone, his voice low and chagrined. In summer, the blackberry bush was probably pretty—green and full of life and bursting with berries. But in December, it looked like something that you’d find in a video game set on an alien planet: brown, twisty and creepy, and surprisingly dangerous looking. I had to give it to the thief—it was so dense that I couldn’t see through to the other side, and so it provided good cover.

I circled around it. A few winter weeds rustled underfoot. Twigs snapped. Branches scraped against my coat. I wasn’t exactly a master of woodsmanship, but even I had enough sense to decide this wasn’t exactly a great spot if you wanted the element of surprise. You had cover, sure, but as soon as you started to move, someone would have heard you. But then, dressing in bright red velour wasn’t anybody’s idea of camouflage either (except, possibly, Mr. Cheek, who would probably have considered red velour a bit toned down). As a disguise, it had been effective, but it was almost like whoever had stolen Three’s package had wanted to be—

Under a tangle of brittle canes, a rectangle of white caught the thin, cloudy daylight. It had the sheen of plastic, and it looked new—or newish. Not something that had been lost and forgotten and left out here for years, deteriorating from exposure.

I told myself to stop. I told myself to think about what I was doing. I was probably ruining footprints. I was probably compromising trace evidence. Maybe Santa’s suit had gotten snagged, and the sheriff might have been able to match the fibers to his cap, except now I was violating the integrity of the crime scene.

On the other hand, I was here, and the deputies weren’t.

I crouched and worked one hand under the blackberry bush. Even though I was trying to be careful, I quickly found out the thorns were as sharp as they looked—they scratched the back of my hand and caught on my sleeve. Then my fingers touched cold plastic, and I reversed the process, acquiring several more scratches along the way.

It was the shape and size of a credit card, but thinner. It reminded me of when I'd first opened a checking account, and the credit union had made me a temporary debit card to use until the real one came in the mail.

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When I flipped it over, it said PIRATE'S COVE in big, pirate-y letters. I'd seen these before. Keme had used one the other day—that's how he'd paid for our laser tag passes. The modern version of the arcade. You didn't carry around a bucket of tokens anymore. No more trying to get a tired five-dollar bill into a change machine. You loaded money onto one of these cards, and you were ready to go.

At the bottom of the card, it said PAUL NAUGHT.

My first, clearest thought was: why hadn't I worn gloves?

And my second wasn't even words. It was just that sensation of your stomach plummeting.

With my non-bleeding hand, I worked my phone out of my pocket and called Bobby. He answered on the first ring.

"Mr. Intuition," he said.

It was a strange response. And his voice was strange, too. But those details only registered peripherally, and I said, "Bobby, I—"

"I don't know how you found out. I probably don't want to know. But yes, we caught him. I was about to call you."

For what felt like a long half second, my brain tried to catch up. "You caught him?"

"The porch pirate, Elliott. We impounded his car because it was illegally parked, and

when we did the inventory search, we found a Santa suit and several recently stolen packages. The sheriff just arrested him.”

Chapter 19

I waited until Deputy Dahlberg showed up to take Three’s statement. I gave her Paul’s Pirate’s Cove card, and I told her where I’d found it. She said thanks, and she wrote everything down. She’s a professional like that.

Then I was free to go, so I went home.

I called Millie on the drive.

“Dash, now’s not really—Mom, no!”

The sounds of a scuffle followed, and then Christine, breathing a bit more heavily than usual, came on the phone. Her words, though, sounded like they were directed at Millie instead of me. “Yes, I am going to talk to him, Millicent. Because this is his fault as much as it is yours.”

“Hold on,” I said, “how is this my fault? For that matter, how is it Millie’s—”

“The two of you couldn’t leave well enough alone. You had to be a pair of—of nosey parkers! I hope you’re happy. I think it would be best for everyone if you removed yourself from the nativity pageant.” She dragged in a ragged breath. “You ruined Christmas!”

The call disconnected.

I didn’t try again, and Millie didn’t call back.

When I got to Hemlock House, the flat-iron sky was low, and in spite of the clouds, the day's light made me squint. I went inside. The house was empty, and it had the wan cheer that Christmas decorations always do in the middle of the day. I wandered through the kitchen, picked at a piece of some sort of torte Indira had left, and stared out the window. The ocean was rumpled and frothy and looked like somebody had stirred it up with a fork. I left the half-finished piece of torte and decided I should try to write.

The problem was that I'd been so busy trying to solve a—I'd almost said a murder. A string of package thefts. A brutal assault. I'd been so busy trying to figure out who had hurt Paul and tried to frame him that I hadn't actually done any thinking about my manuscript.

Maybe I needed more murders. My gaze wandered to the window again. No snow. No ice. Only the evergreen of the Sitka spruce forest. Maybe that was why it still didn't feel like Christmas.

More murders could be good. Sometimes, that was the best way to keep a story hopping. And it was fiction, so you could have bodies dropping every other page. Now that was interesting. That was so much more compelling than trying to track down somebody's stolen LED face mask. (I mean, do the lights even do anything?) Maybe Will Gower needed a serial killer! Of course, that didn't go with the whole cozy noir thing I was trying to do.

The idea had tickled something at the back of my head, though. More bodies wasn't necessarily a bad idea. Maybe people were dying... quite a few people, actually. And nobody knew why. Poisoned pills, like that Tylenol thing. Or a bad batch of whatever people take for their cholesterol. (I ought to know what it's called—Bobby was always threatening me with it.) And someone saw their chance to get rid of someone, and they took it.

A little thrill ran through me. That wasn't half bad. In fact, that could tie in rather nicely to cozy noir. Cozy noir was going to be all about the human aspect of justice. Maybe the killer was desperate. Maybe they thought this was their only way out. A string of inexplicable deaths...what's one more? Nobody would think twice about it.

Except Will Gower, of course. My fictional detective would immediately notice something that was slightly different from the other deaths. Something that didn't add up. Something like...

Well, I'd come up with it later.

The important part was that I'd solved—more or less—my problem of when to introduce the first murder. Kind of.

Having figured that out, I decided I should probably write some of it down, at least make a note of it. Instead, though, I alternated between brooding at my laptop screen and brooding out the window. I wanted one of those big ice storms that occasionally rolled in. Barring that, I would have settled for lots and lots of rain. Something dramatic, elemental, cataclysmic.

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Something that would make me feel better about my own little internal tantrum.

They'd arrested Elliott for the thefts. That was great. That was fantastic. I mean, that was what I wanted, right? I wanted the sheriff and her deputies to be responsible for law and order. I wanted them to be the ones who tracked down all the thieves and murderers and, uh, stagecoach bandits. I didn't want to have to solve every crime in Hastings Rock myself. I didn't have time, anyway. I was too busy writing my book.

But Elliott? Honestly?

I mean, okay, yes, I might be biased by the tiny fact that I found him unbearable. And yes, I'd spotted a number of weird things—red flags like the fact that he and Angeline had met when he'd "helped" her with her ATM card, and then mysteriously, her account got hacked. And that wasn't including the points Millie had made: that he'd cheated during a family game night, and how the details about his luxury apartment seemed to change. Not to mention the fact that the whole business about his "investment tips" for Millie's dad had stunk to high heaven. And it would have been easy for Elliott to learn about Paul's live streams.

So, I could see why the sheriff might suspect him.

There was also the slightly inconvenient fact that the deputies had found a Santa suit in his trunk along with several stolen packages.

Okay, so Elliott had done it. Elliott was the thief. Fine. I wasn't entirely sure of the sequence of events—I suspected there'd been some sort of long con happening, with Elliott trying to get money out of Angeline and her parents, and the package thefts

had been an opportunity that fell into Elliott's lap.

But was I supposed to believe that Elliott had also attacked Paul? That he'd tried to beat him to death?

Before I could think about what I was doing, I had my phone out and was calling Bobby.

"What's up?"

It was such a strange, flat question that it knocked me slightly off balance, and I burst out, "Elliott didn't attack Paul."

Empty seconds ticked past.

"We've got our hands full right now," Bobby said.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry." I couldn't help myself, though. "But he didn't. You know that, right?"

"I don't know that, actually. Elliott still hasn't been interviewed. And we haven't had a chance to re-interview Paul to see if he's remembered anything."

"Bobby, it doesn't make any sense. Con men aren't violent. That's why they're con men."

"That's not necessarily true. It's hard to predict how someone's going to behave when they're cornered."

"But that's the whole point: Paul didn't corner him. Someone tracked Paul down at that storage unit and tried to kill him."

“Maybe he thought Paul knew he was the thief.”

“That’s the problem, though—we’re right back where we started.If someone wants to argue that Elliott might be violent if he were frightened and trapped, okay, maybe I’ll buy that.But tracking someone down and assaulting them in cold blood?”

“They argued.It escalated.”

“I don’t think so.I think someone walked right up to Paul, someone he knew and trusted, and they beat the snot out of him.Who knows what would have happened if Millie hadn’t shown up?”

“Sounds like Elliott.”

It did sound like Elliott, which was probably why I made an embarrassingly high-pitched sound of frustration.“Okay, but if it was Elliott, why would he attack Paul and then stick around?”

“Matthew wanted to make some investments the day after Christmas.”

I said a few words you can’t say when you’re sitting on Santa’s lap.“What about the money in Paul and Ryan’s car?If Elliott’s a con man, he wouldn’t give up ten thousand dollars like that.”

“We’re going to see if we can recover any prints from the tire.Listen, Dash, I’ve got work to do—”

“What about Paul’s Pirate’s Cove card?”

After a silent second (probably considering disconnecting), Bobby said reluctantly, “What about it?”

“Why would he leave that at Three’s house?”

“To frame Paul.”

“But where did he get it?”

“I don’t know, Dash. We haven’t had a chance to interview Paul again.”

“Why not leave his driver’s license?”

“Maybe Paul left the Pirate’s Cove card in his desk. We don’t know how Elliott got into his wallet. We don’t know anything yet, which is why I don’t understand why we’re having this argument.”

“It’s not an argument, it’s—it’s analysis. Why would he steal Three’s book?”

“What?”

“The manga Three ordered, why would he steal it?”

“He was stealing packages, Dash. He didn’t know what was in them.”

“But everything about it was different. He hid. He waited. He ran up to the porch and grabbed it out of Three’s hands. And it wasn’t worth anything.”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you figure it out and tell the rest of us?”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. And then, it all came crashing back—the way he’d asked about turning off the light, the way he’d said, Thanks, even that

strange little jab from earlier that I hadn't even realized until now was a jab, when he'd called me Mr.Intuition.

Mr.Intuition I was not.But I wasn't totally clueless either.

But I couldn't quite keep the disbelief out of my voice as I asked, "Are you mad at me?"

More of those vast, empty seconds ticked past.And then he said, "I'm not happy with you right now, no."

"What?Why?"

"Are you serious?"

"I don't know.If you didn't want me to help Millie or—or interfere with your investigation, why didn't you—"

He cut through my words with a barely suppressed whisper."Why?You want to know why?Because you told the sheriff I was going to apply for the detective role, Dash.I mean, my God, what were you thinking?"

Somewhere at the back of the house, the wind rattled a window.

"I don't understand," I said."I thought—"

"I know what you thought.Everyone knows what you thought because you told everyone, Dash.Everyone."

I didn't remember standing, but I was on my feet, lurching back and forth, rubbing my free hand against my joggers."Bobby, I didn't—I mean, I wasn't—I wouldn't—"

Tears stung my eyes. “I don’t understand. I thought you wanted to apply for it.”

“Oh yeah? Why? Why did you think that?” A beat. “Did you ask me?”

I knew, in that second, if I tried to say anything, I’d burst into sobs.

“I have to go,” Bobby said—his voice stiff now that the heat had died out of it. “Let’s talk about this later.”

Chapter 20

I honestly don’t know what I would have done if, at that moment, the front door hadn’t crashed open.

“Because you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Millie said, her voice frayed. “So stop talking about it.”

“I’m your boyfriend,” Keme said. “I’m trying to help—”

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“I don’t want you to help! I don’t want you to do anything except be nice to my family, and you can’t even do that. Cassandra was trying to be nice to you, Keme. She was asking you questions. She wanted to talk to you. And you just stared at her.”

“She wasn’t asking questions to be nice. She thinks it’s hilarious I’m in high school, and she wants to make you feel bad, like she always does, like your mom—”

“STOP!” And then, the next words clotted with emotion, Millie said more quietly, “Please stop, okay?” My heartbeat filled the next long moment. “I changed my mind. I think I’m going to go home.”

The front door shut—not quite a slam, but on the hard side of Don’t you dare follow me.

I slipped out into the hall. I want to say it’s because I’m a good friend and because I love Keme and because he’s this weird combination of my son and brother and bully. But the complete and total truth is that I went because it was easier to think about something else—anything else—than what had happened with Bobby. I was already doing one of my best magic tricks with that: boxing up all the feelings, all the hurt, all the shame and embarrassment, to deal with later. If there was a later. And yes, part of me knew that was melodramatic. But part of me also knew that Bobby never yelled. He never lost his temper. He never—never—would have acted that way with West.

But that was too close to thinking about it, and so I packed up those thoughts too.

Keme was already starting up the stairs. He had pulled up his hoodie to mop his eyes,

and when he lowered it, he saw me. Over the last few months, Keme and I had broken a lot of new ground. I'd seen him at his most vulnerable. And he'd let me be there for him.

Right then, though, there was no mistaking the look on his face. The message translated to something like Say one word, I dare you, only with a lot of those skull emojis that aren't actually words.

I decided I wanted to live for a few more hours, at least until I could try to apologize to Bobby, so I let Keme stomp upstairs.

That annoyingly observant part of my brain—the one that was always spotting things and grabbing them and holding on to them so I could use them in my writing, kind of like an overgrown toddler—noted that I hadn't heard an engine or the sound of tires.

When I opened the front door, Millie's Mazda3 was still there. She was sitting behind the steering wheel, her face in profile to me, staring straight ahead. If she noticed me, she didn't give any sign of it.

Go back inside, I told myself. Go back to the den and work on your story. Leave her alone—it isn't any of your business. Better yet, go find Nathaniel Blackwood's secret bomb shelter and hide out there until all of this blows over.

But I couldn't. Because like it or not, life in Hastings Rock had changed me. And even though Millie had parents and siblings and probably a really evil great-aunt, she was also my family.

As I crossed the drive, my steps clicked on the worn pavement. Still nothing from Millie; she looked out the windshield like she was watching a movie. Nothing too happy, to judge by her expression. I was willing to bet it included such memorable scenes as Confrontation in the Vestibule and Don't Talk about My Mother (a classic,

from what I understood, for the straights).I tried the passenger door, and it opened, so I slid into the seat.

Millie sank down and closed her eyes.

I settled into my own seat with a few squirms and squeaks.

And then the car was silent except for the sounds of our breathing.Outside, the day was still that hard, chipped cold.The sky was the color of sunlight through a sheet of paper.The fog had half-eaten the trees.Plus, I was cold—even though the car had only been off for a few minutes, the damp was seeping into it.I was starting to suspect that this, like most things in life, would have gone better with coffee and a serving of Indira’s apple crumble.Or with someone else doing it.Someone who wasn’t literally itching inside their own skin at the thought of having this conversation.

Then Millie said, “Do you ever have dreams where you can’t talk?”

I looked over at her.Her eyes were still closed.

“Yeah,” I said.“I do, actually.”I tried to think of something meaningful to say, but the best I could come up with was “I hate those dreams.”

“Me too,” she said in a small voice.Pushing her hair behind her ears, she made an unhappy sound and opened her eyes.“My mom is so mad.”

“I’m sorry, Millie.”

She shook her head—at the apology, maybe.Or maybe at something else.

“This has been a difficult week for her,” I said.“She’s tired, and she’s upset about Paul being hurt, and even though I will literally never understand why, she seemed to

genuinely like Elliott and David—”

“David,” Millie corrected absently.

I let it slide because I honestly.could.not.“—and she’s hurt because Angeline is hurt.And, like she said, I ruined Christmas.”

I meant the last bit to sound light and playful, but Millie didn’t smile.“Do you know what Angeline said when the sheriff told her about Elliott?The first thing she said?She said, ‘You mean he’s not a lawyer?’”Millie shook her head.“My momgasped.They were so excited that he was a lawyer.Gracie Sterling’s boyfriend is a lawyer.And Gracie Sterling went to college.She got a degree in Child Management, and she did it in three years instead of four, and she had scholarships, and she didn’t drop out or anything.Gracie Sterling also didn’t quit dance, and she won Miss Teen Hastings Rock when we were seventeen, andeveryoneused to want her to babysit, and she’s never had a haircut that made her look like a boy, quote ‘and not in a cute way.’”

I couldn’t help myself.“Uh, what is Child Management?”

“That’s why my mom is mad.Not because Elliott was a liar.Not because he was a thief.Not because he hurt Paul really badly, or because he was going to steal all our money, or because he broke Angeline’s heart.Because all her dumb friends are going to find out, and she can’tstandthat.”

We sat there.The wind stirred the trees at the wood line, but where we were, in the lee of the house, there was no wind, no sound.

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“Gracie Sterling sounds like she’s the absolute worst,” I said.

Millie laughed. “No, she’s super sweet. That’s what makes it so awful. I am so...tired of it. ‘Did you see the top Gracie was wearing? It looks much better on her.’ Or, ‘I was at book club, and Gracie said the smartest thing.’ Or, ‘I bet Gracie’s mom doesn’t have to clean up sand every time her daughter comes home.’ Or, ‘Gracie never would have quit the jump-rope team.’ No, Mom, she wouldn’t have, because she was BOINKING THE COACH!”

I couldn’t help myself; I burst out laughing. Millie’s eyes got huge. She covered her mouth as red rushed into her cheeks. When she glanced over at me, somehow her eyes got even bigger. And then she started to giggle. After a few seconds, it turned into tears, but Millie wiped them away and pulled herself back together, shaking her head again.

“I’m sorry, Millie,” I said. “My relationship with my parents isn’t exactly the same, but I know it’s not easy to have parents who find a million different ways to tell you they wish you were someone else.”

“It’s fine. Most of the time, she’s too busy fussing about Angeline and Kassandra to worry about me. Paul and Ryan are practically grown-ups now, or as close as they’re going to get. For a long time, they needed me. But I guess Keme’s right: there’s no reason for me to put up with it anymore.”

I nodded. But I said, “Except, they’re your family.”

She let out an unhappy laugh and nodded.

“Would it help if you blamed me?” I asked. “Tell her the whole thing was my idea?”

“I already did. It didn’t work; she said you had a smart mouth, and your mom should have spanked you more.” In a surprisingly morose tone, she added, “I’ll never get to be Mary. Gracie Sterling is going to be Mary. She’ll probably be Mary every year for the rest of my life, until she’s a hundred years old.”

“Okay, first of all, wow about the spanking comment—”

“She also said she always knew you were a troublemaker, and you were never invited to dinner again unless you do something really interesting and she wants to brag that she knows you.” With a tiny slant to her mouth, Millie said, “I added the last part.”

“And I don’t have a smart mouth. I’m witty. I’m urbane. I’m a conversationalist.”

Millie didn’t seem to hear me, though. Her gaze dropped, and she ran a hand over her leggings. “You, uh, heard me and Keme?”

“It’s a big house,” I said. “But it’s not that big.”

She picked at some lint. Then she stopped, closed her eyes again, and leaned her head against the window. “I thought it was going to be so easy. We’ve been friends for so long. I love him so much. But every time I open my mouth, I start yelling at him. And he—” She cut herself off, and she sounded close to tears when she said, “How do you and Bobby make it look so easy?”

“Trust me, we’re not perfect—”

“I know. That’s why I said ‘make it look.’”

“Excuse me?”

“And we already know Bobby’s superpatient, so I’m asking more, like, how do you manage not to mess it up all the time?”

The question was a flagrant violation of my, uh, dignity. But since—in this one particular instance—Millie happened to be right, I managed to swallow a series of phrases that began how dare you. When I trusted myself not to throw a hissy fit, I said, “For your information, I happen to be in the middle of messing up the best relationship of my life.”

Millie opened her eyes and said—with an unmistakable implication—“WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“I didn’t do anything!”

And then I told her what I’d done.

The first thing she said was “DASHIELL!”

“I know!” I snapped. “And just so we’re clear, that’s not a helpful response!”

“You have to—” Then she stopped. “He doesn’t want to be a detective?”

Because I was temporarily wordless, I managed a few flailing hand gestures to convey an overall sense of See? and That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Finally I managed to say, “Thank you!”

“But that doesn’t make any sense. Bobby’s so good at being a deputy.”

“Yeah, well, don’t tell him that or he’ll charge you with publicly complimenting an officer.”

Millie gave me another, longer look. “Dash.”

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“It’s going to be okay.I’ll apologize.And, like you said, Bobby’s super patient.He’s probably got a few ounces of forgiveness left.”

“He does.”

“We’ll work through it.”

“You will.”

It sounded even less convincing when I said it all out loud.

“He forgave you when you hugged him and got all that powdered sugar on him.”

“That was kind of both our faults.”

“And he forgave you when you went for a run and you pretended a bear came charging out of the woods and knocked you down and that’s why you had to sit on that bench.”

“In the first place, a beardidknock me down—”

“And he forgave you that time he came home and you and Keme were trying on all his expensive sneakers.”

“Kemewas trying them on.Keme.I didn’t do anything!I put one on for, like, five seconds to show Keme a dope way to tie the laces, and of course that’s when Bobby walked in—”

“Dash, he loves you so much. And you love him so much. You’ll figure things out.”

“Yes,” I said. “We will. But this isn’t supposed to be a conversation about me. This is a conversation about you and Keme. I believe someone used the phrase ‘messing it up.’”

Some of the light went out of Millie’s face. She gave a limp shrug.

“Not good enough,” I said. But when Millie didn’t say anything, I said, “I’m going to go out on a limb here: Keme doesn’t like how your family treats you, and he’s trying to tell you what to do.”

Millie’s jaw dropped. (It was not flattering.) “YES! And no matter how many times I tell him it’s none of his business, he won’t stop!”

“Okay, well, here’s the first part: you’re in a relationship with Keme now, so to some degree, it is his business. When you tell him it’s not, you’re telling him there’s a part of your life that doesn’t include him. Is that what you want?”

“No, that’s the opposite of—”

“Then stop telling him it’s none of his business. You need to tell him what he can and can’t do. He can listen and be supportive when you need to vent. He can’t criticize your mom under the thinly veiled excuse of helping you or protecting you or whatever he claims he’s doing.”

Millie was giving me a slightly goggling look, which was even less flattering than the jaw-drop. “How are you so good at this when you’re so bad—”

“Because I’m a writer,” I snapped. “And you can’t keep bossing Keme around like he’s your little brother. He’s a grown man. He’s an adorable little gremlin-wolf hybrid

of a grown man who would actually look super cute if you dressed him up in adult clothing and pretended he was, like, a dentist.”

Millie’s look was slightly less impressed now. “I’m not going to tell him you said that.”

“But it’s so good! And I came up with it right on the spot!”

“I know Keme is a grown man,” Millie said.

Her tone was defensive.

And then she blushed.

I mean, my God. If you’re like me, and you’re basically still thirteen years old and the kissy bits still make you squirmy, then you understand why my spirit vacated my body in that exact moment.

Somehow, Millie soldiered on. “I know he’s an adult. But somehow, every time I open my mouth, I start talking to him like—like he’s Ryan or Paul, and I can hear myself, how I sound—” She stopped. And then she groaned. “—like my mom.”

I couldn’t help laughing. Millie, though, didn’t join in. She gave me what Will Gower would have called a gimlet eye. “I’m not laughing at you,” I said. “I’m laughing at the comparison. You don’t sound like your mom, Millie. Well, not exactly.”

“Oh my God,” she moaned.

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“Come on, it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. Have you met my mom and dad? One time, the pastor came over and he thought my dad was a coat rack.”

“Millie, you’re not your mom. And Keme’s not your dad. On the other hand—”

She made one of those whimpering sounds again.

“On the other hand,” I said a little more firmly, “everybody inherits relationship patterns from their parents.”

Millie’s suspicious, sidelong look at me was simultaneously un-Millie-like and, well, rude.

Mostly, though, it made me laugh again. I raised my hands in surrender and said, “Writer. Well, and years of therapy unpacking the current hot mess in front of you.”

“I can hear myself,” Millie said. “I sound exactly like my mom sometimes. I never wanted to sound like my mom. Growing up, it was like—it was like nobody else was even there. It’s still like that. Like she can’t see me. Like she can’t hear me. Even when she’s looking right at me, telling me Gracie Sterling learned to play the flute—”

“On the jump-rope coach,” I murmured.

“DASHIELL!”

“You said it, not me!”

Millie’s grin was surprisingly real. But it faded as she said, “It’s like she’s talking past me or through me, and nothing I say gets in. I don’t want to do that with Keme, but sometimes, it’s like he’s not listening to me either.”

You’d have to be a pretty lousy armchair psychologist not to make the connection, but I let that pass without comment. Instead, I said, “Someone once told me that all love is a kind of homesickness. Well, actually Nora Ephron said that. And she didn’t tell me so much as, um, write it in a book.”

It sounded like Millie was barely holding back a lot of vexation.

“My point,” I hurried to add, “is that the stuff from our past doesn’t all have to be bad. There are things we go back to because we love them.”

“So, what? I want Keme to ignore me like my mom does?”

“Good luck with that. Keme couldn’t ignore you if he tried.”

Millie sat up. She ran her hand through her hair, her fingers curling along her nape. When she spoke, her voice was thoughtful, distant. “My house was so loud growing up. It still is so loud. And I know I’m loud. I’m always getting excited about stuff. And I like that about myself. But sometimes it’s like there’s so...much. And then I’m with Keme, and he’s like this quiet place I can drop into and be calm and centered and—and with him. Like I’m this kite that would blow away if he didn’t keep hold of me.” Her cheeks reddened. “I know that doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does, actually. And it’s lovely.”

“God, he must be so mad at me.”

“He loves you, Millie. He wants this to work out with you. But you both have to recognize that you’re in a new phase, and things are different. That means making some changes. He can’t keep being a lone wolf; he’s part of something bigger than himself now, and that means talking and making decisions together. It means compromising. And you need to find a way to communicate that isn’t big-sister mode. Part of being in a relationship with someone is learning to see them differently. And that means learning to love them differently too, because you know more of them now, and you know them in a new way.”

Millie was quiet for several long moments. Then she sat up a little straighter, her shoulders square, and said, “I can do that.”

“I know you can.”

“I’m going to talk to Keme.”

“Good.”

“We’re going to figure this out.”

“I’m sure you will.”

Her voice took on a grim resolve. “And I’m not going to let my mom treat me like that anymore.”

“Right, well, that’s kind of beyond the scope of this conversation—”

“And I’m going to be Mary this year.”

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“Not really the point, I think, but—”

Millie’s head swiveled, and I realized I was caught in her sights. In that same take-no-prisoners tone, Millie added, “And you’re going to write me the best book ever about Jinx St. James.”

My brain told me to say no, but you should have heard her—the determination in her voice was two degrees shy of terrifying, which was probably why my mouth said, “Well, um, we can talk about that—”

She pulled me into a hug. It was of the usual Millie-rib-cracking variety, but a little tremor ran through her, and I surprised myself by squeezing her closer.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Anytime. Oh, but not really anytime, because if Keme ever found out we had this talk, he would chop me up and mail pieces of me around the world.”

She laughed, but when she pulled back, her eyes shimmered. “You must think I’m so messed up.”

“Millie, here’s one of the basic facts of life: everybody is messed up. So, don’t worry, you’re not the only one. I’m sure if I ever have kids, I’ll start trying to plan their lives and decide what’s best for them and have this singular vision for who they are and who they’re supposed to be, and everything I do will be directed toward making them into that person, just like my parents did with me, and—”

When the realization hit, I actually felt the blood whoosh out of my head and toward my sneakers.

I could hear my own broken-off sentence like an echo.

I could feel Millie watching me.

It didn't matter. I had fallen into the abyss of cosmic horror.

"Oh my God," I said, only barely aware I was speaking out loud. "I've become my mother."

"Oh," Millie said. "Yay?"

Somehow, I managed to shake my head and whisper scratchily, "No yay. Not yay."

In my head, I played back everything from the last few days. Everything from the moment I'd heard the sheriff's office had an opening for a detective.

Time must have passed because Millie said, "Uh, Dash?"

"I have to go now," I said numbly.

"Are you okay?"

I mustered up something that might pass for a smile. "Uh huh. Just need to lie down and grapple with a fresh bout of horrifying self-awareness."

"Oh. Okay." She leaned in, quick as a bird, and kissed my cheek. And then she said, "I love you."

It was enough, thank God, to startle me out of my waking nightmare. My next smile felt more real, and I said, “I love you too, Millie. Now go talk to Keme.”

“Are you going to be all right?”

My phone buzzed.

The message was from Bobby, and it was short and sweet—which was standard fare for Deputy Mai. I’m very unhappy about how I talked to you. I’m so sorry, and I want to apologize. Can we please talk when I get home?

Somehow, I managed to say through the lump in my throat, “Yeah, everything’s all right.”

Chapter 21

I texted Bobby back to make sure he knew we were okay and that we’d talk later that night. Then I spent the hours between that conversation with Millie and the end of Bobby’s shift trying to find ways to keep myself busy. I played Xbox for a while, but I couldn’t get into it. I shambled into the den and tried to write, which was how I found myself two hours later, with grime up to my elbows as I wiped down the old bookshelves. Millie and Keme, apparently now fully reconciled, took over the billiard room so they could watch a movie. I figured they didn’t need a third wheel, so I went upstairs to shower (resisting the urge to indulge in one of what Millie had started to call mysadness baths), and then I got into bed to read.

It wasn’t that I was sad or angry. The text from Bobby had salved the worst of my hurt, and the conversation with Millie had given me that uniquely soul-destroying insight into my own bad behavior over the last few days. But I was still...upset, maybe. In the truest sense of the word. I felt jumbled up inside, and I couldn’t focus.

The words on the page kept slipping away from me. I loved Dorothy Sayers, and I loved *Whose Body?* If you haven't read it yet, it's the first Lord Peter Wimsey mystery, and the name of the protagonist should tell you what the general vibe is.

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But it doesn't.

That's one of the reasons Sayers is so good—why she's a genius, even though people don't know her name the way they know Agatha Christie. (I mean, Christie's a genius too.) Because you might hear the name Lord Peter Wimsey and think—with good cause—that the series is going to be, well, whimsical. And it is. The books are fun and funny and playful. And then they have this raw streak of reality that cuts right through them, and it's heartbreaking and true and so incredibly human that it turns what could have been a lighthearted romp into so much more.

Plus, the book starts with somebody finding a dead body in his bathtub. Talk about a great choice for where to put the first murder in your story!

Of course, it's hard to sink into a book, no matter how good it is, when every five seconds your brain leapfrogs away and you find yourself thinking about how stupidly you've acted recently.

The sound of the front door closing made me sit up in bed. Bobby's familiar steps moved through the house, up the stairs, and toward my bedroom. Which was quickly on its way to becoming our bedroom. He hesitated outside the door, and then he knocked.

I gave an unexpectedly watery laugh. "Bobby, you don't have to knock."

The door opened.

He was still in uniform, of course. And his hair was still in its neat part. But he had the

faintest hint of stubble (not that he could grow a beard, but still), and his face was drawn. His eyes were red. His color was bad. How many doubles had he worked in a row? When was the last time he'd eaten, or slept, or just gotten to veg out?

"Hi," I said.

"I didn't want—" He stopped and gestured at the door. "I wasn't sure if you wanted—"

"I always want," I said, which didn't make any sense, but kind of did in the moment.

He was still standing in the doorway, so I got out of bed and went over to him and hugged him. He smelled like he did at the end of a hard day: sweat and leather and oil. His arms closed uncertainly around me.

"I'm feeling very vulnerable right now," I whispered against his neck.

It felt like a long time before, voice thick, he said, "Me too."

"Maybe you should give me your gun."

The change came in his embrace, more than anything else. His arms tightened around me, and all of a sudden, it felt like every other time he'd held me. Like things were back to normal, and we were okay. Then he said, "Absolutely not."

"Bobby, you have an unfair advantage."

He said mmm, but in a way that was not gratifying. "I'm so sorry for the way I talked to you. That was inexcusable, and I'm so—so angry with myself for losing it like that. It was unacceptable—"

“Bobby—”

“—and I want you to know that I know that it was unacceptable—”

“Bobby!” When he stopped, I said, “It’s okay.” I wiggled back until I could see his face. “It’s okay. You can get mad. You’re allowed to have feelings. I mean, I never want you to be upset with me, but if I do something that makes you mad, you’re supposed to get mad. And come on, you didn’t even raise your voice.”

His jaw was tight. He cut his eyes away and shook his head.

“Yes,” I said. “You most definitely are. Especially when I am being so totally oblivious to what you want and need, and I’m making everything about myself, and I’m not taking your feelings into consideration. I know—” I almost said, “That’s how it was with West, but I didn’t want to say that—didn’t want to bring his ghost into our relationship.” So, I said, “I know that’s happened to you in the past. I never want to do that to you. You were right: I should have talked to you, asked you what you wanted, listened to what you were trying to tell me. I love you so much, Bobby. I don’t care about you being a detective; I want you to be happy and fulfilled, whatever that looks like for you. That’s what I should have said.”

He still wasn’t looking at me. His jaw was still stone. When he spoke, the words were clipped. “I should have told you.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

He made an unhappy noise.

I bonked him—gently—with my head. “Hey.”

Slowly, his eyes came back to me—wary, defensive. Not like he was protecting

himself from me, but—but from himself, maybe.Or from this moment.From the intensity of it.

“You should be proud of yourself,” I said.“I know how hard you’ve been working on communicating.I appreciate that so much.I love that you want that to be better for us.And I’m so glad you told me when I wasn’t respectful of your boundaries.”

He swallowed.His hand shifted on my back.With that same iron control locking down his voice, he said, “I lost my temper.”

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“That’s okay. I mean, I hate that I made you so mad. But it’s okay for you to have those emotions and communicate them to me. I’m so glad—” I almost said, I’m so glad you didn’t just go along with it, because that’s what the Bobby from the year before would have done. “I’m so glad you told me.”

He swallowed again, and it looked like he was fighting not to let his gaze slide away. His next words were rough. “Thank you, I guess.” He gave a raspy little laugh. “This is hard for me. And I am sorry, Dash.”

“I’m sorry, too.”

His fingers brushed the hair on the side of my head and bumped over the earpiece of my glasses. “I want to kiss you now.” His breath was soft against my face. “Is that okay?”

“This is why you should have given me your gun, so I could have been in charge.”

Instead of responding, Bobby kissed me. Or maybe that was his response, because it was soft and questioning. When I kissed him back, I answered as best I could. Bobby did some more kissing, and there wasn’t anything soft or questioning about it. It was a statement. And here’s the thing about Bobby Mai: he’s not always great with the words, but he has some very effective ways of getting his message across.

The problem, though, is that I will always be Dashiell Dawson Dane. That’s why, when Bobby pulled back, I had this horrible moment where I was fixing my glasses and trying to check my hair (too little, too late) and remembering how to breathe. And I blame all that multitasking for why I blurted, “I’m turning into my mother.”

He didn't groan; that's kind of the remarkable part. His eyebrows didn't even go up. But it felt like a very long moment before he said, "Babe, I've worked, like, three doubles in a row."

Laughter erupted out of me. "Rude!"

A hint of Bobby's goofy grin slid out from behind the exhaustion. "Let me change; you get back in bed."

I did, but only because my feet were cold. And because it was fun to watch Bobby take off his duty belt and his holster.

"All right," he said as he locked up his gun.

"It's not like I want to turn into my mom," I said. "You get that, right? It's happening against my will."

He made a sound that could have meant anything.

"I was talking to Millie about all the stuff that's been going on, with her family and with Keme and—and I might have had a breakthrough. It was awful. And I hated it. And it was totally unintentional, and I'll never do it again."

We had gotten to the part of the evening where the clothes came off. Bobby was so careful. He undid each button slowly and methodically as he said, "Why do you think you're turning into your mother?"

"Because I did exactly what she did. Well, my dad too, so I guess I'm turning into both my parents. But it's more horrifying if I say I'm turning into my mother."

Bobby pulled off his shirt, and instead of wadding it up, he folded it neatly in half

before slipping it into the hamper. He had broad shoulders narrowing to a trim waist, and the lamplight looked like liquid gold poured across his skin. “Is this a writing thing?”

“No, this is a ~~nothing~~. The way I’ve been acting with you. Thinking I know what’s best for you. Having this vision of who you are and who you’re supposed to be. Making decisions for you. Not listening to you or caring what you want. Railroading you into this stupid detective thing.”

That was when he took his pants off.

I mean, obviously I didn’t ~~actually~~ swallow my tongue. But I must have made some kind of noise because he glanced over at me.

“You care what I want,” he said.

“But I didn’t ~~task~~ you. That’s the important part. I made it all about me, about what I wanted, about the version of us that I made up in my head without, you know, consulting you. I just want you to know that I was honestly excited for you, Bobby. I meant what I said: you’re an amazing deputy. I know you don’t want to be a detective—”

“Of course I want to be a detective.”

“You do?”

Not the best question I’d ever asked in my life, but on the other hand, I was operating with about two percent brainpower because at that exact moment, Bobby hooked his black briefs, dragged them down, and threw them in the hamper. Then he stood there, all his attention focused on peeling off his socks.

As I've mentioned, Bobby doesn't have any qualms about nudity. Not that I have any qualms about nudity, provided it's in the dark, or under the covers, or in a quick, mad dash from the shower to my towel. Bobby, on the other hand, once answered the door in nothing but a pair of shorts. Not even a shirt! The whole town talked about it for a month. (I made that last part up.)

Once the socks were safely in the hamper, Bobby stretched his arms over his head, muscles popping, and then padded toward the bed.

"I thought you were changing," I said.

"I did change."

“Into clothes.”

“I’m going to shower. Scoot over.”

I scooted, and Bobby climbed in beside me. We moved around until we were both lying down, my back pressed against his chest. Neither of us said anything. Bobby felt so warm. One arm, heavy and secure, held me against him, and every so often, his stubble would scrape pleasantly against the back of my neck. The rhythmic crash and fall of the waves filtered in from outside, and from downstairs came the sounds of Millie and Keme’s movie—there was a lot of swelling orchestral music, which meant they were watching something sappy and sweet and probably Christmas-y, perfect for a couple who had just finished making up.

“I’m bad at tests,” Bobby said.

“Huh?”

(Again, not my strongest conversational gambit. But you try being engaged and thoughtful when you have a naked hunk of hunk squeezing you against him. And in bed!)

Bobby only laughed quietly, though, and for some reason, he pulled me even closer. His chin settled on my shoulder. “I’m really bad at them. I mean, it’s like a joke in my family. I study. I know the material. I can do flashcards and practice exams and all that stuff and get everything right. And then as soon as I sit down with the actual test, it’s like my head goes blank. I can’t remember anything. I can’t even think.” The dry amusement that came next didn’t quite hide the bitterness. “That makes it hard to

get into med school.”

For a few seconds, I let his words sink in. I rubbed his hand, and then I laced our fingers together. I settled for what I thought was a very Bobby-like question: “I thought you didn’t want to go to med school.”

“I didn’t. And that’s what I told my parents. But it’s not super convincing after they’ve seen your MCAT scores.”

“Bobby—” There were so many things I wanted to say. Things that, maybe for now, were off limits, because I hadn’t met Bobby’s family yet, and I didn’t know if it was my place to say anything. So, I settled for “Tests are so dumb. They’re so problematic. They don’t mean anything.”

“I know. Except when they do.”

And then I asked the question I should have asked earlier: “Is there a test for the detective position?”

“Yes.”

“But Bobby, if you want to be a detective, we can figure this out. There’s got to be a way. We can do some research. I can help you.” And somehow, because I’m not always completely hopeless, I managed to bring the crazy train to a halt and say, “If, uh, that’s what you want to do.”

“I don’t know,” he said. And after a few seconds, “I guess I should try.”

He would; I knew he would. Because Bobby was nothing if not a guy who tried. He always tried. And he tried his hardest. The way he was trying to get better at communicating, at helping me understand what was going on inside his head. He was

trying to be better about being honest about his feelings. About being vulnerable.

And this, right now, was evidence of how far he'd come. (Also, when he'd told me off earlier, but I was less thrilled about that part.) Here Bobby was, telling me he was—what? Scared? Anxious? Not confident about his ability to do something, which for him must have been terrifying, because Bobby was always so good at everything.

Love meant learning to see people differently, and that was true for me as much as it was for Millie. I knew Bobby wasn't perfect; we'd had enough ups and downs for me to know that we both had things we needed to work on. But I was starting to realize that there was this part of me that still saw him as—to put it in the vernacular—fundamentally having his shiz together. And it wasn't fair for me to keep imagining that Bobby was this perpetually unruffled bastion of calm and patience and confidence. He was a human being. Like everybody else, he got disappointed and frustrated and, yes, even scared. If we were going to make this work, he needed to know that he could be himself with me—not the perfect boyfriend or the amazing deputy or the easygoing surfer, but Bobby Mai, a real person. And he needed to know that I saw him, the real him, and I loved him.

I squirmed around until we were face to face. It was harder than it sounds because he had a pretty good grip on me, and I got the feeling Bobby wasn't exactly thrilled about this next, look-into-each-other's-eyes moment. But I made it work. He still looked tired, his eyelids drooping, his hair out of its careful part and spilling over his forehead now. I leaned forward until my nose booped his.

“Hi,” he said quietly.

“I forbid you from becoming a detective.”

He stared back at me for a couple of seconds. “What?”

“I won’t have it. Not in this household, mister.”

“Is this your mom again?”

“BOBBY!”

“You’re yelling in my ear.”

“Oh my God, I’m sorry.” In a softer voice, I tried again. “Bobby! No, this is not me being my mother. This is me being supportive and loving and the perfect boyfriend.” I could see I was losing him at the end, so I hurried to say, “I do not want you to take that test. I do not want you to do anything you don’t want to do. I don’t have any unspoken expectations. I don’t have any secret desires.”

For some reason, that made him smirk.

My face heated. “And this is not one of those things where I tell you I don’t want something, but I secretly do, and the whole point is to see if you’ll do it anyway to prove that you love me, and if you don’t do it, it means we can’t communicate and you don’t love me and this whole relationship is doomed.”

“You are a very complicated person.”

“Do you hear me?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I do.” It looked like he tried to stop there. “But—”

“No buts.” I smoothed some of the hair back from his forehead and let it fall again. “Bobby, if you decide at some point you want to apply for that detective position, I will do everything I can to help you. I love you. I think you’re the best candidate for the job. And I know we can figure out a way to make it happen. But what matters is what you want, because I want you to be happy. You don’t have to prove anything to me. You don’t have to prove anything to anybody. You need to do what’s right for you, and I promise it’s not going to change anything about how I feel about you. I love you so much. I love you, Bobby. And I’m so grateful you told me about this, because I want to know everything about you. I want to keep learning things about you and loving you for the rest of our lives.”

His eyes shone, and he blinked rapidly a few times. Finally, he said, “Okay.”

“Okay.”

The roar of the waves breaking on the bluffs grew louder.

“I don’t think I’m going to apply,” he said. “Not right now.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

He made a sound that wasn’t quite a laugh. “Okay.”

“I know that was hard for you. I’m really proud of you.”

His eyes moved, as though he were studying me. Or looking for something. And then his face changed, like he’d found it—whatever it was—and he whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Bobby kissed me.

“I miss you,” I confessed. “I miss spending time with you. I know it’s not going to be like this forever, but I just wanted you to know how much I miss you.”

“I miss you too.” His hand slid along my waist. “And it will get better. I’ll talk to the sheriff. I’m going to take fewer shifts.”

“That would mean a lot to me.”

He kissed me again, and a single, exploratory finger crept under the hem of my tee.

“I thought you were going to take a shower,” I said.

He made a sound as he slipped the rest of his hand under my shirt. It was a low-in-your-throat sound, a raise-the-hair-on-the-back-of-your-neck sound. And I was still feeling it, like electricity on my skin, when he kissed me again.

And that, folks—as they say—is all she wrote.

Chapter 22

The next morning, we spent Christmas Eve the way Christmas Eve should be spent: with sloth, gluttony, and the slow build-up of avarice. (Also, lust—but that’s more of an adults-only, mom-and-dad-have-to-wrap-one-more-present, don’t-peek-in-your-stockings kind of thing.) Suffice to say that after having Lots of Feelings, Bobby was still feeling frisky. And after Bobby was frisky, I wanted to sleep until noon and then have someone hand-feed me snickerdoodles.

In spite of all those extra shifts at work, though—and all the friskiness—Bobby was banging around in the bathroom by nine, and at eleven, I was told, “Good morning,” in a way that was more command than question or suggestion. It was familiar from all our weekend hikes, when lollygagging and loafing were not to be tolerated.

In that weird way of adulthood, it hadn’t felt like Christmas—and now it did. Keme and Millie had decorated the house weeks ago, but the garlands and lights and sprigs of holly all seemed to catch my eye for the first time (not to mention the enormous Christmas trees that Keme had lugged around the house to impress Millie). The gray outside had cleared, and the day had a chiseled cold that felt like winter, and which made the snug warmth of Hemlock House even cozier. Indira was in the kitchen making peanut brittle, which meant the first floor smelled like hot sugar and peanuts and vanilla. Fox was “smoking” a bubble pipe and wearing a Victorian smoking jacket over a unicorn onesie. Keme and Millie, now fully reconciled, were canoodling on the chesterfield. In plain view, I might add. With smooching and whispering and giggling. Yes, even from Keme.

Bobby and I ate a small breakfast. (Okay, Bobby ate a small breakfast—he had a bowl of oatmeal, and he didn’t even put maple syrup on it. I, on the other hand, found half a pan of bread pudding, and declared Christmas Law—which means you can eat dessert for breakfast.) After we’d finished, and before my blood sugar could plummet, we hung the stockings on the billiard room mantel. The stockings were a

new addition this year. Indira had produced them when the rest of the Christmas decorations came out, without any explanation. But they'd been knit by hand, and they had our names on them, and they were all the same shape and size. I wondered when she'd made them, and how long it had taken her. Bobby found some music on his phone. It was a mix of classic Christmas songs. Some Irving Berlin. Some Ella Fitzgerald. And of course, some Mariah Carey. I mean, we're not monsters.

I was giving the stockings an evaluating glance, trying to decide if they were evenly spaced—and also wondering if I could convince Indira to let me have a go at the bacon, since I needed protein after all those carbs—when Bobby said, “I asked Paul about that card, the one you found at Three's house. He said the last time he saw it, it was in his locker at work.”

It took me a moment to redirect my attention. “It was?”

“Sorry, I meant to tell you last night.”

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“That’s important, right? That means something. That points back to somebody at CPF. Did you tell the sheriff?”

Bobby nodded.

“What does that mean?” I asked. “She didn’t believe you?”

“Dash, it’s complicated.”

“She thinks Paul’s lying?”

“Paul wouldn’t lie,” Millie said from the chesterfield. “He always tells the truth, even when it gets him in trouble.”

Now that I could believe. “So, what? If the sheriff is convinced Elliott did this, then how did he get Paul’s arcade card?”

“That’s a good question,” Bobby said. “I don’t know.”

“I’m calling over there,” I said. “I want to talk to Luz. Maybe she can tell me what they did with Paul’s stuff when they cleaned out his locker.”

“Someone dropped off a box at the house,” Millie said.

“That means Elliott could have gotten the card from the box,” Keme said.

I gave him a dirty look. “You too?”

He shrugged.

“We wondered why the thief took Paul’s arcade card instead of his driver’s license or a credit card,” Bobby said. “Maybe that’s why: it was easily accessible in that box of stuff.”

“This still doesn’t make any sense.” I drew out my phone. “Elliott only targeted high-value items. Why would he want a gay manga so badly that he’d risk a confrontation with Three?”

“Why would anyone?” Bobby asked. “Don’t we have to ask the same question even if it’s someone else from the delivery company?”

I gave him my best don’t-start-with-me look as I placed the call to Clatsop Parcel and Freight. The phone rang. And rang. And rang. And then a recording picked up.

“Thank you for calling Clatsop Parcel and Freight.” I recognized the voice of the less-than-helpful receptionist. “The office will be closed from noon on Christmas Eve until seven AM on December twenty-sixth. To leave a voicemail, please stay on the line.”

“I don’t want to leave a voicemail,” I told the recording. “I want to talk to Luz Hernandez.”

“Good luck with that,” Bobby said. “We’ve sent three deputies and called I don’t know how many times. Tried her cell phone. Went to her house. That woman’s a ghost.”

“I see you’re operating on the same theory as Millie,” I said. “I talked to her the other day. Well, Jinx St. James and I talked to her.”

“What does that mean?” Keme asked.

“Mess around and you’ll find out.”

Millie giggled.

“You are so weird,” Keme told me, with all the fraying patience of a late adolescent.

“OH MY GOD!” Millie said (I use the word loosely). “MAYBE A GHOST TOOK PAUL’S CARD!”

“This is what I’ve been dealing with,” I told Bobby over the ringing in my ears. “I bet she loved *The Sixth Sense*.”

“Not really,” Millie said. “I figured it out at the very beginning.”

Bobby must have seen something on my face because he whispered, “Deep breaths.”

I opened my mouth to say—well, something about ghosts, probably. And then everything clicked, one thing after another falling into place: the string of robberies that had been blamed on Paul; the inexplicable theft of Three’s manga; spilled Cherry Coke, and Paul’s story about the damaged Super Smash Bros. package, and the manager’s door that led into the warehouse; a dead bird; the arcade card that had been left as evidence; the attack on Paul at the storage unit; Millie’s ghost; even the Santa suit, and that inexplicable suspicion I’d had that the perpetrator had wanted to be seen.

My laugh sounded weird even to me.

“Dash?” Bobby asked. “Everything okay?”

“We should have listened to Millie.”

But Millie didn’t even seem to appreciate the acknowledgment; she had received a call, and her phone was pressed to her ear.

“What?” Bobby said. “What are you talking about?”

And then the rest of it clicked into place: the timing.

“We’ve got to get over there before we lose the body.”

“What’s going on?”

“Millie was right,” I said. “We’ve got to go now.”

“Go where?”

“CPF! Come on!”

But Bobby caught my arm. “Dash, we can’t just go charging in. I don’t know what you figured out, but we need to talk to the sheriff, get a warrant—”

“Paul’s gone.” Millie’s voice cut through Bobby’s words. We looked over at her. She

clutched her phone in both hands. “Nobody knows where he is. He’s gone.”

“He figured it out too,” I said. “When you asked him about the card. He figured it out, and he’s going there right now.”

Bobby squeezed my shoulder. “We’ll call the sheriff on the way. Let me grab my gun.”

Chapter 23

When we got to Clatsop Parcel and Freight, the parking lots were empty, and the windows were dark. A solitary box truck, unmarked, was backed up to one of the docks, and the roll-up door that connected into the building was open.

Fortunately, it was just Bobby and me—Bobby had refused to let any of the Last Picks come with us. Millie had argued. Keme had sulked. Fox had demonstrated their switchblade (which was actually a comb). Indira had ignored Bobby and gone to fetch her pistol from the coach house, which was why Bobby and I had practically run out of the house.

(To be totally honest, I had my doubts about how effective Bobby’s orders had been. I half expected the Mystery Machine, aka Fox’s van, to come trundling down the road any minute.)

The sheriff had told us she couldn’t get a warrant with what we’d told her, but she agreed to call the owner of Clatsop Parcel and Freight to see if we could walk through the facility. She had ordered us to, quote, stay in the car and don’t do anything.

Which sounded great. I enjoyed sitting. I loved doing nothing. I was a writer, for God’s sake. My bread-and-butter was doing nothing. (Plus Xbox.)

Except for the fact that, about five seconds after we pulled into the parking lot, Paul came around the corner of the building, jumped up onto the loading dock, and went into the warehouse.

Bobby said a word that happy little elves don't say. At least, not when Santa's around.

"Maybe he—" I tried.

And then a gunshot cracked the air.

"Call nine-one-one," Bobby said as he threw open the Pilot's door. "And stay here."

It wasn't a suggestion. There was no mistaking the tone. The killer had a gun, and Bobby was the only one trained to handle this kind of situation.

But as I watched Bobby run toward the building, I couldn't draw a full breath.

Bobby was alone. He didn't have anybody to watch his back.

So, I called 911, told Jaklin about the shooting at CPF, and sprinted after Bobby.

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At the roll-up door, I caught up to him.(I was a bit winded; Bobby was not.)

“Dash—”

“I know, I know,” I said miserably. “Please yell at me later when we’re both alive and safe.”

He gave me an unreadable look.I was sure the deputy part of him wanted to order me back to the Pilot.The boyfriend part of him, on the other hand, probably knew how well that would work.Finally, he said, “I need you to stay behind me.Shout if you see something.”

I nodded.I still couldn’t seem to get enough air into my lungs, and my stomach was starting to roll.

“Wait for me to say clear.”

I nodded again.

He took a few quick breaths.His expression changed, and it was like I wasn’t there anymore, and it was like he wasn’t there anymore either—he was all focus.With a suddenness that took me off guard, he darted through the open door.

I waited for a gunshot.

I waited for a scream.

That moment lasted forever.

And then Bobby said, “Clear.” His voice was rough, almost angry. But I thought that was the adrenaline more than anything.

Inside, the warehouse looked how I remembered it—the high, exposed rafters, the metal shelving that dominated the back of the building, the acres of polished concrete. It was so quiet that the buzzing of the industrial lights overhead seemed to settle into my jawbone. On our last visit, the space had been relatively warmer than the outside, but today, it felt just as cold. Maybe because everyone had gone home, or maybe because someone had left the roll-up door open. The smell of cardboard and plywood still hung in the air, but with something else now: gunpowder.

Bobby directed a questioning look at me, and I pointed to the door on the far side of the warehouse. “That leads into the offices,” I whispered. I slid my finger to point at the racks of shelving. “The door to Luz’s office is back there.”

Nodding, Bobby eased forward. Our sneakers were silent on the sealed concrete, and somehow, the buzzing of the lights seemed even louder.

Then something pinged.

It took my brain half a second to recognize that the sound had come from the metal roof. I remembered our last visit, and the conversation I’d overheard about birds getting into the warehouse. I realized I was clutching Bobby’s arm in a death grip. With an attempt at a smile, I relaxed my fingers. Bobby’s head cocked in another silent question, so I gave him a thumbs up. Then I decided I was going to have someone cut off my thumbs so I never did that again.

Bobby must have decided he was in too deep, because he started forward again. Instead of making our way toward the office, though, as Millie and I had on our

last visit, Bobby cut across the warehouse on a strange, meandering path. We walked to a pallet loaded with boxes. Then we angled toward a conveyor belt. Then Bobby moved toward a stack of packing materials. We were halfway to the rows of shelving before I understood he was moving tactically, from one piece of cover to another. The point was to get us across the warehouse without ever exposing ourselves to gunfire. Bobby's shoulders were set in a hard line, and he had his hand on his gun, but he hadn't drawn it. I wasn't entirely sure about that decision. If it had been me, I would have had my gun in my hand. I would have been waving it around, covering all the angles. And I probably would have fired off a few warning shots out of pure nerves. (Which was why nobody in their right mind would ever give me a gun.)

An engine rumbled to life back among the shelves.

I grabbed Bobby again.

One of us—I'm not going to say who—said a few more of those we-are-not-happy-elves words.

"Babe," Bobby whispered.

"I know, I know." I pried my hand loose. "It won't happen again."

The sound of the engine changed, and rubber squeaked. Then a long, shrill, metallic sound came from deeper among the shelves.

"Forklift," Bobby whispered.

I nodded.

Metal screeched again, and even though I wasn't a warehouse expert (is that a thing?), I could tell that this sound was...wrong. It was too loud, and it went on too

long, and it had a strained, forced quality. I opened my mouth to ask what Bobby thought was happening, and then another gunshot rang out.

The sound was so much louder inside the warehouse. Bobby reacted automatically, grabbing the back of my neck and forcing me down behind the stack of packing materials. I was nose-to-nose with foam peanuts, unable to see anything, and Bobby's hold on me was painfully tight.

Another shot.

And then—of all things—a door slammed.

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“What the fudge?” Bobby said under his breath.

(Uh, kind of.)

And then, miraculously, his hand relaxed. I got up into a crouch. (I wasn't literally spitting out foam peanuts, but you get the idea.) Bobby was peering around our improvised cover. After a moment, he whispered, “Stay.” And then—quite rudely—“I mean it, Dash. Wait for me to clear it.”

Before I could point out that this felt like a couples decision—not quite of the same caliber as buying matching Christmas pajamas or talking about our dream washer-dryer combo (not conversations in which Bobby typically provided much input), but a couples decision nonetheless—Bobby sprinted away.

I knew Bobby worked out. I knew he ran. Not to get into the weeds about it, but I knew firsthand the benefits of all that cardio and all those muscles.

I did not know, until that exact moment, that my boyfriend could haul, uh, butt.

Faster than I could believe, Bobby reached the wall that divided the warehouse proper from the office space at the front of the building. He hunkered down behind a metal desk that had been shoved up against the wall. He had his gun in his hand now, and his face was set in that same focus that was so intense it blanked out everything else. He must have been high on adrenaline, but he didn't even seem to be breathing harder. After a few seconds, he called, “Clear.”

I ran to join him. And I tried not to make the comparison.

From where we hid behind the metal desk, we had a clear line of sight down the row of shelving that abutted the offices. Two things drew my attention: first, the door to Luz's office was open; and second, a forklift was idling at the end of the row of shelving. The lift was raised to the topmost shelf. But something must have startled the driver, because the lift was turned toward the shelving unit at an angle, and the forks were pressing against the shelf itself. The result was a long, ugly scratch in the metal—which explained the sounds I'd heard earlier.

Bobby gave the warehouse another considering sweep. Then he slid out from behind the desk and signaled for me to stay. He ran in a crouch toward the door to Luz's office. As he reached the doorway, I couldn't help picturing what might happen: the muzzle flash, the bark of a gun.

Nothing.

He gave the office on the other side of the door a quick, considering look. And then he shut the door and kept moving down the aisle.

That was when I remembered I was supposed to be watching Bobby's six, or whatever people said. I checked, but nobody was trying to sneak up behind us.

"Clear," Bobby called from the end of the aisle.

I jogged over to him. The smell of gun smoke was stronger here, mixed now with the exhaust from the idling forklift.

"I need you to go back to the Pilot and wait," Bobby said. The rumble of the forklift's engine meant he had to speak at a normal volume; no more whispers. "I need to clear the offices."

A beat passed before what he was saying sank in. "Bobby, you can't go in there

alone.”

“It’s one thing in the warehouse. We’ve got room to move. But it’s going to be tight in there, and if something happens, it’s going to happen fast.”

“You need help—”

“And you’re not trained.”

I ground my teeth.

“I’m not going to take any risks. I want you to watch from the parking lot in case they try to run out the front. I’m going to keep an eye on things in here.”

I wasn’t sure about that. He’d gone from It’s going to be tight in there to I’m not going to take any risks pretty dang fast, and if I knew one thing about Bobby Mai, it was that he wasn’t going to let Paul die because Bobby didn’t want to go in alone. But I also didn’t know what to say. Bobby was right: I wasn’t trained. And even though I wasn’t a police officer, I’d read enough (and heard my parents talk enough) to understand how dangerous it was to clear a building. I’d be worse than a liability; I’d be a complication.

That was when that dang pigeon decided to make itself known.

Above us, a flutter of wings exploded out from the rafters. I reacted the way any sane person would when a highly evolved mini-dinosaur suddenly surprises you: I looked up.

And that was when I saw the hand.

A woman’s hand.

It hung off the side of a pallet on the topmost shelf, visible only from this end of the aisle. I suspected, until a few minutes ago, it hadn't been visible at all—the hand had probably been jarred loose by the impact of the forklift with the shelving unit.

She'd been up there for days. Hidden. No one even knew she'd been missing.

Millie's ghost. The victim who had started everything.

Because it was always—always—murder.

I opened my mouth to tell Bobby.

And the lights went out.

Chapter 24

For that first instant, as my eyes adjusted, the darkness felt absolute.

This time—gratifyingly—Bobby grabbed me.

Then, by degrees, I could see again. The forklift had a rudimentary dashboard with a few lights. And a pale glow from the opposite end of the warehouse told me the roll-up door was still open. A battery-powered emergency EXIT sign glowed red in the distance, but the other lights that should have come on—similar emergency lights, which should have had their own backup batteries—didn't. Either CPF was old enough that they'd never installed them, or they'd cheaped out, or—

Muzzle flash lit up the gloom.

A fraction of a second later, the gunshot cracked the air. Metal chimed—the bullet striking one of the shelving units, I thought.

Bobby forced me down behind the forklift. Another shot rang out, and this time, the clang of metal on metal was louder, closer. And then we couldn't hear anything because of the stupid forklift. I had a pretty good idea who was out there, but I wasn't

sure. Not yet. And with the engine rumbling next to us, I couldn't tell if the shooter was walking toward us, or if they were fleeing, or—

“Run,” Bobby said in my ear.

He grabbed my arm and towed me after him. He moved in that same low, crouching lope that I'd seen earlier; my own attempt at it was more of a stumbling please-God-don't-let-me-fall, and it was all I could do to stay on my feet. Our movement must have given us away, because the clap of another shot echoed through the warehouse. Then Bobby tugged me around the end of the shelving unit, and he straightened up and began to run full out.

As I have mentioned before, Bobby is fast.

I am...lessfast.

The dark was oppressive, but there was enough light for me to make out shapes: the bulky outlines of the metal shelving, the silhouettes of boxes and crates. Ahead of us was the far wall of the warehouse, which we were approaching too quickly for my liking. Sooner or later, we were going to have to turn down one of the aisles of shelving and try to make our way back toward the loading docks. My brain kept conjuring one image: a gun range. Have you ever been to a gun range? It's basically one big, long aisle. And I knew as soon as Bobby and I tried to make our way down one of them, we'd be perfect targets.

Bobby must have had the same idea, because when we reached the far side of the warehouse, he pushed me up against the shelves and did this weird, feinting move—running out into view, as though he were about to turn down the aisle, and then darting back behind the cover of the shelving unit.

A gun barked. And about six inches from where Bobby had been standing, a bullet

ripped the corner off a wooden crate. A puff of air hit my face, and a moment later, a sickening wave of heat rolled through me as I realized how close the bullet had come.

Somehow, Bobby sounded impossibly calm as he called, “This is Deputy Mai with the Ridge County Sheriff’s Office. Drop your gun right now!”

Nothing.

“I’m armed,” Bobby said into that silence, “and backup is on the way. Put your weapon down and get on the floor.”

Still nothing.

“The best thing you can do is surrender.”

The empty air seemed to ring in my ears.

“We’re pinned down,” Bobby said in a low, frustrated voice.

I nodded, and then I remembered how dark it was.

But Bobby must have picked out enough of the gesture, because he said, “We just have to wait for the sheriff.”

Down the aisle, a sneaker scuffed concrete—barely a whisper, like someone trying to move silently.

“She’s not going to wait for the sheriff,” I said. And then an absolutely terrible idea occurred to me. I tried to come up with something else. Nothing came. I forced myself to say, “I’ll keep her talking. You circle around and get the drop on her.”

“No—”

“Bobby, she’s panicking. She’s not going to put up a fight if you can catch her from behind.”

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“I’m not leaving you.”

“If you don’t go, you’ll have to deal with a shootout instead. Is that better?”

His face was lost in the shadows, but the strain distorted his breathing.

“Go,” I whispered. “I’ll be okay.”

“Once she’s halfway down the aisle, I want you to start backing up. If she makes a move, run.”

“Go,” I said again. “Go.”

He gripped my shoulder. And then he slipped away, hurrying down the next aisle.

To cover the sounds of his movement, I raised my voice and called, “Andrea, right?”

The soft, scuffing steps stopped.

“That’s your name, isn’t it?”

Nothing.

Making casual conversation with murderers was one of those life skills you can’t put on a resume. But it was, apparently, my thing, as the kids say, and since every second bought Bobby more time, I opened my mouth and let the brilliant dialogue flow.

“That was a smart move, the way you played it the other day with me and Millie in the office,” I said. “Risky. You almost pulled it off.”

Silence.

“You’ve made a lot of smart moves,” I said. “What happened? How did it go wrong?”

(Okay, maybe not so brilliant.)

Another of those whispery scuffs moved in my direction.

“Did she catch you stealing?” I asked.

“I wasn’t stealing.”

I’d heard that voice before, on the day Millie and I had visited CPF. It belonged to the woman who had impersonated Luz Hernandez—Andrea, her daughter, the one Paul had told us was always getting into fights with her mom.

“What was it then?” I asked. “A misunderstanding?”

“She always blamed me for everything,” Andrea said. “She always thought I was doing something wrong. The envelope tore. It wasn’t my fault.”

It wasn’t difficult to imagine what had happened: Paul had told us that Luz was hard on everyone, even her daughter. One day, Luz had stumbled on Andrea with a package she’d opened. A package from Japan. Only instead of something valuable or cool, it was a quirky gay manga, and it was absolutely worthless.

“But your mom didn’t—”

“She didn’t believe me. She wouldn’t even let me explain.”

“Right, I was getting to that part—”

“She went crazy. She dragged me into her office. She was screaming. She was always screaming. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ and ‘How stupid are you?’ and ‘I’m not cleaning up another of your messes.’ I didn’t—” Andrea’s voice skipped a beat. “I didn’t have to put up with that. I tried to leave, and—and she grabbed me. She was hurting me.” Disbelief hollowed out the final words. The empty span of seconds that followed felt cracked, broken open. And then, with a kind of anesthetized calm, Andrea said, “I was defending myself.”

Something small, I thought. A utility knife, maybe. A hammer or a wrench. “And then you had to—”

“It’s all her fault,” Andrea said, voice warbling like she might cry. “She ruins everything. The package was like that when I found it. I tried to tell her, and she wouldn’t listen, and she grabbed me, and then she was just lying there.”

“But you’re smart,” I said. “You came up with a plan. The warehouse staff was overworked and spread too thin. You knew where you could hide the body. Only for a few days until you knew you could get rid of it safely. On Christmas Eve. After everyone went home, when the big rush to get everything delivered was finally over. But you had to move quickly, so you—”

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“I put the scissors in the open envelope. They can test for blood, you know. Even if you wipe it off. Mom and I watch Forensic Files.”

“Okay, well, that was going to be my big—you know what? It doesn’t matter. It actually wasn’t that bad an idea: hide the weapon in plain sight while you moved your mom’s body. Then, you could figure out how to get rid of the scissors. The door from her office to the warehouse meant you just had to wait for an opportunity, and then you put her on a pallet and stashed her high on the shelves. But when you came back—”

“Someone took it,” Andrea said. That note of plaintive disbelief made the words nasal again. “They took the envelope.”

“Yeah, I know, I was about to say that.” I drew a breath. “That’s why—”

“That’s why I had to steal it back.”

I said a few words that would have made Mrs. Claus run for a bar of soap. “Why can’t anybody in this town let me finish a dang sentence?”

(I didn’t exactly say dang.)

“Mom had been talking about Paul all week. I knew she’d fired him because she thought he was stealing. A couple of customers had shown her the footage from their doorbell cameras, with somebody in a Santa costume taking their deliveries. And I remembered the address on the package, the one with the scissors. Mom says I have the best memory of anybody she knows.”

It was hard to reconcile the almost childlike confidence of that last statement—and the disorienting slips into the present tense—with the same woman who had coldly and clinically covered up all traces of a murder. In my mind, I could still see her on her hands and knees, trying to get stains out of the carpet. Not Cherry Coke, I thought. The overturned can of soda had been another part of the ruse.

Another of those soft, scraping steps came from the aisle.

I wasn't sure how long it had been since Bobby left, but the sounds of Andrea's steps were definitely getting closer. Halfway down the aisle? More? I tried to catch a glimpse of her between the crates and boxes, but I didn't have a clear line of sight.

Bobby would have told me to run.

What if he needed more time, though? What if I scampered off to save my hide, and that was the exact moment Bobby needed cover, and she turned and saw him and—

I forced myself to keep talking. “After that, you had to make sure Paul took the fall. You knew people would figure out eventually what had happened to your mom. Did you tell people she left on vacation? Or maybe you even got on her computer and sent an email. But sooner or later, someone was going to get suspicious. So, you needed a suspect. And who would be better than someone she recently fired, someone she'd accused of theft, someone who might have gotten into an argument with her, someone like—”

“Paul.”

“Jiminy Christmas.”

(Again, not exactly.)

“It was all going to work out. When I got the scissors back, I knew that guy would see the Santa suit and think it was the same person who’d stolen all the other packages. And when I called Paul, I told him I knew who’d been taking the packages, and he said he could meet me at the storage unit. I just had to—” The sudden break in her speech, the emptiness where the words should have been, hinted at a capacity for brutal, savage violence that existed somewhere below the level of thought. “I’d already put some of Mom’s money in his trunk; she always said you should keep cash on hand for an emergency. Then I’d leave the package with the scissors. And everything could go back to normal.”

I understood the words. I understood what they meant at a literal level. I even understood her need to believe them. And, at the same time, it felt like my brain couldn’t quite wrap itself around the willful self-deception, the monomaniacal fantasy.

In a different, harder tone, she said, “Everything’s going to go back to normal.”

And then quick steps moved toward me.

In my mind, this part of the plan was going to be easy—there’s nothing quite like a gun to transform someone whose motto is lying down is the new sitting into a champion track-and-fielder. Reality, however, didn’t quite live up to my expectations. I rose from my crouch, turned, and started to run around the shelving into the next aisle. But time slowed down, and everything took longer than I had imagined. I was still reaching out a hand to grab one of the shelving supports, planning to use it to swing myself into the next aisle, when Andrea came around the corner.

She was only a shadow. And the gun was just another blob of shadow that came up toward me.

The lights clicked on.

For a moment, I was blinded. Then, my vision cleared. Andrea had bags under her eyes, and her hair was flat and greasy. I recognized, in a more extreme form, the same signs of someone pushing themselves too hard that I'd seen in Bobby. A little too late, I realized that if I could see Andrea, she could see me. Her eyes narrowed, and she swept the gun toward me. It was chrome, and light rode the metal like a wave.

And then Paul shouted, "Bobby, look out! She's got a gun!"

Andrea whipped around and squeezed off a shot. The clap of the gunfire was deafening this close.

My entire body drew tight around a single, panicked thought: Bobby.

I didn't even think about it; I gathered myself to tackle Andrea.

But instead, a rattling clack echoed through the warehouse. Andrea took a staggering step back. She dropped the gun, and it clattered against the floor, but I only barely heard it because at the same time, Andrea's hand flew to her face, and she screamed, "My eye!"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:31 am

For a single, dazed moment, I thought I was dreaming. This had to be a dream. Or a dissociative break. Or—or because I'd seen *A Christmas Story* too many times.

Somehow, it got even stranger. Hurried footsteps raced toward me, and then Millie stepped out from behind the shelving unit. Keme was at her side, and he kicked Andrea's gun away. Ryan followed them. He was carrying one of his stupid airsoft rifles like he was part of Seal Team Six, and the best way to describe his expression was when a boy becomes a man crossed with Mom, did you see what I did? Paul, only a few steps behind, looked crushingly jealous.

Bobby emerged a moment later, and the best way to describe the look on his face was that he looked how I felt—which was like I'd stepped out of one nightmare and into the John Hughes version of *The Bourne Identity*.

Nobody said anything. Well, except Andrea, who was still screaming, "My eye! My eye!"

Millie stared at Andrea, considering her, apparently unmoved by all the noise. (Big surprise.)

And then Millie punched her in the face.

Chapter 25

"I thought it was a family Christmas pageant," I said as we shuffled into the crowded sanctuary of the Hastings Rock Community Church.

I'd never been to the church before.(I know, I know: big surprise.) The aesthetic seemed to land somewhere between Blood of the Lamb and laserdisc: crimson carpet and white wood and these intense purple floodlights that made me think I'd suddenly become able to see ultraviolet light. There was also a dash of Grandmother's Living Room—I was ninety percent sure my grandma had owned the same candlesticks, and I'd definitely seen those golden tassels before. It smelled like overheated children and winter woolens and musty upholstery, and the hub of voices made me wish I'd brought along the kind of hearing protection that airport ground staff have to wear.

It looked like the whole town had turned out. Tessa and her daughter waved to us from one of the front pews. Bliss and Althea Wilson were defiantly saving seats with their coats. Oscar Ratcliff was there, and he immediately locked eyes on us, obviously sniffing around for fresh gossip after the earlier excitement that day. And up at the front—I wasn't sure if it was called a stage or an altar or, um, a narthex?—a few pieces of setting suggested an inn, a stable, and the little town of Bethlehem. Christine was scurrying around in her Christmas Eve best, making final adjustments to the grand production.

"It's not," Fox said. The theme of their outfit seemed to be Mrs. Claus, Zeppelin Pilot, and that's all I'll say—except that it involved a gratuitous amount of synthetic fur trim. A bit unnecessarily, they added, "Obviously."

"I thought it was going to be in their living room," I said.

"Well, it's not," Fox said. "Obviously."

"I know it's not—" I began.

"There are some seats over there," Bobby said.

Which was Bobby's way of telling both of us to knock it off.

We squeezed onto the end of a pew near the front. They seemed like prime seats, and I wondered why they'd been left open until I noticed who was sitting in front of us. And next to us. And behind us.

The Archer clan.

Here's the thing: as individuals, every member of the Archer clan was lovely. (Except Cosmo, who was literally an ankle-biter—he was three years old, he was entirely made of teeth, and once he'd latched on to me in the Keel Haul, it had taken the jaws of life to pry him free.) But as a horde—er, quiver?—which was the collective noun for a group of Archers, they were...a lot. Sybil, who was six, had come to the Nativity pageant in a plastic astronaut's helmet, and she was currently screaming as loud as she could inside it. Rhodes, who was ten, had taken Zaya's firetruck and was smashing it repeatedly against the back of the pew. Zaya was wailing. Imogen was climbing on Mr. Archer, who looked like he'd fallen asleep, and Mrs. Archer was unscrewing the top off a flask.

"I changed my mind," Fox said, and then they flinched as Rhodes smashed the firetruck down about five inches from their head. "I'm just going to nip out into the lobby."

"Don't be such a baby—" I began.

The rest of it was lost in a shout as Cosmo chomped down.

Bobby gave Fox—and me—identically disapproving looks. He plucked Cosmo off me and handed him over the seat to Grandma Archer. He took the firetruck from Rhodes, returned it to Zaya, and said, "Don't make me get Miss Julie."

I had no idea who Miss Julie was, but the bloodwhooshed out of Rhodes's face.

Without missing a beat, Bobby flipped open the visor on Sybil's astronaut mask and said, "There's no air in space."

Sybil stopped screaming.

I was busy checking for blood loss and pinched nerves and pulverized ankle bones, but I couldn't help it. I stopped what I was doing and stared.

Bobby was looking at something on his phone, but eventually he noticed. "What?"

"Are you a mage?"

"What?"

“Did you cast a spell?”

Apparently, Bobby knew by now to wait me out.

“Charm Person is only first level,” I said, “but it’s super effective.”

For someone wearing a fur aviator’s cap, Fox had zero compunctions about coughing, “Nerd.”

“I’m serious, Bobby. You can tell me. I won’t breathe a word.”

“Lies,” Fox said. “He’d tell everyone as soon as he could. Just like how he told everyone about the time you kissed him and there was a full moon and he felt a tingle.”

“I never said tingle! I’m a grown man. I don’t tingle!”

“That sounds like a medical problem.”

At that point, Bobby went back to his phone.

A bit out of breath, Indira slid into the seat we’d saved for her.

“Everything all right?” Fox asked.

“Last-minute costume emergency,” Indira said. “All set.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You knew about this too?”

“Knew about what?”

“He thought this was the family pageant they did in their living room,” Fox explained.

“What about last year?” I asked. “Why didn’t I hear about this last year?”

“Millie wasn’t in the pageant last year,” Indira said.

“And you were busy ‘solving’ a murder,” Fox said. And they even made the air quotes with their fingers.

“I was busy solving a murder today!” I protested.

And, of course, that was when the entire audience—uh, congregation?—went silent.

I mean it: all of them, all at once. Even the Archer clan.

My words rang out in the stillness.

And then Mr. Cheek, who was very much a Bobby Mai fan and very much not a Dashiell Dawson Dane fan, leaned over to Mr. Ratcliff and stage-whispered, “I told you he’d find a way to bring it up.”

“That’s not—” I tried. “I didn’t—I was—”

“Everyone knows what you were doing,” Christine snapped into the microphone. She was standing on the stage now, hand on her hip, staring at me like she was having fond memories of the time she’d spanked Ryan and Paul in public. “If it’s not too

much to ask, maybe you could let someone else have the spotlight for five seconds.”

“But—”

With the clipped pronunciation of someone at the end of her rope, she said, “We are trying to have an uplifting holiday experience.”

I sank down into my seat.

Christine waited a few seconds to make her point. I got the impression that I might have helped Millie and saved Paul and uncovered a murderer, but none of it was going to make up for ruining Angeline’s chance to marry a lawyer.

Then Christine broke into a cheery smile. “Good evening, everyone, and welcome to the Hastings Rock Community Church’s annual nativity pageant. I’m Christine Naught, and I want to thank you all for coming. I have one announcement, and then we’ll begin: due to a family emergency, we’ve had a slight change in tonight’s cast.”

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“Oh my God,” I whispered.

“What?” Bobby asked.

I was surprised to find myself grinning so fiercely my cheeks hurt. “She did it. Millie did it.”

“Did what?”

I shook my head and patted his arm.

Christine made a few more welcome remarks. There was a prayer. And then music began—a flute, soft and plaintive. A mellow, NPR-quality voice came over the speakers, saying, “In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken...”

I tuned it out. I wasn’t here for the story.

I was here for Millie.

“—so Joseph went to Bethlehem with Mary—”

Millie stepped onto the stage a moment later, and she looked radiant: a blue dress, her blond hair miraculously tamed for once, a smile glowing on her face. My eyes stung. It was such a silly thing; I knew that. It was a church Christmas pageant. And it wasn’t going to change anything with Millie’s mom.

But maybe it already had, at least a little. And it meant so much to Millie. And she looked so happy that I had to blink rapidly to keep tears from falling. Bobby rubbed my back, and then his arm settled across my shoulders.

Millie's victory hadn't been complete, though; instead of Keme, her Joseph was a young man with an improbably long neck and ill-fitting brown robes. My brain had just long enough to wonder if this was the costume emergency Indira had been sorting out when Keme stepped onto the stage.

He was the donkey. Floppy ears. A shapeless gray sack of a costume. Black shoes that were supposed to be hooves. His face was set to murderous, and he stared out at the audience with an unmistakable challenge in his eyes.

Indira whispered in my ear, "His tail kept falling off."

"Oh my God," I said. "Oh my God. I will love you for the rest of my life."

And then I started to cry.

"What's wrong?" Bobby whispered.

I shook my head and wiped my cheeks.

"Dash, he's fine. He'll be grumpy about it, but he's okay."

"I know," I said through the tears. "I know."

Because I couldn't explain why I was crying, not completely. Sure, a lot of it was because of the emotional and physical exhaustion of the last few days, culminating in that life-or-death shootout only a few hours before. But it was also because of what tonight meant, for Keme to do this for her in front of the whole town. And what it

meant for Keme to do it even after everything that had passed between him and Christine. And how much he and Millie loved each other, and how hard they were trying to make it work, and the fact that I loved them, and I wanted everything to be perfect for them, and it made me so happy to see them being happy. I wanted to laugh, of course—I mean, a part of me wished I could laugh—but when I thought about Keme’s long-suffering glower as Indira kept trying to fix his tail, a confusingly happy sob tore its way out of me.

“Dash—” Bobby whispered.

“He’s fine.” Fox patted my arm. “He’s all right.” And they kept patting my arm, and I realized their eyes were wet too.

It helped, a little, that when Mary and Joseph and the donkey crossed the stage toward Bethlehem, Christine whispered furiously from the wings, “Donkeys don’t stomp!”

My God, if you could have seen Keme’s face.

The pageant was an absolute train wreck, if you hadn’t guessed that already. Christine’s approach to casting clearly favored friends and family over acting talent. Joseph was a mumbler. One of the shepherds tripped over his own crook. A camel kicked a Wise Man. Angeline wasn’t in evidence, but Kassandra and David played the innkeeper and his wife, and I have to be honest: I had no idea someone could turn the role of innkeeper’s wife into something that required parental guidance for children under the age of thirteen. Bobby even flipped Sybil’s astronaut visor down again.

“Is David supposed to be wearing headphones?” I asked.

Fox rolled their eyes.

Indira ignored me.

Bobby took out a pen (my Deputy Bobby was always prepared) and wrote on the back of the program DAVITT.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:31 am

“Oh my God!” I said. “Who names their child Davitt?”

Christine’s sharp—and lethal—“Be! Quiet!” echoed up from the stage.

Not that anybody was paying attention to me. Or, for that matter, to her. At that moment, Ryan and Paul, who had been cast as sheep, had apparently gotten into some kind of squabble and were now headbutting each other.

The star, of course, was Millie, who delivered her lines with an enormous smile and ear-shattering enthusiasm and almost immediately went off script and got into a tiff with one of the angels.

It was glorious. Christine looked like she was about to have a stroke.

At some point—right around when Millie told the angel she wasn’t going to flee to Egypt because she wasn’t going to let King Herod kill all those babies—I decided maybe I did have a religious side after all. And also that I wanted some popcorn. And would a soft drink be too much to ask?

That’s when I heard the voices behind me.

Three Barbara Bush types in sequined pants, sitting just past the Archer clan, were clucking their complaints to each other.

“Not very demure.”

“Too modern.”

“Who is she?”

I thought of how Millie had described her dream character: She's tough and brave, and she doesn't take crap from anybody. It made me smile because we all did it to some extent. We all wanted to read about the people we wished we could be. The people just a little better than who we really were. The people we were trying to become.

I couldn't help myself. As Millie got a hold of the angel's wing to give him a shake, I leaned back and pitched my voice to carry. “That,” I said, “is Jinx St. James.”