



Evil All Along (The Last Picks #8)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: They say love makes fools of us all. It certainly makes idiots out of some of us.

It's Dash's second Halloween in Hastings Rock, and this year, he's determined to have a normal spooky season—he's going to hang out with his friends, hand out lots of candy, and seize every available opportunity for snuggles with a certain deputy.

Fate, though, has other things in store.

When Dash's friend Keme is arrested for murder, Dash assumes it's a misunderstanding—after all, this is Keme we're talking about. But it turns out, not everyone in Hastings Rock trusts Keme. Or likes him. In fact, plenty of people are downright afraid of him, and for them, the arrest confirms what they've always suspected: that Keme is a seriously bad apple. And when Keme's clothes turn up not far from the scene of the crime, covered in the victim's blood, it's the final piece of proof for the court of public opinion.

It'll be up to Dash to prove Keme's innocence.

But the real killer might have something to say about that.

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“Keme,” I said. “You’re my friend. You’re my best friend. No, scratch that, you’re—you’re my brother. I love you. I’d do anything for you.”

Keme stared back at me. His face didn’t give anything away, but that might have been because he was covered in pancake makeup. (This year’s costume was Pennywise the Clown, and it. was. terrifying.)

“And,” I said, “I know you feel the same way about me.”

He shook his head. (Honestly, so fast it was a little rude.)

“Which is why—” I said.

“Let it go,” Fox suggested. For Halloween, they’d decided to go as—well, I wasn’t sure. Their top hat had a skeletal hand curled around it. And they were wearing a befeathered corset with high-waisted trousers and gleaming steel vambraces. (I knew they were called vambraces because I’d played a lot of Dungeons and Dragons.) They were lugging around a cast-iron pumpkin cauldron, which they kept trying to get me or Bobby or Keme to carry. And their boots had goggles on them.

I ignored them. “—I know you’ll trade me your Butterfinger for my Baby Ruth.”

Keme tilted his head to one side. His dark eyes were unreadable.

“I’ll even throw in—” I began.

Keme tore the wrapper on the Butterfinger.

“Wait!”

He stopped in the middle of sliding the candy bar free.

“—a Snickers and a Reese’s and—no, no, no, Keme!”

He took an enormous bite of the Butterfinger. And then, like a true teenage boy, he grinned. It was disgusting. He had those crispy, crunchy, peanut-buttery crumbs in his teeth. He made sure I saw before he took another savage bite.

“What’s wrong?” Bobby asked as he jogged back to our group with two disposable cups of apple cider. He’d gone as Marty McFly from *Back to the Future*, and let me tell you, my childhood crush on Michael J. Fox (in that VEST, cue Millie voice) hadn’t faded over the years. “What happened? I heard someone scream.”

“Everyone’s fine,” Indira said. She was dressed as a hippie, but in a cute way. (Not in an oh-my-God-she’s-trying-to-wash-our-windshield-for-spare-change way, which had happened the one time I’d gone to San Francisco.) Honestly, her simple, cream-colored blouse and dark slacks were probably part of her normal wardrobe, but she’d gussied them up with a suede tassel vest and a braided leather headband. “Nothing happened.”

Fox sniffed. “Capitalism happened.”

Bobby looked at me.

“I have no idea what that means,” I said. “But Keme ate my Butterfinger.”

“It was mine,” Keme said. “He was trying to trade.”

“Oh,” Bobby said without missing a beat. He handed me my cider. “Okay.”

Which goes to show that if you find a good one, hold on to him.

Around us, Hastings Rock's Halloween celebration was in full swing. The year before, I'd missed the festivities because I'd gone to watch Bobby and Keme compete in an annual surfing competition. This year, though, Gremlins and Grommets—or whatever it had been called—was canceled. Mostly because the woman who had organized it for all those years was in prison for murder.

The town had gone all out for the occasion, the way it always did on holidays. Spiderwebs draped the sides of old Victorian homes, with fake plastic spiders clinging to them. Storefronts had jack-o'-lanterns by their doors. People had put up skeletons and ghosts and foam tombstones that said things like HE NEVER MET A CREPE HE DIDN'T LIKE (that was outside Crepe You Very Much, of course), and SHE FORGOT TO brUSH HER TEETH (Seafoam Sweets), and HE TALKED ABOUT TACOS (Let's Taco Bout Tacos). Cyd Wofford, our resident Marxist, was dressed as a zombie (with a cleaver sticking out of his head, which was awesome) as he handed out full-sized candy bars and tried to explain to anyone who would listen that zombies were a metaphor for the working class. Mr. Cheek (owner of Fog Belt Ladies Wear and a fervent admirer of Deputy Bobby Mai) was dressed as Catwoman and had been trying to whip everyone until Bobby gave him a stern talking-to.

(Honestly, Mr. Cheek probably loved it.)

Everyone had turned out for the town's trunk-or-treat, which was being held on a crisp Sunday afternoon, instead of on Halloween itself, which fell in the middle of the week. Kids dressed as Disney characters and superheroes and non-specific princesses, not to mention a SCREAMING Statue of Liberty, thronged the streets, rushing to collect as much candy as they could from the stores and street vendors and food trucks and anyone else who had decided to hand out goodies. (As a side note, Let's Taco Bout Tacos was giving out gummy tacos, and the third time I went back, Bobby had to say something about making sure everyone got to have some.) Laughter and

excited chatter and spooky music hung in the air, mixing with the smell of candied apples and pumpkin spice everything, and it was a perfect day.

Almost.

“Where is Millie?” Fox asked as they transferred the pumpkin-cauldron-bucket to their other arm. “Keme, did she text you?”

Keme glowered at Fox, which was answer enough.

“She’ll be along,” Indira said. “She’s probably running late.”

“I know she’s running late,” Fox said. “She needs to hurry up. She’s the only one who will carry this ponderous bucket.”

(Uh, ponderous was my choice of word.)

As Bobby took the bucket from Fox, he said, “The Paranormal Paddle is about to start. She’ll catch up to us.”

We made our way north along the boardwalk, toward the bay where the Swift River emptied into the ocean. Everyone else seemed to have the same idea too, and I have to admit, I didn’t love having a million people jostling me and breathing down my neck and bumping my candy bucket (which, yes, you’re allowed to participate in trunk-or-treat as an adult if you don’t have any children, because you can’t steal their candy, and also if Keme won’t share with you). But in spite of the crowd, I was okay. Ish. I mean, I knew most of these people. I was friends with most of these people. (If you could call almost getting T-boned by Bliss Wilson’s behemoth of a Suburban being friends. Which, apparently, you could, because she’d just tooted the horn and given me a finger wave and kept driving.) Plus, it helped to have Bobby there, his hand finding the small of my back to steer me. (It was like having a personal

navigation system, and it was amazing—especially the time I almost went, um, rump-over-teakettle into a pothole.)

The festivities continued along the boardwalk, with rows of vendor tents. Some of the tents were businesses—Mr. Li was selling his watercolors, and Brad Newsum (of Newsum Decorative Rock) was chatting with a middle-aged couple about a landscaping project. But others were more community oriented. The hiking group that Bobby and I occasionally accompanied had a table. And Hastings High was selling tickets to their Homecoming dance, which—confusingly—was being held on Halloween. (I noticed Keme refused to glance over, and I also noticed the teens around the display gawking at him like he was an animal in a zoo.) There was a jump-rope academy (yes, it's a real thing, and yes, I almost got winged by several overenthusiastic jump-ropers), and the Loaves and Fishes food bank (several kids were donating their candy), and a booth for the Confederated Tribes (they were handing out king-size candy bars, which meant they were being swarmed by miniature Batmans). The Hastings Rock Community Church was having a jumble sale, and Arcadia College was handing out flash drives and pens and those weirdly specific sticky notes that I always take but then never use. (Who needs one that has a twelve-month calendar printed on every sticky note ?)

That was when Fox kicked me.

I knew it was Fox because I felt the goggles, and when I swung around—with half an idea to give them a bonk with that stupid cauldron—I stopped at the silent demand on their face. I opened my mouth to ask what they wanted. And then I realized Indira was staring at me too. Her eyes flicked to the Arcadia College tent and then back to me, pleading.

It was kind of like the reverse of *The Grinch*. My heart shrank three sizes. Or maybe ten. I dry-swallowed. Then, somehow it wasn't dry, and I choked on my own spit, and Bobby patted me on the back so enthusiastically that Fox's stupid cauldron

whanged me in the thigh. (Whanged is a word, right?)

See, I knew what Fox and Indira wanted. We—the adults—had been talking about it on and off since July. Worrying about it might be a better way to phrase it. Or maybe fretting .

Bobby thumped me between the shoulder blades again, and I made an ack -ing sound, and I fended off his attempts to continue being earnestly helpful by squawking, “I’m fine.”

Everyone was looking at us, by the way. Mr. Li had stopped explaining something about one of his watercolors. A tiny girl in a dragon costume was clutching her tail, staring at me like I might expire on the spot. Emma Goldman, who was in her seventies and had a Mary Poppins-style purse full of whatever you might need, had stopped her stick-weaving class long enough to peer at me and, apparently, decide I would live before she went back to whatever she was saying. (Slightly disappointing, actually, because she always had these really tasty cough drops in that bag.)

A prickling flush climbed my face as I gave an all-purpose wave to let everyone know things were okay, and our little group started moving again. As we were drawing even with the Arcadia College tent, I channeled my inner thespian, got myself into character—I was playing the role of Befuddled Writer #1—and said with what I hoped was believable-sounding surprise, “Oh! Look! Arcadia College.”

Fox made a tiny, despairing sound. Indira looked like she wanted to cover her eyes. Bobby cocked his head at me, possibly wondering if I needed to be taken to a padded room.

Keme, though, glared.

It was about a five on the Keme scale, which meant: casual annoyance directed at me

for being, apparently, the weirdest person he'd ever met.

"I loved college," I said.

No one said anything to that.

"What about you, Bobby?" I asked. "Did you love college?"

The penny had dropped; I could see it in Bobby's expression. All he said, though, was "Yeah, college was great. Lots of work. Lots of fun."

"Arcadia's campus is so nice."

And this, at least, was true. The campus was gorgeous, actually—thickly wooded, carefully landscaped, with buildings that looked like they'd always been part of that semi-wild space. I'd visited a few times to meet with some of the creative writing faculty, and somehow—against all common sense and good reason—they'd trusted me with a half-semester introduction to composition class that, in theory, I should have been preparing for. In fact, that sounded like such a responsible, sensible, safe thing to do that I wondered if I could convince Bobby to take me home. Right now.

Indira was still giving me that look, though—with a hint of get-on-with-it that hadn't been there before—so I said, "Do you want to see what they're handing out? I bet they have information for prospective students."

This time, the glare was a seven—terrifying.

Words bubbled out of me. "If, that is, you know, you're thinking about, like, considering, even just the possibility—"

And no one was going to help me. Bobby looked like he wanted to thump me on the

back again.

I was like a drowning man grabbing for something—anything—to keep him afloat. The question drifted past, and I asked, “What are you going to do after you graduate?”

Keme’s reaction wasn’t what I expected. The glare went down to a four—I thought of this one as “self-soothing rage”—and he shrugged. “Get a job.”

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was that. He kept walking, and the rest of us, left flat-footed, scrambled to catch up.

“Have you ever thought about college?” Fox asked. “Or a vocational school?”

“What kind of job?” Indira asked. “Have you thought about what you’d like to do?”

Keme shrugged again.

“What about something you enjoy doing?” Indira asked. “Something you’re passionate about?”

This time, you could barely call it a shrug—it might have been my imagination.

Then Indira looked at me. And Fox looked at me. And Bobby looked at me.

I opened my mouth to demand something along the lines of why me? Before I could ask, though, Indira’s expression changed to one I’d never seen before—about as close to a nonverbal threat as I’d ever seen before.

I shut my mouth so fast my teeth clicked together. It took me several seconds before I had enough brainpower to say, “What about something with surfing? What about a

surf shop? Or a school—giving lessons, that kind of thing?”

The silence dragged out until Bobby said, “You’re a natural on a board.”

That earned us a tiny, one-shouldered shrug.

“Have you ever taken a career aptitude test?” Fox asked. Which was a surprisingly helpful comment, especially considering the source. It was significantly less helpful, though, when they added, “Mine said I should be a dog food taster.”

“There’s no way it said that,” I said. But then I felt compelled to add, “The counselor said I broke mine.”

Keme glanced at Bobby, who said, “Law enforcement.”

And that was it. The boy didn’t say anything .

We were quickly running out of boardwalk. Ahead of us, the crowd thickened at the edge of the bay, and I knew once we mixed with the crowd, any chance of continuing this conversation would be lost. I said, “A career aptitude test sounds like a great idea. And why don’t you come with me the next time I go to Arcadia? You can sit in on one of my classes, get a feel for what college is like.”

Among other things, Keme had perfected the teenager’s art of giving me a single, excoriating look that informed me he’d rather be dissected by circus clowns than spend a single moment, alive or dead, in my company—and also, that I was an idiot for ever thinking otherwise.

“Okay,” I breathed, falling back a step as we reached the crowd. “Good talk.”

With a commiserating look, Bobby squeezed my arm.

The one bright spot was that we'd timed our arrival perfectly. The Paranormal Paddlers were already out on the water, passing in front of us. If you've never heard of the Paranormal Paddlers, don't worry—neither had I. They were a local tradition: people from town dressed up in their Halloween costumes and then paddled around on the bay. Why, you might ask? Who knows. Personally, I didn't love the idea of getting my costume wet and then trying to balance on a board while I displayed myself for the amusement of strangers (I wondered if maybe I was spending too much time with Fox). But they all seemed to be enjoying themselves. The mummy looked a little bedraggled, and the wizard's robes were creating some serious drag, but if it bothered them, you couldn't tell. Besides—the crowd loved them.

As another cheer went up (this time, for an Elsa in a wetsuit), I said, “Why aren't you and Keme out there?”

Bobby opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Keme said, “Because it's paddleboarding, you donkey, not surfing.”

Offering an apologetic smile, Bobby added, “Neither of us is really into stand-up paddleboarding.”

I almost said something. But then I didn't. It was enough to smile and know that even Deputy Bobby, who was so genuinely kind and earnest, could be one hundred percent too cool for something.

I was turning my attention back to the water, where a very damp-looking werewolf was trying to fix one of her ears, when a voice broke through the crowd (and also broke the sound barrier).

“THERE YOU ARE!”

Guess who?

Millie wiggled toward us through the crush of bodies. And if everyone hadn't been cheering because the werewolf had finally fixed her ear, you would have heard my jaw hit the ground.

She was dressed as a witch. But not the green-faced, wart-on-the-nose, baggy-black-
robes-that-are-meant-for-comfort-and-not-fashion, garden-variety kind of witch. Millie's take on a witch involved a strapless, ruffled black dress that barely reached her, um, seat, along with black opera gloves, thigh-high leather boots, and the requisite pointed black hat. She'd gone with smoky eye makeup and intensely red lipstick, and she'd done something with her hair that made it extra...something. I couldn't bring myself to look directly at Keme, but I glimpsed him out of the corner of my eye. Even under that stupid Pennywise costume (and whatever he tells you, I am not afraid of clowns), he looked like someone had plugged him into a light socket. His mouth was soft and slack. His eyes were shining. I was surprised his hair wasn't standing on end. I wondered if I should ask him if he was smelling toast.

“I’M SORRY I’M LATE!”

The crowd parted . Moses, what? One little boy in a firefighter's costume actually had his feet go out from under him and fell backward into his wagon.

“WE COULDN'T FIND PARKING ANYWHERE.”

I was sure, at first, that her we was due to the ringing in my ears. Or the beginning of a sonic concussion. Or maybe her brother—

But then a guy slipped out of the crowd, slung an arm around Millie, and kissed her on the cheek.

I kid you not: Bobby actually stepped between Keme and Millie.

“LOUIS, STOP!” Millie said, but with so much giggling that Louis—and everyone else—knew she didn’t mean it.

Louis was tall. He was broad shouldered. He was practically naked except for a pair of tiny leather shorts and matching boots, and I love Bobby, and he’s the most handsome man I’ve ever met, and he’s everything to me, but Louis looked like a hundred and eighty pounds of chiseled beef. The only hint at what his costume might have been was a pair of devil horns poking up from the artful bedhead of blond hair.

He was, I noticed with a rising flood of inexplicable anger, kissing Millie again. And she was giggling. Again.

With chilly politeness, Indira asked, “Millie, who’s this?”

Not quite under their breath, Fox said, “What ’s this?”

“LOUIS, STOP!” But it was a kind of pleased vexation rather than genuine annoyance. Millie caught his hand and yanked him a step closer. “I want you to meet my FRIENDS!”

Here’s the deal: I’m a terrible person. I know that. I accept that. Which is why my biggest question was why Millie’s, uh, enthusiasm hadn’t driven Louis off. I considered the possibility that he was going to steal her kidneys. Or her trust fund. (Even though I knew Millie didn’t have a trust fund.) Or—and I know this makes me a truly awful person—maybe he was closeted, and Millie was a great beard.

“He’s probably a serial killer,” Fox murmured, as though answering my thoughts.

But then I noticed how Louis was looking at Millie. Like, looking at her. I’m not a prude (although I am only thirteen years old inside, and I get squirmy if I have to see too much kissing), but I felt my face heat, and I had to fix my gaze on a safe, neutral

spot. Which happened to be Indira's face. And she happened to look like she was ready to grab Fox's cauldron and start swinging.

"This is Dash," Millie said, "and Bobby—oh he's a DEPUTY!—and Indira, and Fox, and Keme. They're my BEST FRIENDS!"

Louis was already shaking hands, smiling at us with perfect teeth. "What's up, Dan? Great rat costume."

"It's Dash, actually, and I'm not a rat—"

"He's a ferret with a dandruffy tail," Fox informed everyone.

"He's not—" Bobby tried.

"Oh! You know how you cut up old towels and turn them into rags? That's what he is."

"I'm wearing cute ears, gray sweats, and a tail—" I began.

But by then, Louis was already on to Bobby. He held up his free hand in surrender. "I'm innocent! Don't arrest me! Just kidding."

Bobby isn't the most expressive guy in the world, but I knew him well enough to recognize the control he was exercising.

Instead of a handshake, Louis pulled Indira toward him when he took her hand. "God, you look like such a mom. I totally need a mom hug right now." And then he hugged her. And then he **ROCKED HER** (yes, italics and capitalization). If Indira enjoyed being pressed up against all those tightly defined muscles, her face didn't get the message. Maybe she—like me—was still trying to wrap my head around being told,

You look like such a mom .

Fox got a casually dismissive “Your costume is hilarious,” which made Fox look like they were about five seconds away from taking a pair of goggles off their boots and strangling Louis with them.

And then Louis got to Keme. Louis stuck out his hand. Keme stared back; his own hands were tucked under his arms, and his expression was an empty, frozen mask. After a few seconds, Louis laughed, pulled his hand back, and said, “Why the long face, little guy?”

Keme didn’t move, not exactly. But probably only because Bobby was already there, one hand on Keme’s shoulder.

“Louis’s a senior at Arcadia,” Millie said. “He’s a PHILOSOPHY MAJOR. Louis, you should talk to DASH. He LOVES books. HE WRITES MYSTERIES.”

“Nice, Dan.” Louis clapped me on the arm. “Love a fun little mystery. Kind of like dessert after reading a real book, you know?” Before I could respond to that—heck, before I could finish having an aneurysm—Louis said, “Babe, I just saw Ty and Dylan. We’ve got to get over there and get smashed .” Already towing Millie into the crowd, he gave a quick farewell wave back with a Colgate smile. Millie beamed at us. And then the crowd swallowed them, and they were gone.

I turned. Words were already coming—some combination of Let’s not get worked up and What is that guy’s deal? and then fifteen seconds straight of bleep-censoring. But I stopped when I saw Keme’s face. Rage tightened his features. He wasn’t staring after Millie. He wasn’t looking anywhere. It was a thousand-yard-stare, and at the other end of it, behind all that anger, I couldn’t see Keme. Not really.

Then he twisted free of Bobby’s grip, plunged into the mess of bodies, and

disappeared.

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“I’m worried about him,” I said as I shucked my jacket, then my tee. (This one had the Atari logo against a green grid.) I heeled off my Mexico 66s and dropped my jeans. Then, standing there in nothing but my Bowser boxers, I shivered and started picking through a drawer. “No one’s heard from him.”

After the encounter with Millie and Louis—not to mention Keme running off—we’d limped through another half hour of the town’s festivities before calling it quits. We’d come back to Hemlock House, and we’d each found our own ways of spending the rest of the day. I, for example, had taken a perverse pleasure in slowly deleting each letter of the chapter I’d written that morning.

Sitting on our bed, Bobby was already down to a pair of white boxers, and he was tugging on a sleep shirt. As the fabric passed over his head, he said, “He’ll be okay.”

“I don’t know about that, actually.” My search for pajamas forgotten, I wrapped my arms around myself and leaned against the drawer. “Bobby, you saw his face. He was heartbroken. Scratch that, he was devastated.”

Bobby’s head popped free of the shirt. He finished pulling it on, and then he smoothed his hair. The movement was automatic, and it was such a Bobby movement that I could have drawn it in my sleep. (If I’d had any artistic talent. Which I don’t.) He seemed to consider my statement for a moment. And then he nodded.

“And where is he?” I asked.

“Do you want to go look for him?” Bobby asked.

“I don’t know. Should we?”

Bobby’s pause was longer this time. “Keme knows where we are. If he wanted to be with us, he’d be here. I think he needs some time alone.”

“But he’s not thinking clearly. He’s hurt. And I know he’s eighteen now, but he’s basically still a kid, and he’s out there, and it’s cold—” I couldn’t say any more. And even though Hemlock House was snug and warm—well, as snug and warm as a Class V haunted mansion could be—I shivered as goose bumps broke out up my arms and across my shoulders.

Bobby stood and came across the room. He wrapped me in a hug. He was warm. He was solid. His breath tickled my neck. As he rubbed my back, I slowly relaxed into his embrace.

“Keme’s going to be okay,” he said again. “You’re right—this is going to be hard for him. But he’ll get over it.”

I shook my head. I didn’t say anything because I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know how to put into words what I was feeling. I knew it was more than a crush that hadn’t worked out. I knew it meant more to Keme than that. But I didn’t know how to explain it, so I settled for that simple, silent shake of my head.

“Everybody goes through their first heartbreak,” Bobby said. One of his hands settled at the small of my back, above the elastic waistband of my boxers. “We all make it to the other side.”

The only thing I could think to say was “He loves her.”

“And he knows she loves him too,” Bobby said. “But not in the same way.”

He was referring to the night of Keme's eighteenth birthday, when Bobby and I had accidentally witnessed the moment when Keme overheard Millie describe him to her friends using the words: like my little brother . At the time, I'd thought maybe that would put an end—however painful—to Keme's unrequited feelings. But in the months since, Keme hadn't changed his behavior around Millie, and it was obvious to everyone (or at least to me) that Keme had decided to keep hoping and trying.

Until today.

That half-formed thought floated up again, but since I still couldn't put it into words, I settled for an unhappy sigh.

"If you want me to go look for him," Bobby said, and he kissed my cheek, "I will."

After several long seconds, I shook my head. "If he knew I sent you after him, he'd kill me."

Bobby pulled me closer. He rubbed one hand up and down my back, then sideways, then up and down again. The fingers of his other hand curled around my waistband.

"I know you're going to think I'm making this up," I said. "But I swear one time I saw his eyes turn red."

Bobby kissed my shoulder.

"Like the Terminator," I said.

"Dash?"

"Hm?"

“Pay attention,” he said and kissed the spot where my neck joined my shoulder.

The thing about sex with Bobby was that it was just so good . I mean, I don’t want to go on and on about it. (See above, about my inner thirteen-year-old.) But it was so easy, and everything felt natural. Sometimes, it was playful—Bobby, for all his stoicism and reserve and iron self-control, seemed to find an outlet for all those bottled-up emotions when we were together like this. And sometimes it was slower, sweeter, like drop after drop of honey filling me up. And sometimes it was fast and frantic because a certain deputy had needs and also wanted to be at work on time. (I’m not complaining.)

Tonight, it was slow. Bobby guided me over to the bed, kissing his way up my neck to my jaw, then to my mouth. He eased my glasses off, lowered me onto the mattress, and crawled up next to me, still kissing me, his hand sliding up my belly, following my chest, curving along my arm. Exploring me by touch first. And then his mouth followed. The front of his T-shirt hung down, pulled by gravity, and it was easy to slip my hand up there and find the densely compact muscle. I mean, my God, he had abs. Louis who?

“I love you,” Bobby whispered as he nuzzled my ear. His tongue darted out, and I made a sound you can’t make in church.

My own voice was decidedly breathy as I said, “I love you too.”

Bobby hesitated, and then he said, “I love you so much, Dash. I’m so happy with you.”

Until then, my eyes had been half-closed as I focused on letting myself feel the attention Bobby was lavishing on me. Now I opened them.

By his own admission, Bobby had never been good at talking about his feelings. And

he'd told me enough, dropped enough hints, that I figured a lot of it had to do with his parents, and with how he'd been brought up. One of the things he'd been working on—we'd been working on—was putting those feelings into words. So, for him to say it again, and to say more, was Bobby taking a risk. And I had to blink to clear my eyes.

"I love you too," I said. It came out scratchy, but it was the best I could do. "I love you more than anyone I've ever known."

He smiled. Only a hint of a tremble at the edges. His hands stroked slowly up and down my thighs. "You're so beautiful. Sometimes I look at you, and I can't understand how I got so lucky. Everything about you turns me on. I was going crazy today, watching you, thinking about how long I had to wait until I got to touch you like this." He bent and kissed my knee. "I want to keep you in bed all day and kiss every inch of you."

My first, automatic reaction was to laugh. Somehow—barely—I swallowed it. For a few seconds, the volume on my inner monologue went all the way up. I'm not beautiful. I'm skinny, except where I'm not. I've got a bunch of moles. My skin is pasty white—blindingly white, as a matter of fact, when I take my shirt off. My hair alternates between angry hedgehog and the junior lesbian guild. And in contrast to all of that, Bobby is, well, perfect—the perfect body, the perfect hair, the rich, earthy bronze of those eyes. I swear to God, in the year plus that I'd known him, Bobby had never once had so much as a blemish.

After a few deep breaths, though, I cranked the volume down. I smiled up at Bobby. This was about him, I told myself. This was really about him. Because he was being so brave. I mean, he was always more communicative when we were intimate, but this was clearly Bobby stretching himself, working at putting into words the things he wanted to tell me.

But the urge rose up inside me to laugh—or to say something silly that would defuse the tension, a joke, something that would box up everything he'd said into nice, conveniently disposable packages. Something like I guess I'm lucky you're into zombie chic . Or better, If you like this, y ou should see me with my shirt on .

I didn't, though. I let the urge pass through me. And then I gave a wobbly smile. I sat up, kissed Bobby, and said, "You're perfect. Did you know that?"

He opened his mouth to say something, but I kissed him again, turned him out of his shirt, and—

Well, the rest, as they say, is history.

One of the perks of being an author (and there aren't many) is that you get to set your own hours. Which means you get to set your own schedule. Which means nobody can tell you that one o'clock in the afternoon is an irresponsible wake-up time because you are an author, and your schedule is dictated by the muse. (It's also dictated by how many episodes of Below Deck you stream before Netflix self-destructs.)

All of which is to say that I woke up a little past noon. (One o'clock is only a tiny bit past.) Bobby was already long gone to work, and the house was quiet. I showered and dressed—joggers and a Dungeons Tripple had taken an indecent amount of pleasure in embarrassing me about my crush on Bobby before we'd started dating. Oh, and you know the other thing? His scalp. I mean, it wasn't a problem that he was bald. But his scalp was disturbingly loose on his skull and the whole wrinkle situation got weird —and fast. (I mean, it was like crepe paper.)

Bobby's face was so serious it was almost stone. Tripple looked like he was about to smile.

"Bobby?" I looked past them, but all I saw was their cruiser. "What's going on?"

What's wrong?"

"Is Keme home?" Bobby asked.

"No. Why? Did something happen?"

"Did he come home last night?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't think so?" Tripple asked.

"It's a big house. I was asleep. What—"

"So, he might be here right now?"

"No, he's not here right now. I already told you that."

"Why don't we have a look?"

That shocked me out of my daze. I stared at Tripple. At the almost smile. And I said, "Do you have a warrant?"

"Dash," Bobby said.

"You're not searching this house for Keme—for anything—until you tell me what's going on."

The tightness in Bobby's jaw should have told me, but all he said was "We just need to talk to him."

And then Tripple grinned: sharp, narrow teeth yellowing at the gumline. “About a murder.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

“I am not going to calm down,” I said, trying to keep my voice low. “Don’t tell me to calm down.”

We were in the kitchen, just Bobby and I. The air smelled like yeasty dough and cardamom and brown sugar. My stomach turned, and I wondered, from a far-off point in my head, if I was going to be sick.

“I didn’t say anything,” Bobby said mildly.

Which was fair. And true. And made me want to scream my head off.

“I can’t believe this,” I said. I was still fighting to control my volume because Tripple was in the servants’ dining room. (And, outrage of outrages, eating my cardamom rolls. I mean, Indira’s, but it’s basically the same thing.) “You think Keme killed someone?”

“Of course not.”

“But you’re going to arrest him.”

“We’re not arresting anyone,” Bobby said in that same even tone. “But we do need Keme to come in for questioning.”

“Who is he supposed to have killed?”

“I told you,” came Tripple’s voice from the next room.

Bobby didn't exactly sigh, but he did appear to brace himself.

A moment later, Tripple pushed into the kitchen. He was still carrying his plate. The cardamom roll was untouched.

"I told you," he said again. "Look at him. He can't wait to get his nose in it."

"This is a private conversation," Bobby said. It was about as close as Bobby ever came to telling someone to screw off.

"Yeah," I said. "Go eat your roll in the other room."

"No, thanks." Tripple set the plate down and leaned against the counter. "Don't care for sweets."

"Okay," Bobby whispered, and he squeezed my arm. "Take a breath."

"You don't care for—"

"Dash."

I swallowed my outrage—and my total bewilderment—and finally managed to say, "I'm not sticking my nose into anything. But Keme's my friend, and I think I ought to know what you're accusing him of."

"He's my friend too," Bobby said, and I was surprised by the hardness of his tone. "And no one's accusing him of anything."

"JT Haskins," Tripple said. He was watching me like it might mean something to me.

I glanced at Bobby. "Who's that?"

“Keme hasn’t told you about him?” Tripple asked. “Hasn’t complained about him? Told you his sob story?”

“I’ve never heard that name from anyone,” I said. “Certainly not from Keme. Who is he?”

“He owned the Gull’s Nest.” At my look of confusion, Bobby added, “It’s the RV park on the north side of town.”

“That’s where Keme lives,” I said with a flash of realization. “Well, he doesn’t live there, but you know what I mean.”

“His mom lives there. Some of the RVs are more or less permanently there—you can rent by the month, and enough people stay that it’s like a mobile home community in some ways.”

“What happened to—JT? Was that his name? And why are you looking for Keme?”

“This is an ongoing investigation—” Bobby began.

“Somebody bashed his brains in,” Tripple said. He had that weird almost-smile again. “And that boy got in a big fight with JT last night. Everybody saw it.”

I couldn’t imagine Keme getting into a fight. Or rather, I could, but it was terrifying—and not consistent with the Keme I knew. The Keme I knew was more than capable of murdering me by stabbing me with a pencil. But a fight? A big, blowup argument? The Keme I knew would have been filled with cold rage, maybe. He would have thrown some icy silences. But I couldn’t imagine an actual fight.

“This is crazy. There’s no way Keme would hurt someone, let alone kill them.”

The pained look on Bobby's face came and went so quickly I thought I'd imagined it, but it was Tripple who responded. He laughed and said, "You don't know him at all, do you? That boy's a bad seed. Always has been. Vandalism. Destruction of property. Shoplifting. Assault. He always walked away from it because he was a minor, but now that he's an adult, well—" Tripple's smile flashed out. "—now something's going to stick."

My automatic reaction was to tell Tripple he was full of, uh, beans, but I glanced at Bobby first. His expression was totally closed off, and that was its own kind of confirmation.

"So, what?" I could hear myself scrambling, but I couldn't seem to stop. "He got into an argument. That's not a crime."

"It is when it gets physical," Tripple said.

Ignoring that, I pushed on. "What evidence do you have that he had anything to do with this man's death? Tell me one single piece of evidence."

Tripple opened his mouth, but this time, it was Bobby who spoke. "We don't have anything, Dash." The yet in that sentence was painfully loud, even though he didn't actually say it. "Right now, we just want to talk to him."

"So," Tripple said, "if you know where he is, and you want what's best for him, you'll help us run down that little pup."

"He's not here," I said. "You want to find him? Help yourself. Look around. He's not anywhere in this house."

"I'll do that," Tripple said. "You two have fun playing kiss-and-tickle."

Bobby's jaw tightened, but he didn't say anything. Tripple laughed to himself as he sauntered out of the kitchen. As the door swung shut behind him, he started to whistle—a jauntily off-key tune that I couldn't recognize.

“What in the blankity-blank is wrong with him?” I asked.

Several long seconds passed before Bobby answered in what must have been his attempt at a normal voice. “Believe it or not, this is Tripple in a good mood. He finally put in his retirement papers, thank God.” More quietly, he asked, “Are you okay?”

I shook my head. “I can't believe this. I can't believe you think Keme had anything to do with this.”

“I don't. I told you I don't think that. And the sheriff knows I don't. Why do you think she's got me paired up with Tripple on this bogus errand? She sidelined me as soon as she realized Keme was a person of interest. I'll be lucky if she doesn't put me on a desk until it's over.”

I hadn't thought about that. In the shock that had followed Bobby's arrival, I hadn't really thought about anything. But now that he said it, I could see what he meant—Bobby wasn't usually partnered with Tripple (for obvious reasons), and he was the best deputy Sheriff Acosta had. (That's not just my personal preference speaking—everyone knew Bobby was the best.) There was no way Sheriff Acosta would waste him on pickup duty unless she was worried Bobby's friendship with Keme would compromise him in the investigation.

So, I said the perfect thing to repair my social-emotional blunder: “Oh.”

A hint of a smile showed in the crinkle of Bobby's eyes. He pulled me into a hug. It felt good to touch him again; it wasn't like we'd been separated for all that long, but

there was something so reassuring, so comforting about the physical contact. Also, he smelled like french fries, and my stomach rumbled.

Bobby laughed.

“It’s not my fault,” I said. “You smell delicious. Why do you smell delicious?”

“Because Tripple treats his patrol car like his personal trash can. When he goes off shift, you wouldn’t believe how much trading and haggling and complaining the deputies on the next shift do to avoid getting his unit.” He ran his hand over the back of my head and threaded his fingers through my hair. “It’s going to be okay.”

I shook my head. Then I stepped back, and Bobby let his arms drop. My face felt hot, and I put my hands to my cheeks as I asked, “That’s all? Keme had a fight with this guy, and he ended up dead?”

“Pretty much. His wife found him this morning. I guess they’re in the process of separating. That’s kind of an understatement, actually. They had a huge fight last night. Someone called in a domestic disturbance, and a deputy had to go out there. Tripple said it was pretty bad.”

“Hold on, this guy, JT, had a fight with his wife, and a few hours later he’s dead. And even though the spouse is always the most likely suspect, for some reason, we’re looking at Keme?”

“Well, the wife—Channelle—has a pretty solid alibi.”

“What? She was having dinner with the sheriff?”

The corner of Bobby’s mouth twitched. “Not far off. After Tripple separated them, he got her checked in at the Bay Bridge Suites, and she spent the night there. She went

back to the RV park the next morning, and that's when she found him. There's security camera footage of the motel parking lot. She didn't leave."

"That doesn't prove anything. She could have snuck out the back—"

"There's no way out back."

"She could have disabled the cameras. She could have fabricated the footage from last night, like on, um, Speed . She could have gone from her room to another, prearranged room, put on a wig and a fake mustache, and left through the front door."

"What were you doing today? Brainstorming?"

"Bobby, she obviously killed him!"

Bobby looked up at the ceiling and the faint sound of Tripple's footsteps above them.

In a quieter voice, I asked, "What about a murder weapon?"

"It looks like it was a blunt object. We haven't found it yet."

"What did Tripple mean, Keme got physical with JT last night?"

"Have you ever been to the RV park?"

I shook my head.

"The pads are right next to each other. They have hedges, that kind of thing, but no real privacy. I mean, most of it is a glorified parking lot. We've got an eyewitness, and he says Keme threw the first punch."

I shook my head again and sagged against the counter. Whatever had been powering me up until now—adrenaline and fear and a thin oil slick of anger—it drained out of me. My head was empty and throbbing. I wanted to close my eyes.

“Hey,” Bobby said, and he chafed my arms. “We just need to talk to him. Once we can establish where Keme was last night, it’ll be over.”

I didn’t say what we were both thinking: what if Keme couldn’t prove where he’d been last night? What if he’d been sleeping rough, the way he used to, and there was no one and nothing that could verify what he claimed?

The creak of the treads from the servants’ staircase announced Tripple’s return. I drew myself up as best I could. I waited for Bobby to take a step back, establish that professional distance to avoid another nastygram from Tripple about our relationship. But Bobby stayed where he was, hands on my arms, too close for anyone to have any doubt about who we were to each other or that he was trying to comfort me.

Tripple poked his head into the kitchen, spotted us, and sneered. All he said, though, was “I can’t find him.”

I managed not to say, I told you so . But only because Bobby was on duty, and me being a petty, um, witch wouldn’t help anything.

“Please let us know if he comes home,” Bobby said. “If you can talk him into going to the station, even better. It’d be good if he came in on his own.”

I nodded. And then I followed Bobby and Tripple to the door and watched them drive away. The smell of french fries lingered, but it only made me feel sick now.

For a while, I paced. Hemlock House was big. And it had lots of connecting rooms. Which meant it was easy to make a big loop—perfect for pacing.

Keme wouldn't hurt anyone. But Keme had punched this guy, and people had seen it. The spouse was always the most likely suspect. Cameras on the motel parking lot. Cameras everywhere. An airtight alibi. Tripple saying, That boy's a bad seed. Always has been. But Keme wasn't a bad seed. Keme was a teenage boy. They did dumb things, sometimes, sure, but he was loyal, and he was protective, and he cared so deeply about the people he loved.

I remembered the cold rage on his face as he'd watched Louis and Millie walk away.

That kind of rage didn't go away easily. It lingered. It held on to you. It made it hard to think rationally. It made you want to hurt someone else so that you weren't the only one hurting anymore.

Vandalism. Destruction of property. Shoplifting. Assault.

But Keme wouldn't. He just wouldn't.

He always walked away from it because he was a minor, but now that he's an adult...

And then something clicked into place. Keme had been at the Gull's Nest last night. He had to have been—he'd gotten in a fight with JT. So, wouldn't it make sense that Keme had stayed the night with his mom? Maybe she'd look at me like I was crazy and say, He was here the whole time . Or at least checked in? Maybe he'd stopped by, talked to her, told her where he was going? Maybe she knew where he was, or where he'd gone last night. Maybe she hadn't felt comfortable telling the deputies. Maybe she'd kept quiet because she thought she was protecting Keme.

And maybe she'd tell me.

It was a gossamer bridge of maybes, and a part of me knew I was indulging in a fantasy.

But if there was even the tiniest chance—

I grabbed Bobby's keys and ran for the car.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

I drove Bobby's Honda Pilot north into town. It was late afternoon, and at this time of year, the sun was already starting to go down. As I made my way through the thick growth of pine and spruce, the light was long and slanting low between the massive trees. It caught beaded drops of water and sparked them with gold. It traced the saw-toothed outline of ferns. It threw dark shadows, and when the hanging moss drifted in the breeze, it was like ghosts moving among the branches.

That was too morbid a thought, and I tried to shake it off. I tried to think about practical things. Like cars. A few months ago, a very, um, unhappy man had run me off the road. I'd survived, but the Jeep hadn't been so lucky. And since I was currently in the precarious financial position of having eight dollars and sixty-seven cents in my savings account, I hadn't bought anything to replace it—the insurance payout had disappeared startlingly quickly into saving one of Hemlock House's particularly slanty chimneys. Bobby was kind enough to get a ride to work most days and let me borrow his Pilot, but I knew that wasn't ideal. It made Bobby's commute much longer than it needed to be, and it wasn't convenient, even though he never complained. It made me dependent on Bobby, and I was working hard not to repeat some bad patterns about relying on other people to take care of all the un-fun adulting stuff. And there was one other thing: there was this tiny part of me (the teensiest) that thought the Honda Pilot was maybe, just a little, a mom car.

Don't tell Bobby.

Also, don't get me wrong. It was a great SUV. It was big, and it had a tow hitch, and Bobby had gone for a trim that made it look extra sporty. Obviously he kept it in pristine condition. (It never smelled like french fries, for example.) But sometimes, when I had to pick Keme up from school, I started noticing all the other cars in the

pickup line. And who was driving them. And the fact that I was driving one too. And that I was picking up my feral wolf-child from school, and on the way home, I was going to get milk and bread and eggs from the Keel Haul General Store, and then I was going to wait for my man to get home.

Sometimes, I really, really, really missed the Jeep.

The Gull's Nest RV Park concreted-in grills; and often a smaller vehicle with out-of-state plates. The permanent residents, on the other hand, had clearly made themselves at home. They had little wooden signs announcing THE SMITHS, and they had patio furniture instead of the park's disintegrating picnic tables, and many of them had Halloween decorations hanging from their awnings and strung along the yew. Somebody had clearly gotten into the spirit of the season and hung a witch on her broomstick from a nearby spruce. The witch had her face pressed up against the trunk, her hair a gray cloud around her head, legs kicked out in surprise. The effect, I guess, was to look like she'd crashed into the tree.

The other thing I noticed about the park was that it was old. The asphalt pads for the RVs were crumbling, and the trash cans were rusty and dented. There wasn't any litter on the ground, and the landscaping all looked neat and maintained, but you couldn't look at this place and not know it had a lot of years behind it. That made sense; Hastings Rock's boom as a tourist town was a relatively recent phenomenon. Land values had skyrocketed, and the town's focus had shifted to providing lodging and food and entertainment for visitors. An RV park wasn't an efficient use of all this real estate, and I wondered how much the land would be worth now if the owner decided to sell. Then I remembered the owner was dead.

I spotted two sheriff's cruisers outside the RV park's office—a single-story building with a fieldstone foundation and shake siding, everything painted tan with green trim. On one side, a curving wall of glass blocks reinforced my sense that the park had been built a while ago. You just didn't see enough glass-block walls these days, let

alone curved ones.

Thinking inconspicuous thoughts, I rolled past the cruisers. I didn't have an address for Keme's mom, so I had the vague idea that I'd drive around to get a sense of the park's layout and then start knocking on doors. Then, on a camper across from the park office, I saw a sign that said COLLSON. It was done in Sharpie on copy paper, and something about how it had been taped onto the door—lots and lots of tape—suggested, to my writer's imagination anyway, passive-aggressive defiance.

I passed the pad, turned at the next corner, and parked the Pilot behind a dense wall of yew. Then I trekked back. In my mind, I'd expected the RV park to be full of, well, RVs —ginormous houses-on-wheels that cost somewhere in the six figures and were driven by men who liked to wear fishing vests as a fashion statement. But that wasn't the case. Plenty of the pads were occupied by pull-behind travel trailers, and plenty of these still looked like they might cost more than a college education.

Keme's mom, on the other hand, lived in a camper that looked like it cost less than a used car. It was white with brown accents, and the paint was bubbling up around the doors and windows. The slide-out on one side looked a little, um, precipitous, and the tires were flat. Scratch that. The tires looked like they'd gone flat years ago and then slowly disintegrated until now it looked like the little camper had fused with the pad itself. I did a quick walk-around. Rust snaked down from the ladder on the back, and a decomposing black hose ran from underneath the camper to what I guessed was a septic tank. Water and electric hookups completed the operation. The blinds were down in the windows, and the aluminum slats were bent in places, but someone had gone to the effort of decorating the glass with vinyl clings—pumpkins and spider webs and friendly ghosts. Through the camper's thin shell, the sounds of daytime television were clear. Somebody was watching *The Price is Right* .

I knocked on the door. There was a lull, and then the camper rocked slightly as steps moved toward me. The door opened, and a woman stood there.

She was White, petite, and young—maybe in her thirties, but if so, she had great genes. Dark, wavy hair fell to her shoulders, and she had wide-set hazel eyes complemented by high cheekbones and a full mouth. Her dress called to mind a lot of adjectives I'd heard but wasn't exactly sure of—smocked was one, and off-the-shoulder was another, and maybe something about poet sleeves? She wore suede clogs, and standing there, she reminded me of a Disney princess who had fallen on hard times.

Her smile was automatic but still warm. "May I help you?"

"Yeah, hi. I'm Dash Dane. I'm looking for Keme Collson. Well, Keme's mom, actually."

"I'm Keme's mom."

I like to think I'm quick on my feet, but...yeah. First, the words didn't make sense. Then I tried doing the math. I mean, it was possible. But how young had she been?

"Who is it?" a man called from inside the camper.

"He said his name's Dash," Keme's mom answered.

"Well, what does he want? You're letting the cold in."

"Can I help you?"

I was still recalibrating, so I said, "I wanted to ask you a few questions if you have a minute."

"He wants to ask me some questions," the woman said over her shoulder.

“About what?”

“About Keme,” I said loudly enough to carry.

“Is he police?”

“I’m attached to the sheriff’s office,” I said. Which wasn’t exactly a lie. I mean, I was attached to part of the sheriff’s office—that part being Bobby.

A television audience cheered. The breeze shifted, and I could smell the lodgepole pine and the char of the park grills and the clean, crisp air of autumn.

“All right,” the man said.

“Won’t you come in?” Keme’s mom asked.

I followed her inside—which took about two steps. Somehow, the camper’s interior felt even smaller than the outside had suggested. It probably had something to do with the fact that this one had the same design aesthetic as the few other RVs and travel trailers I’d been in: “Dad’s man cave” meets “Mary Poppins’s valise.” There was a built-in sofa, a kitchenette with a three-quarters fridge, and the slide-out dinette, which I guessed doubled as a bed at night when you put the table down. A TV was mounted on a swing arm overhead, and sure enough, Drew Carey and some lovely ladies were showing contestants a new car. Two doors led off the cramped space; one stood open to reveal double bunks (literally that’s all—you opened the door and climbed right into a weirdly octagonal bed). The other, I guessed, was the bathroom. Patchouli and the smell of warm bodies in a closed-up room were overpowering.

A man was sprawled on the sofa. White, probably my height, and around my age. He was shirtless and barefoot, dressed in nothing but a pair of jeans that rode low enough

to give a glimpse of, uh, the melons (and to tell me underwear was not a priority with this guy). He was one of those guys who would probably be flat-bellied and slim-hipped forever, no matter how many beers he drank or nachos he ate. His dark hair was long enough to cover his ears, shaggily parted on one side, and he had a soft, boyish face. He made me think of one of those kids from *The Suite Life* who'd grown up rough. His eyes flicked to me and then back to the television.

"Right over here," the woman said.

We squeezed past the man on the sofa and onto the dinette benches, and our knees bumped under the table. Up close, with more time to study her, I decided she wasn't just pretty—she was beautiful. Keme was a good-looking young man, and it was clear where some of that had come from.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I don't know your name."

"September. September Collson. You're with the sheriff's office?"

"In, um, a monogamous sense, yes." Before she could ask what that meant, I hurried on. "I'm also Keme's friend, and I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions. In particular, where was he—"

"How is Keme?" She said his name with delight, and her smile broadened. "How's he doing?"

I had to reboot again. It wasn't only the question—although the implications behind it were bad enough. Among other things, it made me think the deputies hadn't talked to her yet. But more than that, it was the tone. The unqualified happiness.

In retrospect, I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting. A drunk, maybe. Someone with a substance-abuse problem. Even a raspy-voiced cocktail waitress who reeked of

cigarette smoke would have made more sense to me than...this. The shine in her eyes, the rise of her voice, the smile, the Disney princess softness—this, I didn't know how to handle.

“Uh,” I said.

(That's me. I'm a writer.)

“Well,” I tried again, “that's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. I was wondering if you've seen Keme lately.”

“Oh sure. He was here last night.”

That seemed a little too easy. “He was?”

She nodded.

“What time was he here?” I asked.

“Five? Six? What time was Keme here, Foster?”

The man on the sofa—presumably Foster—didn't answer.

“Oh!” she said. “It was after dark. I was plugging in the lights.”

“Okay,” I said. “And what time did he leave?”

That seemed to be a real stumper. She frowned and folded her hands on the laminate tabletop. “I don't know. Foster, what time did Keme leave?”

Nothing.

“He wasn’t here very long,” September said. “A few minutes is all.”

“He didn’t stay here last night?”

September frowned. “No. Why would he?”

Because you’re his mom seemed like a good starting point, but somehow I managed to say, “He doesn’t sleep here?”

Her tone was perplexed, like I was asking a question she didn’t understand—or maybe like she couldn’t figure out why I didn’t understand. “No.”

“Do you know where he might have stayed last night?” I asked. “Somewhere he might have gone. Maybe his dad’s?”

“Keme’s dad died. A long time ago.”

From the sofa came, “Why are you asking about where that kid slept last night?”

I twisted in my seat to look at Foster. He was still watching TV, but his fingers were restless on the remote, bumping over the little rubberized buttons.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “who are you?”

“That’s Foster,” September said, as though that explained everything.

“What’s the nature of your relationship?” I asked, but I directed the question to the man.

His gaze snapped to me, and he sat up. I saw what I hadn’t noticed before—he’d been lying on a bag of frozen peas, and he had one heck of a shiner on his cheekbone.

“Why’s it any of your business?”

“We don’t like to put labels on things,” September said.

“I’m talking to him,” Foster said. He didn’t look at her, and the words were flat and low.

Outside, the wind in the yew creaked and rustled.

“I think I’m getting a headache,” September said in a bright, trembling voice, and she slid out from the table.

Foster was still watching me. He had dark eyes. He was pretty in that soft, boyish way, and the dark eyes were part of it, but right then, there was something else in there. Something I didn’t like. Something that had September holding an old pill tin. Her hands must have been shaking because I could hear the pills rattling around inside it.

A year ago, I would have made up—and then stammered—some excuse to get out of there. And maybe if things had been different, I still might have. If he hadn’t reminded me so much of Owen Markham, who’d pulled my shorts down in sixth-grade gym class, and who’d gotten a girl pregnant in eighth grade. If I’d been anywhere else, instead of squarely in the middle of the life Keme had hidden from me. If we’d been talking about anyone but Keme. And, of course, if it hadn’t been for all that personal growth stuff, and how I’d changed and gotten braver and bolder.

(Also, if I’m being totally honest, the fact that I knew my boyfriend could beat Foster up.)

So, I barely recognized my own cool, detached tone as I said, “That’s right: you’re talking to me.”

Contestant voices buzzed on the TV in the background. The click-click-click came of the big price wheel spinning. Foster examined me like he hadn't seen me before.

"If Keme didn't stay here," I said, "why did he come by?"

"He owed us some money," Foster said.

"Her teenage son owed you money?"

"That's right. He wasn't supposed to have it in the first place." Foster cut his eyes to September, and I followed his gaze.

She hadn't been able to get the tin open, and now she clutched it so tightly her knuckles blanched. "It was just a little," she whispered. "He never asks—"

"We don't believe in giving handouts," Foster said over her. "We believe in teaching children to be independent."

"Oh," I said. "Like you?"

I heard the words. I wasn't sure where they'd come from. I couldn't seem to think; my hands were shaking, so I pressed them against the dinette cushion I was sitting on.

This time, Foster was quiet longer before he said, "Who are you?"

"He came back to give you the money," I said. "Did he give it to you?"

"Of course." September gave a wilting laugh. "He's very responsible."

"And what happened then?" I asked.

“He saw—” September began.

Foster didn’t move, not exactly, but his body tensed, and September cut off.

I looked more closely at Foster. At the bruise on his cheekbone that was still darkening from red to blue-black. “What did he see?”

“He left,” September said with a kind of desperate cheeriness. “He stayed with a friend.”

“This is about JT,” Foster said. He didn’t smile, but some emotion lit up his face. “You think he had something to do with it.”

“What happened to JT?” September didn’t seem to remember she was still clutching the pills. The bones in her hand stood out, and her cheeks were flushed. A few strands of hair hung in front of her face, and her eyes were blank with panic. “What are you talking about?”

“Do you know where Keme went after he left?” I asked.

“Yeah, he went over and picked a fight with that dumb jerk who owns this place.” (Dumb jerk wasn’t exactly what Foster said.) “That’s what I told the deputy. There’s something wrong with that kid. It’s not my fault; I told September she wasn’t strict enough with him when he was little.”

September clutched her whatever-the-smocked dress with one hand. Her breathing sounded gaspy. “What deputy? What are you talking about?”

“You were asleep,” Foster said without looking at her. “You were still upset.”

“Upset about what?” I asked.

“You need to take one of your pills and lie down. I’m gonna handle this.”

“What are you—” Her voice hooked me, and I turned. She was staring at me, a childlike, unspoken plea for help in her face. “What’s happening?”

Foster padded across the camper to her and took the tin of pills from her hand. He opened it, took her jaw in one hand, and pressed one of the pills between her lips. When I’d been growing up, I’d seen the neighbors give their dog her medicine the same way. He waited, and she swallowed, and he released, saying, “Go lie down.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, but they didn’t fall. She gave an unseeing look around the camper, her eyes passing over me as though I weren’t there, and then she made her way to the bunks at the back. She slipped off her clogs and her bare feet looked small and clean as she climbed onto the lower bunk. She had to wiggle around to pull the door shut after her. I thought about Keme sleeping in there too. All three of them packed into that weird little corner room.

Then Foster turned back toward me. I guess it says something about me that, over the last year, I’ve gotten used to the idea that somebody might want to kill me. My first thought was to check for weapons. He was standing in the kitchen, so knives seemed like a real possibility. But he didn’t open a drawer or rummage around inside a cabinet, and there wasn’t anything even close to a weapon out where I could see it.

Now that I thought about it, there wasn’t anything out where I could see it. Everything in the camper looked like it had come with the camper. Heck, for that matter, everything except the cushions looked like it was bolted down. Where were the knickknacks? Where was all the junk that accumulated in a shared living space? I tried to think back to the glimpse I’d gotten of the bunks—had there been blankets? I didn’t think so.

When Foster leaned against the kitchenette’s counter, my attention came back to him.

“I don’t know what you think we’re going to say. He didn’t stay the night here. I’m not going to say he did. Whatever he got up to after he left here, that’s his responsibility.”

“Why did Keme go talk to JT?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did he see that made him upset?”

Foster folded his arms across his chest and shrugged.

I tried to think about a clever way to ask the next question, and finally I said, “Where’d you get that bruise?”

“I slipped in the shower.”

“No, you didn’t.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Did Keme hit you?” I asked.

“If he hit me, I’d kill that kid. I don’t put up with that kind of behavior.”

It was surreal, listening to this guy who couldn’t have been any older than me talk like he was some sort of father-knows-best stereotype from the Wally Cleaver era.

“Did Keme see you hurt September?”

For the first time, something like shock showed on Foster’s face. “I’ve never laid a

finger on her.”

But I saw, in my mind, how he’d held her by the jaw, and how those slender, boyish fingers had forced the pill into her mouth.

I decided to try a new angle. “Why would Keme be angry with JT?”

“I told you I don’t know.”

“I know. I’m asking you to think. Take a guess.”

“Because JT’s the worst, man. His wife too.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re awful. They run this place like it’s their little kingdom. They’ve got all these rules. They’re always trying to bust someone. And they’ll charge you for anything they can. Petty stuff. One time, we had some friends over, and we didn’t clean up until the next morning, you know. That jagweed fined us for littering.” He shook his head and scoffed.

“That doesn’t sound like enough to want to murder someone.”

“Yeah? If you’re late on your rent, man, they don’t miss a beat. Eviction notice. They slap it right on the door and take you to court. One guy, he was sick, so he couldn’t move out. When he was at the hospital, they went in and took all his stuff and put a chain on the door.”

“That doesn’t seem legal. It’s still his RV, isn’t it?”

“Nah, they own some of them. Rent them out like apartments. They say you can get

your stuff back, but you've got two weeks. Don was still in the hospital, you know?" Talking about JT seemed to have made Foster forget his earlier reticence. "There's this law they're trying to pass, and it would make it impossible for landlords to jack up the rent. It's going to pass, too. So, you know what JT and Channelle did?"

"Raised the rent before the law passed."

"It's crazy, man. Nobody should be allowed to do that. And it's not like we can afford it—" Foster stopped. As a hint of red climbed his cheeks, he sent a look my way that was simultaneously sullen and challenging, like he was daring me to follow up on that admission.

Instead, I said, "So, there are lots of people who might want something bad to happen to him."

"I don't know." But he shifted, adjusting his arms across his chest, and said, "Yeah, I guess."

"Anyone in particular? Anyone besides Keme who's gotten into a disagreement with him lately?"

"I don't know," Foster said again. It must have been automatic, an engrained defensive answer, rather than a genuine one, though, because he said, "This guy showed up yesterday. Pounded on the door. He and JT really got into it." He must have seen the question in my face because he pointed at a window and said, "The office is right there. It's a straight shot."

"What were they arguing about?"

"I don't know." There it was again, that knee-jerk, adolescent defiance. "They weren't yelling, but this guy got right up in JT's face. JT shoved him."

This was life in an RV park, I thought. Live entertainment, twenty-four seven.

“He was police, too,” Foster offered, unprompted.

“I heard a deputy was out here for a domestic dispute.”

“Oh, that. No, this guy wasn’t from Hastings Rock. Orange County. That’s what it said on his car.”

“Did you get a good look—”

“That deputy was out here later. September called it in. JT and Channelle were going to kill each other.” More of that red rose in his cheeks, and he said, “Shoot, that’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?”

“They were having a fight, a big one. They do it all the time. Some people don’t know how to build a solid relationship. JT was throwing all of Channelle’s stuff out of the house, and Channelle was screaming at him. When Channelle hit JT, that’s when September called.”

I tried to construct the sequence of events. “So, the guy from Orange County came, and then later, JT and Channelle got in a fight.”

Foster nodded.

“What happened?”

“Same thing that always happened. Deputy comes out. Splits them up before they can—” Foster stopped. Swallowed. “Channelle goes and stays in a motel for a few

days like she's done with him, but she always comes back."

"You saw her leave?"

"Yeah, she left. That deputy always makes sure she's actually going to the motel and not just going to loop back and start things up with JT again."

"And did you see anybody else after that?"

Foster shook his head.

"When was the fight with Keme?"

"Before all that. I figure that's why JT was already so worked up when that police officer came to the door."

If that was true, then I didn't understand why the sheriff was so interested in talking to Keme. JT had clearly been alive after their argument. Then a possibility occurred to me.

"Did you see Keme come back last night?"

"Nah, he wasn't going to come back. He was too mad."

"Let me guess: you don't know what he was mad about."

In an instant, Foster's face was closed again, his arms tightening across his chest. He shook his head.

"All right," I said. "If you think of anything, can you call Deputy Mai?" I looked around for something to write it down on, but there wasn't anything—not even

takeout napkins. “Will you remember that?”

“I’ll remember.”

When I stepped out of the camper, the fresh air was so sweet—full of the scent of dry autumn leaves and the water in the bay and the clean, cold chill of October—that my eyes stung. I hadn’t realized until that moment how claustrophobic the little camper had become. I moved to the end of the pad and looked back. The door was shut. The blinds were down. The aggressively taped-on sign that said COLLSON looked even sadder, somehow. And I thought—even though I tried to convince myself that it was my imagination—that someone in that little camper was staring back at me. Watching me.

An excited shout made me whip around.

Deputy Dahlberg was standing at the edge of a line of trees behind the park’s office. She shouted, “Salk!” Then she waved her arms and did a little jump and shouted the other deputy’s name again.

I stared at her, taking in her visible excitement.

She found something, I thought.

The wind snapped a nearby Halloween banner, and I flinched.

She found something.

I should get in the car. I should call Bobby.

Instead, I hurried toward Dahlberg, cutting in a straight line across a stretch of lawn, and then, where the landscaping gave way, through knee-high grass and weeds. It

wasn't the kind of place adults would come. Kids, maybe—kids were drawn to wild places. But I didn't think a lot of kids came to the Gull's Nest. I wondered what was on the other side of the trees. My thoughts were like a needle skipping on an old record.

Dahlberg noticed me when I was still about thirty yards away. "What are you doing here?" she asked. And then she said, "You can't come over here."

Twenty yards.

"Dash, I'm serious. Turn around."

Ten.

She started to move, putting herself in my path. She was saying something, and I recognized the tone—this wasn't Deputy Dahlberg my friend, the one who let me in the side door at the station sometimes so I could sneak in a little present for Bobby. This was Deputy Dahlberg the deputy, and she was doing her job.

And then I saw it.

Among the trees, on a flat patch of pine duff, lay a pile of clothing. A pair of slides so worn the rubber was gone in places, exposing the fibrous backing. Well-loved (and well-worn) Rip Curl shorts with a familiar stitch along the side, repairing a tear from when a branch had snagged them. The T-shirt showed a cheery hamburger carrying a surf board, and the words Tasty Waves . It should have been white, but instead, it was reddish brown. Rust, I thought. My brain was still skipping. Deputy Dahlberg was saying something. I was missing things, still staring at the shirt.

Not rust. Blood.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

The Hastings Rock sheriff's office was located inside a concrete building with a flat roof and a bad attempt at a folksy stone veneer. Inside, it wasn't much better—clean, yes, and well maintained, but it still felt like a public building. It had vinyl tiles and neutral paint, and the lobby was decorated with posters warning you about strangers and suspicious packages and crossing the street. What seemed to be a Muzak rendition of “Thriller” played overhead; it was probably meant to make everyone feel as calm and cozy as if they were stuffed in an elevator. From farther back came voices and then a microwave dinged. Next to me, Indira wrinkled her nose, and Fox stuck out their tongue. Millie and Louis didn't react—they were too busy holding hands (both hands, as a matter of fact). Then I caught a whiff of something like warmed-up tuna casserole. Nobody asked me, but in my book, microwaving fish in a shared office was a bold move.

After I'd spotted the bloodstained clothes, Salk had arrived, and he'd escorted me back to the Pilot. (Which was a polite way of saying that Deputy Salkanovich, who was Hastings Rock's former star quarterback, a total sweetheart, and who had once told me if Bobby broke my heart, he'd wrestle him—very confusing, as you might imagine—had dragged my sorry keister away from the evidence.) I hadn't wasted any time before calling Bobby. But it didn't matter; I was too late. Bobby told me they'd already found Keme and taken him to the station. So, I called Indira.

And now, here we were. The Last Picks.

Only, not all of us. Because Keme wasn't here. And neither was Bobby.

Waiting looked different for each of us. Indira sat perfectly still, with a kind of preternatural calm that was actually more frightening than if she'd been screaming.

Fox kept busy for a while punching holes in bottle caps and then stringing them on a shoelace, but they quickly settled into a doze. Millie cried. Like, a lot. Loudly. And Louis looked like he wanted her to let go of one of his hands so he could play on his phone.

How did I spend my time waiting? I'm so glad you asked. I did what I'm best at: I worried. I'm a great worrier. I worried about everything. I worried until my head ached, until my stomach was completely acidified, and until my neck throbbed like someone had closed a clamp around it. (If you ask me, I did a great job.)

“Well, well, well. If it isn't Encyclopedia Brown.”

I recognized Tripple's voice before I saw him. He stood at the reception desk, flipping through a stack of papers. He glanced up at me with a smirk. “Did you save your buddy yet?”

Next to me, Indira radiated anger. Fox snorted in their sleep. Millie burst into a fresh wail of tears. Louis had successfully freed one hand and was reading something on his phone.

“Ignore him,” I muttered.

“Let me guess,” Tripple said. “You and Bobby are going to play boyfriend detectives as soon as he's off duty.”

“No,” I said. Not because I didn't like the idea of playing boyfriend detectives with Bobby, but because Bobby had this whole thing about honor and duty and responsibility.

Tripple just laughed, though. “Sure, you are. You were already poking around at the RV park. Let's hear what you learned, Deputy Dash.” His tone had that patronizing

good humor I associated with distant (and usually unpleasant) elderly relatives. “Did you crack the case?”

“I wanted to talk to Keme’s mom. He didn’t do this, and if you—” I almost said were halfway decent at your job , but since my conflict-averse meter was quickly buzzing up into the red, I just sank down in my seat and mumbled, “—knew Keme, you’d know that too.”

“Oh yeah? Did you find some evidence? Got any proof?”

I refused to look at him, but a flush prickled its way up my neck and into my face.

“Don’t you have anything that requires your attention, Deputy Tripple?” Indira asked in a clipped tone.

Tripple only laughed again. He tapped the papers on the desk to line up their edges and headed for the door that led deeper into the station.

As soon as Tripple cleared the door, Sheriff Acosta stepped into the lobby.

I shot out of my chair.

Sheriff Acosta was a sturdily built woman with warm brown skin and dark hair pulled into a ponytail. She was a good sheriff. She was fair. She didn’t throw children in the slammer (never mind that Keme was, legally, an adult). In fact, as far as I knew, she didn’t even call it the slammer. She was a smart, reasonable, competent professional.

Which is why I said, “This is wrongful arrest. This is false imprisonment. You can’t—”

Bobby followed the sheriff into the lobby, and she turned to look at him. He didn’t do

anything, but something in his pose suggested a nonverbal I warned you .

“Hello, Dash,” the sheriff said. “Indira, Fox, Millie.” There was a slight pause. “Louis.”

“Hiya, Sheriff,” Louis said. “We’re all so worried. What can we do to help?”

He didn’t sound particularly worried, but it still made Millie erupt in a louder-than-usual sob.

“Is Keme okay?” Indira asked as she got to her feet. Her voice was steady, and her face was smooth, but her hands were tightly clasped, and there was an electric charge of worry in the air around her. “May I see him?”

“He’s all right,” the sheriff said. “You’ll be able to see him in a little while, I think.”

“HE DIDN’T DO IT!” Millie’s shout rang out in the lobby as she got up stiffly from her chair. (For that matter, Millie’s shout probably rang out in the next town over. I thought Louis’s eyes might have rolled up inside his head.) “KEME DIDN’T DO IT! HE WAS WITH ME ALL NIGHT .” (The italics are to help you understand she got even. louder .) “AND I HAVE PROOF!” She fumbled her phone out of her pocket to display a picture of a group of people. Keme might have been in the mix, but before I could spot him, Millie swiped. “WE WERE AT A PARTY, SO HE COULDN’T HAVE DONE IT!”

The sheriff must have been made of sterner stuff than the rest of us mortals because she looked unfazed. She listened to Millie (if listened is the correct word when you feel like someone has a megaphone pressed to your ear) without her expression changing. “That’s good to know, Millie. Thank you for telling me. I’ll need you to make a statement to Deputy Mai, and I’ll need those photos as well.”

Millie looked like she hadn't expected that response; her own face seemed caught between the lingering desire to carry on the fight, and numb relief.

That was until Louis cleared his throat and said, "Well, Sheriff, he wasn't with us the whole night."

"YES, HE—" Millie began.

Louis shushed her and caught her hand to pat it. "Be quiet now, babe. I've got this."

You could have heard a pin drop in that room. (If you still had functioning eardrums.)

I swear to God: Indira growled.

Fox crossed themselves.

"Keme was at the party," Louis said—oblivious to the fact that he was one gingerbread house away from Indira roasting him in an oven. "But he was only there for an hour or so. He was gone by nine."

The hurt on Millie's face was too much to look at; I averted my gaze.

"But he WAS there—" Millie began.

"A couple of my friends and I," Louis said over her (no mean feat), "we saw him leave. I can give you some names if that would help."

I waited for the sheriff's cross-examination of Millie, but all she said was "Thank you, Louis. I'd like you to make a statement too, and I'll need you to provide Deputy Mai with those names."

When I was brave enough to risk another look, the pain on Millie's face looked even deeper. Louis was still patting her hand.

It felt like that awful, frozen moment would go on forever, but then Fox said, "Leaving aside Millie's terrible attempt at an alibi, you can't tell me you think Keme had something to do with that man's death. Keme wouldn't hurt a soul." Fox seemed to consider this, head cocked to the side, and then added, "Except Dash."

"I understand that this is a difficult, stressful time," the sheriff said, "and emotions are running high. Right now, the best thing you can do for Keme is be ready to show him your love and support when you're able to see him. I understand if you feel like you need to wait here, but I encourage you to go home and get some rest. I'll contact you when Keme can have visitors."

Another of those frozen gulfs opened up.

"But you can't be serious," Fox said. "This is ridiculous. We're talking about Keme."

"Bobby, go ahead and take those statements," the sheriff said. "Dash, if you'd come with me."

She didn't seem to be asking, so I followed her out of the lobby.

As the sheriff led me down a hallway, she said, "I understand you're already conducting your own investigation."

"I don't know about an investigation," I said, "but I did talk to Keme's mom and—I don't know, her boyfriend." I filled her in on the conversation, including their vagueness about why Keme had gotten upset and the reason for his argument with JT, and then I told her about the other man, the one from Orange County, who had argued with JT.

“California?” the sheriff asked.

“I have no idea. Foster didn’t seem like the chewiest, um, cookie in the drawer.”

(I was sixty percent certain that was an expression.)

“Why would someone drive all the way up here from California to argue with JT?” the sheriff said, but it wasn’t really a question, so I just offered a shrug.

We passed the squad room, where Salk and Dahlberg were having a conversation in low—and what appeared to be unhappy—voices. Neither of them looked up when I passed. We continued down the hall. There were more of those public safety posters. (One of them was about Sasquatch, but I was pretty sure it was a joke.) And someone had hung the kind of “public spaces” art that you could get at TJ Maxx. (Skyscrapers in black and white! A triptych with a distressed wooden frame!) I’d been back here before, of course—even as a suspect myself. But the last year, and my relationship with Bobby, had wiped away a lot of those bad associations. Now it felt like I was seeing everything anew, and it all felt wrong. Like the building had been turned upside down. Or this was one of those dreams where you were lost in a maze.

“You understand,” the sheriff said, “that your personal connection to the case means that I can’t contract you to help with the investigation.”

“I know,” I said. And maybe it was the disorienting unreality of the moment that made me brave enough to add, “But I’m still going to try to help Keme.”

“I know,” the sheriff said.

She opened a door, and we stepped into a dark room. The only bright spot was a smoky piece of glass that looked in on the next room, where Keme sat at a table. Even though I knew he couldn’t see us, it felt like he was staring right at me, his jaw

set with familiar belligerence. A bruise was darkening at the corner of his mouth, and the skin had split above his temple. He also had one heck of a shiner.

“I’ll have to send someone to take statements from them again,” the sheriff said. “From his mom, I mean, and her partner. When Salk tried to talk to them, the boyfriend wouldn’t give him the time of day. He told Salk he didn’t know where the mom was. Didn’t know how to reach her.”

“That’s interesting,” I said. “He told September she was asleep when the deputies came around to ask about Keme.” I hesitated. “She took a pill while I was there. I don’t know what it was, but it felt...weird.”

Weird actually didn’t begin to describe it, but I wasn’t ready to get into the details.

The sheriff only nodded. Then she said, “We canvassed the park, as I’m sure you guessed, and the statements we took back up what you told us. No one was seen entering the house after Deputy Tripple and Channelle left.”

“So, that’s the last time anyone saw him alive,” I said. “Do you have a time of death?”

“The district medical examiner puts it somewhere between eight and ten last night. We’re thinking it had to be around ten, since JT made a couple of phone calls around nine-thirty.”

“Who’d he call?” I asked.

“Deputy Tripple for one,” the sheriff said drily. “Apparently he had complaints about how Tripple handled things earlier, but he framed it as wanting to ‘add something to the incident report.’ Jaklin put him through to Tripple’s phone, and he read Tripple the riot act. After that, JT called over to the Bay Bridge Suites. Apparently he knew,

or he guessed, that's where Channelle would be staying. He kept asking the front desk to connect him to different rooms, hoping he'd get lucky. After a while, May—the woman working the desk—told him to stop bothering people and hung up on him.”

Then something I hadn't really thought about occurred to me. “He lived in the park office?”

“Yeah, it's got living quarters attached to the back.”

“Where was he found?”

“In the garage.”

“And he was killed with a blunt object.”

The sheriff nodded. “The garage is half storage unit and half tool shed, so there were plenty of things lying around. It's possible the killer planned this and came prepared, but it feels spontaneous to me—an argument escalated, and someone grabbed whatever was at hand and hit him with it.”

On the other side of the smoky glass, Keme's face was stone.

“He didn't do this,” I said quietly.

“Dash, I've got a shirt, shorts, and slides covered in blood. We already typed it, and it matches JT. The DNA results will come back as a match too, I'm sure. And I know you want to be a loyal friend, so I'm not going to ask you to confirm this, but I know those clothes belong to Keme.”

“Did Bobby—” I regretted the question as soon as I began to ask, and I mumbled,

“Never mind.”

The silence drew out between us until the sheriff said, “No, Dash. It wasn’t Bobby.”

After a deep breath, I said as firmly as I could, “Keme didn’t do this.”

Sheriff Acosta nodded, but she said, “You understand I can’t take your word for it, though.”

“I know. But I want you to know he didn’t do it. What about the wife? What about the other man who got into a fight with JT yesterday? Nobody actually saw the killer go into the house, right?” The sheriff didn’t answer, so I continued, “They had to have entered from the back. They walked through the trees and got inside the office that way. I mean, the front of the office is practically a fishbowl—someone would have seen the killer.” She still hadn’t said anything, so I said, “You knew that. That’s why you had Dahlberg searching the tree line.”

“And that’s where she found the only physical evidence in this investigation,” the sheriff said. “Do you see my problem?”

I wanted to say again, Keme didn’t do this . But I didn’t.

“Right now,” Acosta said, “I need you to convince Keme to help himself.” At my glance, she continued, “He won’t talk, Dash. To anyone. He just stares us down.”

“He’ll talk to Bobby.”

“He won’t, actually. Bobby was in there for almost an hour, and Keme didn’t so much as look at him. I thought maybe his mom...”

The trailed-off sentence seemed like an invitation, so I shook my head. “I don’t know

how much help she'd be. I can't figure out their relationship."

"Turns out, it's a moot point; when I finally got her on the phone, she said she wouldn't be coming down to the station because, quote, 'Keme's an adult now, and we raised him to be independent.'" The sheriff snorted. "'We raised him to be independent' is pretty big talk for a woman who lives off a trust her dad left her, with a sponge of a boyfriend who spends half his time catting around."

I'd never heard the sheriff editorialize like that.

Clearing her throat, she gave an embarrassed shake of her head that was almost lost in the dim light. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Uh, no, that was amazing."

For some reason, she put her hands on her hips—like I was the problem. "I'd like you to see if you could get Keme to tell us where he was last night. Even if he thinks it won't help because he was on his own, there's a chance we could verify the alibi. If we can verify it, Keme's in the clear, bloody clothes or no bloody clothes."

"If he won't talk to Bobby, he won't talk to me, but I guess I can try." I took a step toward the door, and then I stopped. "Sheriff, do you think Keme's bad? I mean, do you honestly believe he's capable of something like this?"

She was nothing more than a silhouette, hands on her hips, like a darker spot in all the darkness. Finally, she cleared her throat again. "He's had a rough life, Dash. He has a temper, and a history of fights, and—and I don't know how to put this. I know you and your friends care about him. But you've got to understand, to a lot of the town, Keme is...strange. He doesn't talk to most people. He's closed-off. And frankly, he's downright rude sometimes. He doesn't act like a normal kid, so people don't know what to make of him. And people are afraid of things they don't understand."

I waited for more. And then I said, “I didn’t think you did.”

She didn’t say anything, but as I swung open the door, she said in a low, hard voice, “It doesn’t matter what I think.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

When I stepped into the interview room, Keme didn't look over. He kept staring straight ahead, his gaze fixed on his reflection in the mirror, arms folded across his chest. The bruises looked worse without the filter of dark glass between us, and although his hands were tucked under his arms, I wouldn't be surprised to see split knuckles. He sat very still, his breathing shallow, and I wondered how many more bruises hid under the hoodie.

The room was small, with fluorescent panels and oatmeal-colored walls and straight-back metal chairs that looked like they had zero lumbar support. It smelled like Funyuns, and it was bright enough that I thought too long in this light would give me a splitting headache.

I pulled out the chair next to Keme. My knee bumped his, and he pulled his leg away, but he didn't look at me.

"Hi," I said.

Nothing.

"Are you okay?"

Still nothing.

"That was a dumb question," I said. "How are you doing?"

His breathing was still high and thin. Sitting next to him, I could almost feel his heart racing. How long had they had him in here? How long had he been alone, panicked,

frozen? I knew what it was like to be a suspect in a murder investigation. It was, to put it bluntly, horrible. It was disorienting. It was terrifying. There was a kind of dissociative disbelief, like I'd stepped out of my life by accident and couldn't quite get back. And I'd been in my late twenties, with parents who would, at a bare minimum, provide the financial resources I needed. What would it be like to be a teenager whose mom couldn't be bothered to come down to the station because her latest boyfriend was trying to make a point? A teenager who'd had to rely on himself for most of his life? Who had learned the hard way that even the people you thought you could depend on weren't going to be there for you? Like his mom.

Or Bobby.

The thought flashed through me. It left my fingertips tingling, and a faint tremor in my hands.

I worked saliva into my mouth. "If you don't want to talk, that's okay. But I want you to know that nobody who knows you thinks you did this. We don't think you did it. I don't think you did it. I know you didn't do it. And we're going to make sure you're okay."

The muscles in his jaw tightened. How hard was he trying, I wanted to know, not to show anything? Not to give away even a single moment of weakness—or what must have felt to him like weakness?

"But I hope you'll think about telling us where you were last night. Even if it's embarrassing, or you think we'll be disappointed in you, or you did something you're not proud of, it doesn't matter, Keme. What matters right now is proving you couldn't have done this. So, we need to know where you were last night. And we need you to help us."

His eyes were dark. They shimmered with the rainbow drift of the fluorescents.

Relationships had never been a strong suit for me. I mean, my whole romantic life had been a series of ongoing disasters, mostly because of my indecisiveness and my general lack of self-confidence when it came to knowing what the heck was going on. It had been true to a lesser extent with friends, and so my friend groups had always been small, and they'd always been more about who wanted to invite me to things than about active effort on my part to cultivate meaningful relationships. (See above about indecisiveness and lack of self-confidence—plus, I overanalyzed everything and because, you know, social interaction made me want to scream into a pillow.)

But I'd been trying to do better. To take risks. To make myself vulnerable. And Keme was my friend.

Which was why it only took me about thirty seconds of panic-calculating before I reached out to touch his arm. His whole body went stiff, which wasn't exactly encouraging, but I plunged forward. "And I want you to know that all of us—Bobby and Fox and Indira and Millie—"

Keme didn't exactly flinch. But he did shift away from me in his seat.

"—and I, we care about you so much."

And then came the truly scary part.

I was a little embarrassed by the thought that Bobby would be proud of me.

I scooted forward in my seat, and I brought my arms around Keme to hug him. "We love you—"

Keme knocked my arms away. He shot up from his seat, his face reduced to dark lines, and he shoved me.

The force of the push threw me out of my chair. I landed hard on my butt. My elbow cracked against the table, and it must have gotten my funny bone exactly right because it felt like I grabbed a live wire. I stared up at Keme.

He had backed himself into a corner, his hands held out in front of him like I might come after him. His face was impossible to read, but he was breathing like he'd just finished a race, and his hands were shaking.

The door swung open, and Sheriff Acosta stepped into the room. She had her hand on her gun, although it was still holstered, and she looked at Keme first and then at me.

"I'm okay," I said. It certainly seemed true—my arm was zinging, and my butt ached, but those were minor things. "It's fine," I said. "I'm okay."

To prove it, I used the table to get to my feet.

I looked at Keme. His eyes were blank, like he wasn't seeing me. Or like he'd never seen me before.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He stared at me.

"Step out here," the sheriff said.

I moved backward, unable to take my gaze off Keme until I reached the hallway and the sheriff shut the door.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I nodded, rubbing my arm. (Better than rubbing my butt.) "I shouldn't have—he

doesn't like—" Tears welled up, and I blinked desperately to keep them from falling. The tide of embarrassment at my reaction only made things worse, though, and despite my best efforts, my voice thinned as I tried to say, "I should have known."

"It's okay," the sheriff said. "As long as you're okay."

I shook my head, but I didn't know at what. "I'm going to get him a lawyer." My face was hot. I was starting to shake. "I should get him a lawyer. I'll call Lyda."

"That's probably a good idea," the sheriff said. "Dash, why don't you sit down for a moment?"

I shook my head again, and I managed to firm up my voice a little. "Can you—can you wait? To arrest him, I mean. It'll be on his record, you know, if you arrest him. So, if you could wait. Like, a day." She looked back at me with unhappy eyes. "I know you have to do it eventually, but just a day. Please."

Slowly, the sheriff said, "I have to charge him by the end of the day tomorrow."

I nodded. "Thank you."

"I really think you need to sit down. Let me find you somewhere private—"

Waving off the words, I turned and stumbled toward the closest exit.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

I made it to the Pilot and got behind the wheel before I started to cry. At first, they were tight, furious tears. Tight because I was trying so hard to hold them back. And furious because—well, because I was furious. At myself, most of all. For being so stupid. And for crying, because it was so embarrassing. Then the dam cracked, and I cried harder, and some of it was for Keme, and some of it was for myself.

The door clicked open. I blinked stinging eyes at Bobby. His face was grim and drawn, but it softened when he pulled me into his arms.

He let me cry, and he rubbed my back and made soft, comforting noises. And after a while, I was better. Or I stopped crying, at least. My eyes were hot and itchy. My nose was clogged. My cheeks felt sticky with salt tracks.

Bobby found tissues in the pocket of the door (I told you it was a mom car), and as I pressed a wad of them to my eyes, fighting an aftershock of fresh tears, I said, “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” Bobby said. He was rubbing my shoulder, and he paused now to squeeze for emphasis. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Well, I did. Obviously. But I mean for crying. I’m sorry I’m such a mess.”

It took Bobby a second before he said, “Why would you need to apologize for crying?”

And, since he was Bobby, it was a real question.

I didn't answer right away. The late October day was thinning around us, and the gloom made the distances grow. A Schwan's truck rolled slowly past, the rumble of its engine swallowing up smaller sounds, and it felt like it was miles away instead of a few yards. Even farther off, the last of the light came through the branches of a crimson-tipped strawberry tree. It set the little red berries aglow, and the peeling, cinnamon-colored bark looked like paper about to burn. Then the Schwan's truck moved on, and the rumble fell away into the gathering shadows.

I rubbed my chest without really thinking about it. Keme hadn't shoved me hard enough to hurt, but when I tried to take a deep breath, it felt like I couldn't. Like the muscles were too stiff—bruised. But, of course, they weren't. That was only in my imagination.

"Do you want me to drive you to Dr. Xu?" Bobby asked.

"What? Oh. No, I'm fine. Thank you."

His hand slid from my shoulder to the back of my neck. With his other hand, he brushed my hair away from my forehead. It wasn't anything you couldn't do in public, but it also felt intensely intimate, like I was naked in the sheriff's station's gravel lot. I caught myself glancing around to check if anyone else could see us, but we were alone. A little, squirming part of me told me to shift, fidget, move in some way that would make him drop his hands.

But Bobby spoke first. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I shook my head. And then words came tumbling out. "It's all so awful. I was over at Keme's mom's place. Have you ever been there?"

"Not inside."

“But you know,” I said. “Does everyone know? Does Indira? Does Millie?”

“That they live at the RV park? Yes, everyone knows.”

“Not that.” I tried to think about how to put it into words. “It would be so much...I don’t know, simpler, I guess, if his mom was just this outright awful person. But she’s not. She actually seems sweet. And she’s totally incapable of taking care of herself, much less Keme. I don’t know why. I don’t know if that’s how she’s always been, or if it’s like a learned helplessness kind of thing, and at some point, she decided to be that way because she thought it was easier. But that’s how it is. I mean, Foster is obviously the one making all the decisions, and before him, there was somebody else, wasn’t there?”

Bobby nodded.

“And there’s this part of me that sat in that stupid camper and wanted to scream at them. Wanted to shake September. Because even though I feel bad for her, I feel worse for Keme. I mean, it’s like she doesn’t care about him at all. No, that’s not right. It’s like—it’s like he’s somebody she knows, and she likes him, and she hopes everything turns out all right for him, but that’s as far as it goes.”

Brushing my hair away from my forehead again, Bobby said, “That sounds like a defense mechanism. She hasn’t had an easy life either, from what I gather. At some point, it was too hard or too much to worry about Keme. And so she stopped.”

“But how? I mean, he’s her son. If we have kids, I’m going to duct-tape them to chairs and not let them out of the house until they’re forty. Do you know what happens to kids in this world?”

On the strawberry tree, a squirrel scampered up a branch, making it sway. A second squirrel chased after it, chittering.

“Also, please stare into this memory wipe device,” I said, “and forget I said anything about having kids.”

For an instant, the whole world lit up with Bobby’s big, goofy grin. Then he swept his fingers slowly across my forehead again. “I’m more worried about the duct-taping-them-to-chairs part.”

“Wasps, Bobby. Trampolines. Middle school locker rooms. Do you know they expect you to shower ? And don’t get me started on organized sports.”

That white slice of his grin broadened again. But then it faded, and he said, “For some people, it’s easier to put up walls than to keep being hurt. And the walls look different for different people.”

Leaning into the warmth of his touch, I let myself relax a little. “I know. It just—it just broke my heart. And then they found those bloody clothes, and as soon as I saw them, I knew they were Keme’s. I mean, I’ve seen him wear that stupid hamburger T-shirt so many times I’m surprised it hasn’t rotted away to nothing. In medical terms, I freaked the fuck out. And then I came here, and the sheriff is actually thinking about arresting him, and he won’t say anything, and he’s clearly been in a fight—”

I touched my chest again without thinking about it.

This time, Bobby’s hand wrapped around mine, and in an unfamiliar voice, he asked, “Did he hurt you?”

It took me a moment to register that new note as anger. Tightly controlled, yes. But definitely there, and shaded with protectiveness and something else, something even scarier, a matter-of-factness that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Like Bobby was going to handle it—permanently—if anyone hurt me.

(And yes, I kind of liked it.)

“No,” I said. “And knock it off. I don’t want you going in there after I leave and beating him with wet towels or rubber hoses or, um, ladies’ swimming suits.”

It took about two seconds before “What?”

“They’re kind of like the intersection of wet towels and rubber hoses, right? An all-purpose, leave-no-marks torture device? You could really whip him with a bikini top.”

Three seconds before “Dash.”

“And I know this part is dumb, but it was weirdly embarrassing to fall on my butt in front of the sheriff. I know she didn’t care. I know it doesn’t matter. But it hurt, and then I started to cry and that was even more embarrassing.” The rest of it flowed out of me, and I couldn’t have stopped it if I’d wanted to. “And the worst part is I thought I was being brave. I thought I was doing, you know, something good. Going outside my comfort zone. Showing him how much I cared about him. I mean, Bobby, my God, I was going to hug him, and it wasn’t a funeral or National Taco Day. We weren’t even shipping him off to war.”

“What war?”

“And instead, I was just...wrong. I mean totally, completely, humiliatingly wrong. He didn’t want a hug. He didn’t need a hug. He definitely didn’t—I don’t know what I was thinking. At the best possible times, I’m the most annoying person he’s ever met. I should have remembered that.”

“Dash,” he said softly.

“That’s all,” I said.

The hum of tires came from the next block.

“The end,” I said.

I thought, maybe, I could hear the ocean, but it was probably just the blood in my ears.

“I’m done emoting,” I told him.

He didn’t actually say, Thank God , but sometimes you can tell.

Then I asked, “Are you okay?”

In the strawberry tree, the squirrels were still playing tag, barely more than shadows chasing each other now. The hum of tires faded. The light faded, and the world grew thinner.

“Yes,” Bobby said.

Because he was Bobby.

“I swear to God, if that’s all you say after I spilled my guts,” I told him.

He wasn’t exactly the eye-rolling type, but he did give my hand an amused little shake. “How did you put it? It made me feel feelings.”

“More,” I growled.

He actually laughed, which all things considered, was very rude. But the amusement

dropped away, and when he spoke, his voice was heavy. “I’m...not happy.”

“Okay. This is good. Keep going.”

“I—” Bobby released my hand and rubbed his eyes. My heartbeats counted out his silence. He stopped rubbing his eyes and put one hand on the roof of the Pilot, and he looked off into the dark, and I didn’t know what he was seeing. “I tried to talk to him,” Bobby said, “and he looked at me like—like I was nobody. Like I wasn’t even a person. Everybody else who tried, he stared in the mirror, but he looked at me.” Bobby stopped again. I could feel him battling himself, fighting to control his emotions. “I should have—” But the words cut off. And then he said, voice tight, “I should have done something .”

“He’s scared,” I said. “And he doesn’t know what’s going on.”

“He knows. He’s scared, but he knows.”

“Bobby, he idolizes you. He was probably embarrassed you saw him like that.”

Bobby shook his head. “I should have done something.”

“Like what?”

He made an unhappy sound that wasn’t exactly a laugh. Then he looked at me. “I’m proud of you for taking a risk with Keme. I know that was hard for you. And I don’t think you should read too much into what Keme did. He loves you.”

“You realize this is a pot-and-kettle situation, right?”

“I’m kind of gathering that.”

“Well, I’m going to help him even if he does think I’m the most annoying person in the world. Keme didn’t do this. I understand the sheriff is in a bad spot because there’s all this evidence, but I’m not going to let anyone pin this on Keme.”

I waited for the arguments, but what Bobby said was “I don’t know how much I’ll be able to help you. The sheriff is keeping me out of this.” Sourly, he added, “Rightly so.”

“I know.”

His jaw was tight, but he spoke with forced casualness. “What are you going to do?”

“Do we have any idea where Keme got those bruises?”

Bobby shook his head.

“I think I should talk to Millie,” I said. “What did she say when she gave her statement?”

“She didn’t. She ran out of the station the minute you went with the sheriff. Louis too.”

“What? Why?”

All I got in answer was a patented Bobby Mai shrug.

“Well, I’ll see if I can pin her down. If Keme was at that party, maybe I can figure out where he went next. Put together a timeline, you know? All we have to do is establish an alibi for JT’s time of death.”

“And you might suggest that next time, Millie not lie to the sheriff. That kind of thing

only makes this worse for Keme.”

I sat up straight. “Oh, I had a brain, um, flash.”

Bobby did not look suitably impressed.

“What if we framed Louis for JT’s murder? Hear me out! That’s two birds with one stone. We get rid of Louis, and we save Keme.”

Bobby considered me for a long time. Then he said, “I know you’re joking, but just in case: absolutely not.”

“He called me Dan! And he said Fox’s ‘costume’ looked nice! And he said mysteries are like dessert , and that’s an insult to mystery novels and to dessert.”

Leaning in, Bobby kissed me and said, “Please be safe.”

“He’s a philosophy major.”

Bobby didn’t look back, but he gave me a little wave over his shoulder as he headed into the sheriff’s station.

I waited until he was inside, and then I gave him an extra minute, just to be safe. I wanted to make sure Bobby didn’t come back to ask a follow-up question, or tell me he’d changed his mind and was on board with my plan to frame Louis, or kiss me again. (I definitely wouldn’t have minded the last one.)

I had to wait. Because Bobby would have known, as soon as I turned the Pilot out of the lot, that I wasn’t going to Millie’s. I turned the other way and drove toward the Bay Bridge Suites.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

On my drive across town, I called Lyda Hayashi, defense attorney extraordinaire. Lyda worked out of Portland (believe it or not, Hastings Rock didn't have an established criminal defense lawyer, which seemed like a real missed opportunity). She'd helped me and Hugo when we'd been suspects in murder investigations, and when I explained the situation with Keme, she agreed to see what she could do. I asked if there was a punch card or a loyalty rewards system. (Buy two murders, get one free. Actually, it would be 'Buy two murder defenses'—you get the point.) She laughed, and somehow, when she disconnected, the sound was very expensive.

Then I turned my mind to the task ahead of me. What I'd told Bobby was true—I needed to talk to Millie. I wanted to know why she'd tried to give Keme such an easily disproven alibi. And I wanted to know what Millie could tell me without Louis around, which I was starting to suspect would be more difficult than I'd realized. The idea of establishing a timeline for JT's murder was a good one, and I needed to do that too.

But every murder investigation is ultimately about the nexus of people surrounding the victim. And there was one person who should have automatically been at the top of the suspect list: JT's wife, Channelle. In the first place, because the spouse was always the most likely suspect. And in the second, because Channelle and JT had argued the same night JT was killed. They had a history of domestic disputes, as a matter of fact. And if JT really had been killed in anger—if someone had grabbed something in the garage and hit him with it, as the sheriff had suggested—then the pieces fit. It wasn't hard to imagine what had happened: Channelle had gone back to the house that night, and they'd resumed their argument. Things had gotten out of hand, and boom—no more JT.

It was certainly more convincing than the theory that an eighteen-year-old boy, who was kind of my brother and kind of my foster son and kind of my seventh-grade bully, had murdered JT for no apparent reason. And even though I knew that any modern law enforcement officer would say that evidence and opportunity were the deciding factors, I still believed motive was important. Call me old-fashioned.

By the time I got to the Bay Bridge Suites, night had settled fully over Hastings Rock. The motel was a two-story cinder-block building in a courtyard design. It was painted a creamy white, and light splashed against the walls from decorative floods. Cute little '50s-ish wall sconces with ribbed-glass jar shades provided additional touches of light. Along the exterior corridors, the doors alternated in pops of red and blue. The sign was red too, the fat, mid-century letters pushing back the dark with their neon glow. It looked like it could have been in a Hopper painting, albeit one with a splash of Andy Warhol. There was even a pool, and if this had been a noir movie, it would have been a great place to find a body floating in it. Instead, a stocky little black duck was squawking in outrage at an abandoned pool noodle.

I parked across the street in front of a darkened real estate office, and I sat and watched. A light was on in the motel's office, and more lights shone in the curtained windows of the rooms, but my overall impression was that this was a sleepy space. We were past the peak of tourist season, and although the town still had a fair number of visitors through October and into November, it was obvious that the Bay Bridge Suites had rooms to spare. The first and most important question was: which one was Channelle's? If this were a mystery novel—and if I were Will Gower—I'd have been able to determine where she was staying through a combination of common sense and reasoning. For example, Will Gower might realize that with the motel mostly empty, Channelle would likely be staying where it was easy for the staff to clean her room—near the office. In real life, there was probably something to that, but my brain didn't exactly work that way. My brain was more inclined to spout every single possibility, no matter how unlikely, and assume they were all equally valid. For example, what if she'd asked for a room on the end because she wanted privacy?

What if she'd wanted a view of the bridge? What if she'd hurt her leg committing murder, and she didn't want to use the stairs? Maybe, I decided, I should count the windows that had lights in them, and then, by process of elimination—

Someone rapped on the Pilot's window.

I swear to God: I shot out of my shorts.

(I also said some words that never made it into the Bay Bridge Suites' promotional materials.)

Brow furrowed, Indira gave me a slightly disapproving look through the glass. It was made more effective by the enormous pistol she held in one hand.

“What are you—” I buzzed down the window. “What are you doing? And put that away.”

On anyone else, I would have called Indira's expression haughty as she slid the gun into her purse. “The same thing you're doing, I imagine. Trying to talk to Channelle Haskins.”

I imagined how Bobby—not to mention the sheriff—would take this latest development. I wasn't sure the town could handle another amateur snoop. I mean, sleuth.

So, I said, “No, I'm not.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

That one stumped me, but then genius struck. “Buying a beach house.”

It's kind of amazing how good Indira is at the mom look—you know, the one that says she knows you're full of horse plop.

"Indira," I said, "you can't."

"Why not? You can. Is it because I'm a woman? Is it because of my age?"

The sky was totally clear, and it had been an absolutely perfect day (in terms of weather, not in terms of having your friend framed for murder). But I'm not joking: I heard thunder.

"Uh, no," I said. "It's because—" Feet don't fail me now, I thought. "—you're an upstanding citizen, and Keme needs you not to get yourself thrown in jail."

"I'm not going to get myself thrown in jail," Indira said. But she shifted her purse, and her gaze slid away from mine. Her voice tightened. "Keme is—is sitting in a cell right now, Dashiell. He's alone." She stopped, and several seconds passed before she spoke again, her voice thinner and higher as she forced the words out. "And I have to do something. If you're not going to help me, I'll talk to her myself. She's in room two-oh-six; I called and asked."

"And they told you?"

Indira ignored me. "I'm perfectly capable of handling this on my own."

And then she stood there, clutching her purse with both hands, staring at that stocky little duck as it screamed at the pool noodle.

Several things clicked. She'd been here, waiting. She hadn't gone up to the room, even though she knew which one it was. And when I'd arrived, she'd tapped on my window. And now she was just standing there. Plus the fact—of which I was

occasionally reminded by people who loved me and wanted the best for me—that normal people like Indira didn’t regularly do things like interview strangers about the murders of their husbands. (The implication was: unlike me .)

I sent a silent apology to Bobby and the sheriff and professional law enforcement everywhere. And then I said, “Maybe we should talk to her together.”

The stiffness in her voice almost hid the relief. “Whatever you think is best, dear. You’re the detective.”

“I’m more of a snoop,” I said as I got out of the Pilot. “I mean, if you ask anyone else.”

“I’m sure you are, dear.”

“No, I meant—” I tried not to sigh. “Here we go.”

Room 206 was on the second floor, so we climbed the stairs together. We still hadn’t seen anyone. Tourists in October and November tended to be retirees, and I was starting to suspect that everyone staying at the Bay Bridge Suites had gone to bed with the sun. We made our way past darkened windows and stopped in front of room 206. This window was dark too. I had a hard time believing Channelle had called it a night after the blue plate special, but anything was possible. I knocked, and the door shifted in its frame.

“Try again,” Indira whispered.

“Why are you whispering?”

“Knock on the door, Dashiell.”

I knocked again. The door shifted again. That kind of thing happened in old buildings as they settled and the frames went out of true. But it didn't exactly inspire a lot of confidence in the Bay Bridge Suites.

"She's not there," Indira whispered.

"Guess not. We can try tomorrow. I also think we need to talk to Millie—"

"Don't be silly. This is a perfect opportunity." She opened her purse and began to rummage around. "I know I have a bobby pin in here somewhere."

"A what?"

"A bobby pin." With a cry of triumph, she produced one and held it out to me. "Go on, dear."

"And do what?"

"Pick the lock, of course."

Of course.

I stared at the bobby pin. "I have no idea how to open a lock with this. Maybe if I had my picks, but they're back at the house. Also, remember how we talked about not getting thrown in jail?"

With a slightly miffed noise, Indira lowered herself to examine the lock. It wasn't exactly high security—it was set into the doorknob, and I guessed that the real security, if you could call it that, consisted of one of those swing bars or a chain, something you set from the inside. Indira considered the lock for a moment, set one hand on the door, and frowned.

The door popped open.

(The bobby pin never went into the lock, by the way. It never even came close.)

Chills washed over me. The sound of traffic from the bridge, which until then had been steady, dropped away.

Here's the thing. Indira is awesome. She's kind. She's wise. She's an incredible chef and even better baker. But she does have that witchy-white lock of hair, and sometimes she has this energy, like if you and Keme don't stop wrestling right. now. you're going to get zapped. And I know magic isn't real. But also, sometimes when I'm around Indira, it's kind of hard to remember that's a fact and not, you know, more of a guideline.

Indira looked up at me. Her eyes were lost in shadow.

"Oh my God." My whisper was barely more than a breath. "Did you do that?"

"Of course not," she said. "The jamb is broken. Look."

I'm not going to lie: it was super disappointing. (Also, kind of a relief.)

I crouched by the door. Indira was right: the wood around the strike plate was splintered, with several larger pieces of wood lying on the floor. I covered my hand with my shirt to avoid leaving prints and pulled the door closed. The latch caught, but only barely. When I pressed on the door near the broken section of jamb, the door popped free again.

"Someone broke into her room," Indira said.

I nodded.

“But who?” she asked. “And why?”

“Good questions.”

“Wouldn’t it have made a lot of noise to break down the door? Someone had to have heard it.”

Shaking my head, I pointed to scuff marks on the jamb. “They used a pry bar or a tire iron or something. You can see where they put it in. The jamb might have made a cracking noise when the wood split, but it’s not like they took this thing off its hinges with a battering ram. Even if you were in the next room, I doubt you’d have heard it, and it doesn’t seem like there’s enough foot traffic to worry about someone seeing you.”

Indira’s mouth hardened into a grim line. She reached into her purse, and instead of the bobby pin, this time she drew out the gun.

Waving Indira to the side, I inched open the door, bracing myself for—well, I don’t know. A knife-wielding maniac to come charging out of the dark. Or the muzzle flash of a gun. Heck, maybe Michael Myers. (It was Halloween, after all.)

Instead, darkness floated out to us, scented with something velvety and floral. A woman’s perfume. I wasn’t an expert, but I was willing to bet it wasn’t the drugstore variety.

After a few more seconds, I stepped inside and turned on the flashlight on my phone. Indira followed me, shutting the door behind her. She produced an actual flashlight from her purse, and between the two of us, we got a decent look at the room.

It had been torn to pieces. The double beds were overturned. A mirror that must have hung on the wall at one point was propped against the wall. The chair cushions had

been slashed, and a vanity lay toppled on its side. Clothes lay everywhere, and the suitcases linings had been sliced to ribbons as well.

“Someone was looking for something,” Indira said.

As far as I knew, this was her first breaking-and-entering-slash-murder-investigation, so I decided to cut her some slack on the narration. But I nodded my agreement.

Before the destruction, it would have been a cute, albeit dated, room. The walls were knotty-pine paneling, and they would have been hung with the local watercolors that now lay on the floor, their glass shattered. The chair and the vanity looked like mid-century pieces. And like the rest of the motel, whoever had designed the place had loved color: teal carpet, mustard-colored bedding, and tangerine upholstery. Now it was a disaster zone.

I picked a path across the room toward a doorway on the far side. It connected to a bathroom, and I wanted to get there first, before Indira. I had an idea of what I might find.

But when I reached the doorway, there was no crumpled body on the shower floor. No shower curtain ripped from its rings. No—wait, was I just thinking of Psycho ? No killer monkey! (That’s from Poe.) Instead, the bathroom was small, with checkerboard tile running across the floor and three-quarters of the way up the walls, complete with a mirrored medicine cabinet, chrome towel rods, and an unopened bar of soap so tiny it wouldn’t even get the job half done. The bathroom, too, had been searched, with Channelle’s toiletry case dumped out on the floor, the medicine cabinet’s door ajar, and the cabinet itself ransacked.

“Dash,” Indira said from the other room.

When I found her, she was crouched next to the vanity, picking through pieces of

something that clinked against each other. She lifted something, and in the gloom, it took me a moment to recognize it. “Roses.”

The roses had been trampled—the stems bent and broken, the flowers flattened, petals mixed in among the broken pieces of the vase. I was surprised I hadn’t smelled them, and then it made sense—the scent of the perfume was overpowering, and I guessed that like a lot of store-bought roses, these didn’t have much fragrance.

“Who buys roses after their husband is beaten to death?” I asked.

“Who sends roses?” Indira corrected softly.

A man, I thought. And then: more clearly, the other man. Because if nothing else, the motel room was evidence that there was another man.

In the wake of the question, the stillness of the motel bore down on me.

“Let’s be quick,” I said.

We resumed our inspection of the room. While Indira examined the overturned vanity, I moved over to the suitcases. As I began to pick through the clothes strewn across the floor, another thought occurred to me.

“Fingerprints,” I whispered to Indira.

She gave me a look that could politely be translated as Don’t teach your grandmother to suck eggs . (Fox had said it to me once, and it stuck.) And then she went back to work.

I was picking through more of the clothes when something rustled. I plucked away a couple more sweaters—cashmere, by the feel of them—and saw what had been

hidden underneath: paperwork. Pages and pages of paperwork lay on the floor, fanned out across the teal carpet as though someone had thrown them down. Whoever it was must not have thought the papers were important—or must not have found whatever they'd been looking for—because when they'd turned their attention to the suitcases, they'd thrown the clothes on top of the paperwork.

In the mess of clothes, I found a pair of stretchy fabric gloves and pulled them on. I did a quick wipe-down of everything we'd already touched, and then I started going through the papers.

They appeared to be paperwork for the RV park. A lot of utility bills, which were all up to date. And then account statements for the park's various tenants. A few of these were marked overdue. Channelle only appeared to have brought the most recent ones—a quick scan showed me they only went back to August.

It was easy to tell right away that something was wrong. The statements were covered with writing in pen: blocky letters that—to me, anyway—suggested a man. There were dates and dollar signs and numbers, and on the printed statements, several of the balances were crossed out and rewritten. I wasn't a financial genius, but it wasn't hard to see that someone, most likely JT, had discovered discrepancies in the accounts—and equally obvious that Channelle hadn't wanted anyone else to see the evidence of JT's attempt to unravel the mess.

Then an Idea (yes, capital I) occurred to me, and I began flipping through the statements.

In August, the statement for September Collson showed she'd been overdue by almost six months' rent. And the September statement (that's kind of confusing—the statement for the month of September) had a red stamp on it that said EVICTED and below it, the words ACCOUNT CLOSED.

I called Indira over and showed her.

“But she’s still living there,” Indira said. “You went into the camper.”

“Yeah, but maybe she’s not supposed to be living there. I saw something taped to the door when I got there. It was just a sign that said Collson, but now that I think about it, it might have been taped over something, you know? Like maybe she taped over the eviction notice.”

“To what end? Mr. Haskins would have called the deputies, and the deputies would have removed them.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe they were planning a legal battle. But there’s no way this isn’t connected to Keme talking to his mom, getting—” I almost said getting in a fight with Foster , but since I technically didn’t have any proof of that, I settled for: “—getting upset, and then arguing with JT.”

Indira’s face was unreadable in the weak light. She reached out to point to a paperclip and said, “What’s this?”

A second page was clipped to the back of the statement. It looked like some sort of record JT must have used at the park to track the eviction process. A quick glance showed me that JT had posted the eviction notice in September. The next entry showed that JT had moved the tenant’s possessions into storage and had the camper cleaned for a new renter.

“He skipped several steps,” Indira said.

“What?”

“Well, if September was going to stay and fight the eviction—which it seems like she

wants to, since she's still staying in the camper—then he should have filed a complaint with the court. Legally, JT couldn't take their belongings until the court had issued a writ allowing him to evict them, and even then they would have had time to take their belongings with them. Something about this doesn't make sense.”

“How do you know so much about evictions?”

Indira's slight hesitation, and an unfamiliar note in her voice, surprised me. “I wasn't sure what you'd do after you became owner of Hemlock House.”

“Indira, by that point, I'd already tasted your chocolate cake. I'm not that stupid.” I gave the paper another glance. And then —yep, you guessed it: an Idea sprang out at me. “If JT put all of September's belongings in storage, could that have included some of Keme's stuff too?”

“It would have been everything inside the camper,” Indira said slowly.

“Like a T-shirt and shorts and slides.”

“Oh my God,” Indira said. Her hand fastened on my arm. “You have to tell Bobby.”

“Uh, well, yes, I should, but maybe with certain, um, details omitted? Not that I want to lie to Bobby because trust is the bedrock of a good relationship, but I'm not sure he'd be thrilled to know I was, um—”

“Breaking and entering?”

“I was going to say sleuthing.”

“I'll call him, dear. I'll say Millie told me.”

“Thank you.”

As Indira placed the call, I resumed my search. After the tenant statements, the paperwork changed to JT’s personal finances: bank account statements, credit card statements, a checkbook. I had a hard time imagining JT had parted with any of this stuff willingly, which meant Channelle must have taken it after she found JT dead. Or after she killed him, a part of me suggested.

When I flipped the next page, I stopped. A driver’s license had been buried in the mix, and I caught it as it slid across the stack of pages. It was from California, not Oregon, and it showed a woman I didn’t recognize. She was what Will Gower would have called a bottle blond, with perfect makeup that had somehow resisted the DMV camera’s magical ability to make everyone look like they were having their mug shot taken. In the photo, she wore a sweatshirt that looked oversized—on her, the effect was cute—and there was a hint of rhinestones and what I thought might be a Western-style fringe. It was hard to say from a single DMV photo, but I thought it was even odds that she’d been, uh, enhanced.

The name on the license was Channelle Vance, and the address listed the city as Santa Ana. I wasn’t an expert on California (Will Gower wasn’t exactly a fun-in-the-sun kind of guy), but something told me that Santa Ana was either in Orange County, or close enough that the difference didn’t matter. It looked like the license had been issued two years ago and was still valid.

Indira was speaking quietly into her phone, explaining to Bobby our theory about the eviction and Keme’s clothes. I hissed to get her attention and showed her the license.

“And another thing,” Indira said. “Could you see if there’s anything on Channelle using a different last name? Like Vance?”

In the motel’s quiet, I could hear Bobby’s answer. “That sounded like Dash. Where

are you?”

Indira wasn't one to hem or haw or say um, uh, er, etc. But she did pause for a microsecond before saying, “I've got to go, dear.”

“I know that hiss—” Bobby began.

Fortunately, at that point, Indira disconnected. We traded a relieved look.

And then my phone buzzed.

Where are you?

Home? I texted back. Writing? Safe?

It's more believable without the question marks. Where are you?

Bay Bridge Suites.

Call me. Now.

I answered with JAS—it stands for just a sec , which is way cooler than brB (be right back) or, believe it or not, AFK (away from keyboard).

Bobby did not wait just a sec. Bobby called me instead.

As my phone buzzed, I said to Indira, “We might be out of time.”

She nodded, but she said, “Look at this.”

A velvet box lay behind the vanity. It was open, and it held an incomplete jewelry set:

a ring and a pair of earrings, all set with heart-shaped blue stones, and an empty spot where a necklace should have been.

“Roses,” I said. “Jewelry. Perfume.”

“And the clothes,” Indira said. “She has expensive tastes. But my point is that this couldn’t be a normal robbery, otherwise someone would have taken the jewelry.”

“Right. Okay, well—”

“And one more thing.” She indicated for me to look between the far bed and the wall.

In the narrow space between the wall and the bed, a shredder was plugged into an outlet. The top of the shredder had been removed from the little plastic receptacle it normally sat on and now leaned up against the wall. The little plastic receptacle was empty.

My first thought was that the paperwork in the room only went back to August. “She was shredding something,” I said. “But if that’s the case, why keep the California license?”

“Maybe she still needs it,” Indira said. “Maybe that’s her backup if she needs to run.”

That seemed like a possibility. Most people, after their husband got his head bashed in, probably weren’t thinking about shredding paperwork in their motel room.

“Do you think whoever broke in here took the shredded paperwork?” I asked. “Oh shoot!”

(I did not say shoot.)

“The liner in the bathroom trash can.”

I scooted around Indira to double-check, and I was right—the detail hadn’t really registered until I’d thought about it, but the liner for the bathroom trash can was missing.

“So,” Indira said, “she shredded something and threw it away. Tonight. And there’s no chance the garbage has been collected yet.”

We both stood there, thinking the same thing.

“Fine,” I said. “But I’m only doing it because I’m a gentleman and you’re—” I almost said older. Indira’s face didn’t change, but I got that strong premonition again about a zap, so I changed it to “—a lady.”

She didn’t even sniff or anything.

We hurried out of the room and shut the door behind us. The latch caught—barely—and then we made our way down to the parking lot and around the back of the Bay Bridge Suites. Two large dumpsters had been rolled up against the rear wall of the motel, and next to them, three parking spaces had been spray-painted onto the concrete. Only one was occupied—a silver Chevy Cruze. Staff spots, I thought. Whoever was on the front desk tonight. The smell of garbage floated up, with the faint hint of burned rubber and a whiff of what my brain processed as deep fryers and hot breading, like we were downwind of a chicken shack. The shadows were deep enough that Indira turned on her flashlight again.

I was starting to do the mental calculus—would crawling around in a dumpster be worse than calling Bobby and telling him everything?—when Indira’s sharp intake of breath pulled me out of my thoughts.

And then I saw the woman on the ground. She wore a sequined V-neck top that looked like too little against the October chill. The same could be said about the short black skirt. She wore heels, but one of the shoes lay several feet away on the pavement. I recognized her from the license photo: blond, perfectly made up. Little details registered: the deep red of her lipstick; a rash of color on her cheek; her press-on nails. Her head was turned at an impossible angle, and the way the light caught her eyes turned them into blank white circles.

Channelle Haskins—or Vance, or whatever her real name was—was dead.

Hand shaking, I took out my phone and called Bobby.

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Bobby came. Then more deputies came. And then the sheriff.

Their cruisers filled the alley with spinning light, the rumble of engines, the choking sweetness of exhaust.

I managed to stuff Channelle's gloves—which I'd taken from her room—into my back pocket before anyone noticed.

Everyone seemed to know what to do. Of course they did—this was their job. As Salk and Dahlberg began putting up a perimeter, Bobby helped Indira into his cruiser. Then he moved me to the end of the alley, where I couldn't see Channelle anymore. I hadn't realized I was shaking until he put a blanket around my shoulders.

"I know I said I was going to talk to Millie," I said, but my lips felt numb, and the words sounded funny. "But I—"

"We can talk about it later," Bobby said. And then he took me by the arms, the emergency blanket crinkling under his fingers, and I couldn't tell if he wanted to shake me or if he was trying to brace himself. He swallowed. And then he said, "I'm so glad you're safe."

To any amateur snoops—er, sleuths out there, let me tell you: if that didn't take the remaining wind out of my sails.

I closed my eyes, and he pulled me into a hug.

It felt like a long time before I could say, "I hate this."

He rubbed my back.

“It’s awful,” I whispered. “It’s always so awful.”

“I know,” he said, and he threaded his fingers through the hair on the back of my head, as though he were holding me together. And maybe he was.

When I was less of a mess, I told my story to Bobby first—with some light editing to make it sound less like, um, burglary. And then I told it again to the sheriff.

When I finished, she said, “The motel doesn’t have any working security cameras, and I’m going to guess we won’t find any prints.”

After a heartbeat, I realized that was kind of a question. Face heating, I said, “I don’t think you will.”

The sheriff made an unhappy sound. “We didn’t see any shredded paperwork in the dumpster, but we’ll keep looking. Meanwhile, I’m going to call the station and have them release Keme. I want Bobby to take him home, and I want you to keep him there tonight. Understand?”

Several long seconds passed before I said, “Wait, for real?”

“Yes, Dash, for real. There’s a legitimate explanation for how his clothing came to be at that scene—JT kept the belongings of any evicted tenants in his garage. Keme’s clothes were literally at the scene of the crime. Add to that, the fact that he was at the station while the RV park’s office was being broken into and Channelle Haskins was killed, and I think there’s enough doubt about his role in events that I—and the district attorney—don’t feel comfortable charging him at this point.” Her voice softened. “He’s not doing well, Dash.”

I caught that mention of the break-in at the RV park, but my throat was too tight to speak, so I only nodded.

“Let me know if you need anything,” the sheriff said.

It sounded like a dismissal, so before she could step away, I managed to ask, “How did she die?”

The sheriff glanced back. Blue and red light chased the shadows across her face, and I thought she wouldn’t answer. Then she said, “It looks like she was hit by a car.”

A moment later, Bobby’s hand was on my shoulder, and he said, “Let’s go.”

We split up and went our separate ways: I drove Indira back to Hemlock House in the Pilot, and Bobby went back to the station in his cruiser. I wasn’t sure how Indira had gotten out to the Bay Bridge Suites without a car, but I had a sneaking suspicion it involved a particularly plangent fortysomething who referred to their bathrobe as their “dressing gown.” On the drive, Indira was quiet. In the night’s weak, ambient light, she looked tired, and she kept reaching up to check her hair. When we passed through the woods of Sitka spruce and fir and pine, and the perfume of balsam and rich duff filtered into the SUV, there was only the light of the dash to illuminate us, and I had the strangest sensation that we were both ghosts.

When we got home, Hemlock House sat on the bluffs, its windows warm and glowing. You might expect a Class V haunted mansion perched up on the sea cliffs to look, well, spooky. And yes, the Last Picks and I had gone all out with the Halloween décor—Millie was an absolute fiend for spider webs, as I’d discovered last year, and Keme, in a rare moment of weakness, had come close to begging for the giant skeleton in the front yard. That memory—of the surly teenage boy reluctantly explaining why we had to have the giant skeleton, while I tried not to goggle at him and Bobby gave me stern looks—seemed like it had happened a lifetime ago. My

eyes stung, and I took deep breaths and shoved away the image of the rage-filled stranger from the sheriff's station.

I dropped Indira off at the front door, and as she went in, I parked the Pilot in the coach house. When I got inside, I found everyone waiting in the hall.

And everyone, in this case, included Louis.

He was standing with his arm around Millie, one foot raised, his sneaker planted on a priceless Victorian, uh, commode (I hate calling it that—it's just a chest of drawers). He wore ripped jeans, a flannel over a T-shirt that had a logo I didn't recognize, a gold curb chain, a backward baseball cap, and hands down the most sparkliest earrings I'd ever seen on anyone outside a drag bar. (Or honestly inside a drag bar.) He was shushing Millie, who was sobbing uncontrollably, by saying with what sounded like forced understanding, "Not so loud, babe."

Fox stood a few feet away. They were dressed in what I could only describe as "Robin Hood for Her"—a cowled green tunic, some sort of leather vest-and-gloves combo that suggested archery, floral tights, and (vegan) snakeskin boots with little dragons on the tips of their curled toes. In that particular moment, Fox looked like they were wishing some enterprising, uh, Saxon (is that right?) would run Louis through with a broadsword. Indira's expression wasn't far off—she was staring at Louis like she was about to reach for her deboning knife.

Louis switched to the saccharine voice a lot of people use with upset children. "You want to go wash your face, honey? Why don't you go calm down and then clean yourself up? You don't want Jordan and Erik to see you all blotchy, right?"

Fox's eyes didn't actually flash red, but I wouldn't have been surprised to see one of those little dragons perched on the toes of their boots give an angry puff.

Before anything could happen, though, Millie caught sight of me and said, “DASH!”

“Babe,” Louis said, “my ear—”

“IS HE OKAY? IS KEME OKAY? WHAT DID HE LOOK LIKE? WHAT DID HE SAY? IS HE REALLY COMING HOME?”

By some miracle, the sonic buffeting hadn’t knocked me tail-over-teakettle, but it did take me a moment to descramble my brain. I decided to answer the safest questions first. “He’s okay. And yes, he’s coming home. Bobby should be back with him in a few minutes.”

“That’s too bad,” Louis said, “because we’ve got this party—”

“He’ll be hungry,” Indira said. “Millie, why don’t you help me in the kitchen?”

Louis opened his mouth to say something, but apparently he had some brains, because he stopped himself. That was probably because Indira has this way of saying things, and you can’t argue with her. Like, she tells you that it’s time to wash all the pillowcases, and four hours later, you’re still unzipping pillows. Or one time, we’d been walking downtown, and this tourist in a ridiculously oversized pickup kept revving his engine and trying to inch forward (in spite of the foot traffic), and Indira looked at him and said, Stop .

And he turned. his engine. off.

Anyway, Louis looked like he was still experiencing some of that when Indira took Millie by the shoulders and steered her toward the kitchen.

As they left, Fox leaned over to me and whispered, “You’re on your own. If that young man talks over me one more time, I’m not responsible for my actions.” Then,

in a louder voice—with a feigned casualness clearly meant for Louis’s benefit—Fox added, “Well, I must get back to my etchings—”

I grabbed their arm. “No, you mustn’t.”

Fox bared their teeth at me in what was definitely not a smile.

“You do etchings?” Louis asked Fox. I mean, Louis was technically looking at his phone—probably typing a message to Jace or Chad or some equally obnoxious-sounding guy—but the question was clearly meant for Fox. Before Fox could answer, though, Louis continued, “That’s dope, dude. You know what you should do? You should do them on the boardwalk. You know those really funny ones where they make you have a big head and you’re driving a race car?”

I tightened my grip on Fox, not that it would do any good.

“Do you mean,” Fox asked with poisonous sweetness, “caricatures?”

“Dude, you’re going to make so much money.” And then Louis looked up and shot Fox finger pistols. “You owe me a commish!”

If a commish consisted of being shot, Robin Hood-style, then I thought Louis was likely to get his commish sooner than he expected.

“Let it go,” I whispered to Fox. “He’s trying to be nice.”

“He called me a sidewalk artist,” Fox snapped. If they’d had a cape, they would have been flinging it back dramatically, but they settled for stomping one of the dragon-tipped boots. “That is an insult that cannot be ignored.”

“Well, ignore it,” I said. The sound came of the front door opening, and I added, “For

at least five more minutes.”

Bobby poked his head into the hall and gestured to me. I released Fox’s arm—not without some misgivings—and started to excuse myself, but Louis was laughing at a video he was watching on his phone, and he didn’t even seem to notice when I walked away.

“Is everything okay?” I whispered to Bobby. “How is he?”

Bobby sent me a level look, but he didn’t answer the question. Instead, he said, “He doesn’t want to stay here.”

“What?”

“He didn’t want to come with me. And then he tried to get out of the car twice at stoplights.” Frustration tangled Bobby’s usually even tone. “And he won’t say anything.”

Sure enough, as we stepped into the vestibule, Keme was unlocking the front door.

“Hey,” I said. “Where are you going?”

He shot me a look over his shoulder.

It was hard to remember the boy from a few weeks ago, the one who had challenged me to a Sour Patch Kids-eating contest and who had laughed when I’d panicked because my mouth got too tingly after approximately eight hundred Sour Patch Kids. The same Keme who had given me a wedgie in front of Bobby. (Bobby had tried not to laugh. Notice the word tried .) The same Keme who had fallen asleep with his head propped against my knee after six and a half hours of Naruto. This Keme, the one in front of me, stared through me with dull, dead eyes, his face blank with a kind of

directionless hostility. He wouldn't make eye contact, and it made me feel like I was invisible. (Invisible, but still somehow managing to piss him off.)

So what? It didn't mean anything, I told myself. He'd been through a terrible experience—something most people would never have to deal with. He was scared, and he was hurting, and he was barely more than a child. A lot of adults wouldn't have handled themselves as well as he had. If anger was the best way for Keme to protect himself in this moment, then that was okay. I could deal with Keme being angry at me. Right then, he needed someone to remind him that he had people who loved him and cared about him. And even though our last encounter hadn't gone so well, even though it had left me with doubts about how much of my relationship with Keme I had misunderstood or projected or simply imagined, I still wanted to do the right thing for him.

I walked forward, speaking softly as I closed the distance between us. “Why don't you come in and clean up? Take a shower, change clothes. Indira's making you something to eat, and I bet you need a good night's sleep—”

I reached out to touch his shoulder. He moved so fast he was a blur, slapping my hand away. Then he drew in on himself. He wrapped his arms around his chest, and his shoulders curved inward. He still wouldn't meet my gaze. My hand stung, and the sting was already growing into a throbbing pain that told me Keme had hit me as hard as he could. It ran up my arm, into my brain. For a moment, I stood there, my hand still outstretched. Then I drew it back toward me. I realized with something like shame that my mouth was still open.

“Keme,” Bobby said, and it was about as harshly as I'd ever heard him speak to anyone. “What was that?”

“It's okay,” I said, but my voice trembled. “I shouldn't have—”

“It’s not okay. You can’t hit people. And Dash is trying so hard to be kind to you. What’s wrong with you?”

Keme didn’t look at either of us. I thought, if he’d been able to, he would have run out the door right then, but he only shrank in on himself more.

“It’s okay,” I said again, a little more believably this time. “That was my fault. I shouldn’t have gotten in your space. Listen, I know it’s been a hard couple of days for you. Why don’t you stay the night? If you still want to go somewhere else in the morning, Bobby or I can give you a ride.”

He didn’t relax, not exactly. But some of that wire-tight tension loosened, and when I nudged Bobby toward the hall, Keme followed us.

Fox saw us first, and they let out a gasp that from anyone else would have been way too dramatic. They reached Keme before I could stop them—or warn them—and opened their arms for a hug.

Instead of the whip-crack blow I expected, though, Keme stood still and let Fox embrace him.

“My dear, dear boy,” Fox said, and to my surprise, their voice cracked. “It’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay now.”

It should have sounded trite. Or melodramatic. But instead, it sounded like heartbreak, and like someone who was too old and too wise to believe what they were saying—and yet, somehow, still hoped it might be true.

When Fox released Keme and stepped back, Louis looked up from his phone. “What up, killer?” he said with a grin. And then he held out his fist. “Dead man walking on the green mile. Did you get any prison tats?”

Keme stared at him. You've heard the expression, I'm sure, if looks could kill . Well, if looks could draw and quarter and then drag behind a truck on a bad stretch of road. After a moment, Louis's grin faltered, and he dropped his hand.

"Louis," Bobby said, "why don't you help me get everybody a drink?" He shot me a glance. "If that's okay."

"We're fine," I said.

Bobby didn't look as convinced as I'd hoped, but he directed Louis into the living room—and, in the process, probably prevented a murder.

"Do you want to shower first?" I asked. "If you need some clean clothes, I can grab something from Bobby—"

Before I could finish, Millie tornadoed into the hall. Barefoot and sopping wet, Millie is five-feet flat and weighs a hundred pounds. She's blond, she always has flyaways, and her general vibe (on a good day) is caffeinated manic kindness. Right then, though, she was like a force of nature.

"KEME!"

I swear to God: an irreplaceable Ming vase wobbled on its stand.

She charged toward him, and she must have slowed down at the last moment, otherwise it would have been like when they fire neutrinos into other neutrinos. Or into atoms. Or however they make atomic bombs explode. (It's science—look it up on Wikipedia.) Instead of a mushroom cloud, there was just Keme's surprised—and slightly pained—grunt, and the crack of bones and flesh colliding. Millie's arms wrapped around him, and Keme rocked backward. It was a small miracle they somehow managed to remain on their feet.

“OH MY GOD, KEME! ARE YOU OKAY?”

The boy stood rigidly, arms at his sides. He made no effort to hug Millie back. For that matter, he made no effort to look like he was enjoying the embrace. Millie might as well have been a stranger who had grabbed him on the street, instead of—well, Millie.

“WE’VE BEEN SO WORRIED ABOUT YOU!” Millie leaned back to get a look at his face. “ I’VE BEEN SO WORRIED.”

She paused, as though Keme might say something. But Keme was pulling his now-familiar trick of not looking directly at her, and if anything, he seemed even tenser.

When it became clear Keme wasn’t going to respond, Millie looked around. She seemed only to realize then that the rest of us were there, and with what must have taken an agonizing effort to lower her voice, she asked, “Can we talk? I really need to talk to you.”

Keme mumbled something I couldn’t hear. Then he wriggled out of Millie’s grasp and padded toward the stairs. Millie stared after him. Her eyes and nose were still red from her earlier crying, and now fresh tears spilled down her cheeks, but she didn’t make a sound. That, more than anything else—her silence—cut me to pieces.

Indira entered the hall as Keme took the first step up the stairs. In that instant, the mixture of happiness and relief in her face was so sharp it was painful to look at. And then she must have noticed how the energy in the room had changed, and the fact that Keme was on his way upstairs. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out, and with something like shock, I realized I’d never seen Indira in the clutches of uncertainty before. When she finally spoke, her voice had an unfamiliar note somewhere between good cheer and desperation. “Dinner is almost ready.”

Keme continued up the stairs without looking back.

“I made your favorite,” Indira said. Pain gleamed in her face as her voice trailed off.

In the silence that followed, from upstairs came the sound of a door thumping shut.

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“But I won’t annoy him,” I said around my toothbrush. “I won’t bother him or talk to him or—or exist. I mean, I’ll just be a spectral apparition of myself. The least annoying version possible. I’ll basically be ectoplasm.”

Even through the hiss of the shower, Bobby’s “Sweetheart” sounded worn out. The shower curtain rattled back a few inches, and Bobby peered out at me. His hair was wet and flattened against his skull from the spray, and more water beaded on his nose and glittered in the faint hint of the day’s stubble. The faint scent of his oh-so-masculine soap floated out to me. “He needs some time alone.”

“Right,” I said. “I know.”

Bobby gave me a sympathetic look and pulled the curtain shut.

“But,” I said.

I couldn’t actually hear his sigh over the sound of the water, but sometimes, when you love somebody, you know.

“But,” I said again—in defiance of that unheard sigh—“on the other hand, what if he’s, you know, not okay?”

“I didn’t say he’s okay. I said he needs some time alone. He’s hurt, and he’s confused, and he needs time and space to sort that out.” The water shut off, and Bobby pushed the curtain back. He stood there in all his, um—well, glory is really the only correct word. You know that classic vee shape? Yeah, that. And I could count his abs. And let me tell you, if you thought his, uh, tush looked great in a pair of

jeans... Where was I? Oh, right. Bobby grabbed his towel and, as he ran it over his hair, said through the thick cotton, “He’s a private person. And an independent person. I think you, of all people, ought to understand that.”

“I do. I do understand that.” I spat in the sink to clear the last of the toothpaste from my mouth and rinsed my toothbrush. “And I love that for him. I want him to have all the time and space and privacy he needs to heal.”

Bobby was moving the towel down now, and let me tell you, it was distracting.

He didn’t sound distracted at all, though, when he said, “Only you want to go check on him.”

“Like the merest phantasmagorical presence.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Fox.”

“Rude!”

“And I think you need to give the Dungeon Master’s Guide a break too.”

“Robert Mai!”

(Not his real name, but I liked to use it when I yelled at him.)

He grinned as he bent to dry his legs. He’d missed a spot on his shoulder, and a few drops of water glittered there, next to a constellation of freckles that were almost impossible to spot unless you really, really looked. The curve of his spine was like a horizon. And have I ever mentioned he has cute ears?

“I know you’re worried about him,” Bobby said as he stepped out of the tub. He

kissed me, and his nose wrinkled (adorably, of course) at the mintiness of the toothpaste. “I’m worried about him. But let’s give him one night—how about that? We can check on him tomorrow.”

It wasn’t an unreasonable request. Bobby was never unreasonable. So, eventually, I nodded. And I got another kiss for my good decision. Then Bobby tugged on my tee and said, “Are you going to shower tonight?”

“Yes,” I said.

That big, goofy grin splashed across his face, and Bobby looked me up and down with something like a leer. I gave him a boyfriendly shove into the bedroom and shut the door.

One of the things I’d learned about Bobby, now that we were a few months into a relationship, was that Bobby had zero qualms (is qualms the right word?) about nudity. Like, ze-ro . I mean, he wasn’t going to step outside for an air bath (nightmares of Ben Franklin), but—well, the shower was a great example. He didn’t even wrap the towel around his waist. He returned it to its hook (neatly and perfectly, of course) and sashayed out of the bathroom, with everything hanging out there for God and the angels to see. I blamed the pernicious influence of Sports, with a capital S.

You get one guess at how comfortable this guy was with, you know, flaunting it.

I sincerely apologize for saying Flaunting it . I immediately regretted it.

Anyway, I guess I was lucky that Bobby found it quirky in an endearing way rather than quirky in a let’s-see-a-therapist-about-it-way. Mostly, as a matter of fact, he seemed to find it amusing. Hence his big grin as I shooed him out of the bathroom.

It wasn't that I couldn't be naked with him. I mean, trust me, there were times when I was very happy to be naked with Bobby. But nudity has its place. And its place is in bed. Under the covers. In the dark. Oh, and you pull all the curtains extra tight, just in case.

He was polite enough to wait until I was splashing merrily away in the shower before he came back into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

"Do you really think he's going to be okay?" I asked.

Bobby made an affirmative noise as he brushed diligently (eight little brushstrokes per tooth—yes, he's insane, but I love him). He must have sensed something in my silence because he said more clearly, "Wait, you don't?"

It was the same sense I'd had—God, when had it been? Earlier that day? The day before? It seemed like ages ago. The sense that I could grasp an outline of the problem, but not quite put it into words. And since my whole job (in theory, at least) was putting things into words, that annoyed me, and I found myself groping for a way to say what I was feeling.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess—I guess I don't think he's going to be okay. Or maybe I'm not sure. Did you see how he acted tonight?"

A beat passed.

"I'm sorry he hit you," Bobby said. "I should have been faster, but I honestly didn't expect—"

"No, not that. I mean, not only that." Although I would have been lying if I said it didn't hurt that he'd struck out at me, and then only moments later, he'd let Fox hug him. "With Millie."

“I was trying to keep a handle on Louis.”

“It was...it was so weird , Bobby. It was like he didn’t know her. Or like he’d totally shut down.”

For several seconds, all I heard was the water raining down on me.

“Are we talking about Keme getting arrested?” Bobby asked. “Or Millie dating Louis?”

“First of all, she’s not allowed to date Louis. I’m the closest thing in her life to a father figure—”

“Except her actual father, who she lives with.”

I ignored that. “—and I forbid it. Did you hear him tell Indira her mashed potatoes could use some ‘loosening up’? My God, I almost vomited in my mouth from rage and terror.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything about this, but sometimes I think when you watch all those General Hospital reruns with Indira, it starts to slip into your vocabulary.”

“I think it’s all tied together, you see? I mean, in the span of twenty-four hours, Keme finds out the girl he’s desperately in love with is dating a total—” Fortunately, the sound of the shower swallowed up my words (which they would have had to bleep on General Hospital). “And then he gets arrested, and he finds out there are plenty of people in town who think he’s rotten, and it was only a matter of time before he did something like this. And then you—”

I stopped myself. But not fast enough.

You know what I was talking about, how sometimes, when you love someone, you just know? I didn't have to hear a pained exhalation from Bobby to know that one had hurt.

"I didn't mean it that way," I said.

"I know what you meant," Bobby said. "I was there when they brought him in. I tried to get him to talk. He can't trust me."

"It's not that he can't trust you. And I don't think you did anything wrong—jeez, Bobby, I did the exact same thing. But I think Keme lost all his solid ground, and he lost it in a day."

"We all love him." Bobby's words had a strangely stiff sternness, as though he were correcting me. "We'll make it up to him."

I rinsed the shampoo out of my hair.

"What?" Bobby asked. "What am I missing?"

"I don't know. Nothing. I mean, we do love him. And we're going to try. But I think—" I stopped. Backed up. "I know this is going to sound dumb because I totally recognize and own that my life has been infinitely easier than Keme's, but I think I understand, at least a little, what it's like to grow up feeling like your parents aren't there for you. I mean, I know it's totally different—"

"Don't do that. You don't have to minimize it like that. You and Keme didn't have the same lives, but I think you're right: in your own way, you know what it feels like to have parents who neglect you."

I thought carefully about how to say what I wanted to say. I could feel that realization

about Keme, the one that I'd been struggling with, slowly coming into focus. "One of the things it does is it makes it hard to form other relationships. I mean, obviously I've got you. And I've got friends. But I'm also me, and you know exactly what I mean." The sudden tightness in my chest surprised me, and I hurried to say, "I'm worried that Keme might—might shut himself off, after being hurt like this. He's had such a hard life already. He's been hurt so many times. And somehow, through it all, he's still this great kid. This great guy, I mean. And part of that is Indira. And part of that is you. But a lot of it—a lot of it is Millie. And I'm afraid that he's going to decide he never wants to be hurt like that again, and he's going to do what too many people do and find a way to bury the best part of himself because it's safer."

Silence answered me.

Then the shower curtain chimed on its rod, and Bobby stepped into the shower. He was still naked (see above about the casual nudity), and even without my glasses, I got the general idea—and it had its usual effect on me. His hair was out of its usual neat part, and the messy spill of it across his forehead gave him a decidedly rakish appearance that was at odds with the gravity of his expression.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Getting in the shower with you."

The best thing that came to mind was "You can't; you're already clean."

For a moment, that beautiful grin lifted the heaviness of his expression. He stepped closer—not that we had a whole lot of room—and his hands settled on my waist. He pulled me toward him. His arms slid around me, and the feeling of wet skin on wet skin knocked the wind out of me. In moments like this, when he seemed so in control, so certain, it was always disorienting when our bodies slotted together and I remembered that, somehow, I was taller than him. He ran his hand up and down my

back.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said softly over the rush of the falling water.

I couldn’t say anything, but I thought, What if it’s not? What if this is it, and we lose the best part of him?

“You’re so kind,” Bobby said in that same voice, barely loud enough to be heard over the shower. “You’re so full of love for the people you care about. And I know it’s scary sometimes.”

Somehow, I managed to say, “I don’t want to be full of love. I want to be full of tacos.”

He laughed softly, his face turned into my neck, and then he kissed me on the jaw. His strong hand was still skimming across the warm, wet skin of my back.

Believe it or not, it was hard to think about Keme at that point.

“I was so scared when you called from the motel,” Bobby said, his face pressed into that spot where my neck joined my shoulder. “All I could think was that something terrible had happened to you. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you.”

“You didn’t lose me,” I said, my voice thick. These moments were so rare, when it felt like the walls dropped away and we could say everything we wanted to say—needed to say—to each other. “I’m fine. I’m right here.”

Bobby made a sound that was part contentment, part—well, I wasn’t sure what. Strain, maybe. “You’re so hot,” he whispered. “Everything about you turns me on. I can’t get over how beautiful you look with water running over you, the way your hair looks like this.” He pressed his mouth to my shoulder. “I love the way the heat of the

shower brings a flush to your skin.” He kissed my ear next, and then he kissed a line down my neck—and my knees threatened to give out. “I love touching you like this. I never want to stop touching you.”

As usual, the words elicited a strange combination of reactions from me: the gut-clenching need to shrink away (and, ideally, pull a towel over my head); the sense that I was supposed to say something in return—to acknowledge the words somehow, or reciprocate, or both; and the wild urge to laugh because, I mean, this was me we were talking about, and I ate way too much cake and hated exercise and didn’t have a single ab.

So, I did what any normal, red-blooded American male would have done: I moaned.

I mean, I didn’t make a whole production out of it. But I let out one of those breathy, pleased little sounds.

Bobby’s next kiss was lower on my neck. Harder. Insistent. And it was definitely having, um, an effect—especially when I realized what he was doing.

“You’re giving me a hickey,” I said, and even to myself, I sounded drunk.

Bobby made a surprisingly dark growling noise. “I love how it looks on you. I want to mark you all over like this. God, Dash, do you have any idea how gorgeous you are?”

That frenetic laugh rose up inside me, and I barely tamped it down again. Before I could stop myself, I said, “You don’t have to do that.”

The hiss of the shower filled the small space.

Bobby pulled back. His arms loosened around me, although they didn’t fall away

completely. His pupils were dilated, and his lips were puffy, and he drew his brows together as he asked, “What?”

I wasn’t sure if it was panic or courage that made me say, “You don’t have to say things like that. About me.” Water drummed against my back. “If you don’t want to.”

“I want to.”

“If it makes you uncomfortable, I mean.”

He slid his hands to my hips, and now it felt like he was holding us apart, keeping both of us firmly planted where we were. His face was unreadable.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“You don’t need to be sorry.”

“Did I upset you?”

He shook his head.

“Did I ruin everything?” I tried to keep my voice playful, but my voice dropped off.

“Do you want to stop?”

In the warm, humid cocoon of the shower, his golden-olive skin practically glowed. His still-damp hair, in that messy, uncombed shock, made him look ten years younger. He lifted his fingers one at a time, as though he were playing my hips like a piano. And then he shook his head again. “Of course not,” he said as he reached past me to turn the water off. “Let’s move to the bed.”

To my surprise, Bobby wanted to dry me off. A hint of a troublemaker’s smile

appeared as he toweled my hair, ignoring my squawks of protest, and his grin was even bigger at the resulting spiky-but-also-somehow-poofy cloud that resulted. I tried to copy him, to get into the playfulness of the moment, but it was like I was always a heartbeat behind, trying to read my next line in the instant before I had to play my part. When Bobby looped the towel around me and shimmied it back and forth, drawing me into another kiss, we bumped noses. But that only made him laugh softly.

When we tumbled into bed, still warm from the shower, I stared up at him as he straddled me. My heart was beating faster in my chest. I scanned his face for tightness or anger or—or what? Or anything, I guess. He hadn't said anything since suggesting we leave the shower, and now I was painfully aware of every sound: the rustle of bedding; the soft, sticky sounds of still damp skin as he adjusted his position; our syncopated breaths.

Are you mad? The question almost slipped out before I could stop it. Are you hurt? Can you tell me how you're feeling?

But I couldn't ask, because I'd just told him he didn't have to do that. Didn't have to talk. Didn't have to express his feelings, or share, or tell me anything. And I couldn't read his face. And maybe it should have made me laugh and taught me a lesson about irony and be careful what you wish for and all of that. But instead, it was like a bubble was caught high in my chest, and my eyes burned.

He bent to kiss me, cupping my face with both hands. His hair tumbled over his forehead as he leaned down, and for a moment, the need to tell him how he looked—handsome, and vulnerable, and the tiniest bit debauched (in a good way)—was so strong that my lips parted.

And instead, my own words came back to me.

My lips were still parted when he pressed his mouth to mine.

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Bobby zonked out pretty fast after we finished. I mean, not in an ungentlemanly way. He was always good about checking in, about snuggling, about making sure it wasn't a wham-bam-thank you, uh, sir kind of experience. But Bobby did veer dangerously close to a straight guy sometimes (my God, his socks), and true to form, it wasn't long before soft, snoring breaths reached me in the dark.

I, on the other hand, did not sleep. I lay there in the dark, listening to the wind hammer the house and snap at the shutters, my mind running on its little hamster wheel.

Everything was fine. Everything was great. Our, um, relations had been fantastic—as always. Bobby was so attentive. So careful. And it only made it better when he got so worked up that he lost control, when he forgot all about being attentive and careful. And tonight hadn't been any different.

Bobby hadn't seemed any different either. I mean, sure, he hadn't said anything. But I'd told him he didn't have to. I knew it was hard for him, being expressive like that. I knew it didn't come naturally to him. I knew he was doing it for me, because he knew how much it meant to me. So, really—if you looked at it that way—I was being considerate. I was cutting him some slack. After all, we'd only been together a few months now. We were still figuring things out.

And honestly, wasn't it a little bit his fault? I mean, Bobby was attentive. He had to have noticed that it made me uncomfortable when he said stuff like that. Stuff that obviously wasn't true. Things he didn't need to say. He had to have noticed, but he kept doing it anyway. That he liked marking my skin. My skin's already got plenty of marks, thanks—they're called a million moles. That I'm beautiful. Yeah, I own a

mirror, guy, I know what I look like. Why couldn't he just—why couldn't he just not do that? Any of that? Without me having to tell him and make everything weird.

Rolling onto my stomach, I pulled my pillow over my head and decided I had never, post-coitus, had such a strong urge to bite someone. In this case, myself. For being such a colossal idiot.

(For the record, I'd never had any urge to bite someone post-coitus. I'm not a raccoon.)

I was still lying there, stewing in the dark and calling myself a lot of names they won't let you use on the Disney channel, when I heard the footsteps.

They were soft. In fact, if my room hadn't backed up against the servants' staircase, I probably wouldn't have heard them. If I'd been asleep, I definitely wouldn't have heard them. And in an old house like this one, that was a real feat—especially since it seemed like every other floorboard was determined to squeak, groan, make a weird clicking noise, or otherwise protest being walked on.

And since snooping is better than lying in the dark and semi-hating yourself for opening your big mouth, I slipped out of bed, pulled on clothes, and padded out of the room.

I caught Keme in the kitchen. He was dressed in his usual getup—a pair of board shorts that were frayed where the hem had worn out, a Santa Cruz hoodie, worn and cracking slides. He had at least pulled on a pair of socks. He was in the process of unlocking the side door. When he saw me, he froze. His eyes were so shadowed they looked bruised. Red, too, as though he'd been crying. But his mouth was set in an uncompromising line. And the set of his body was fight-or-flight.

“Hey,” I said.

Nothing.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

Keme stared at me for another second. Then he seemed to dismiss me. He slid the deadbolt back.

“What’s going on?” I said.

He opened the door.

“Hey, where are you going?” I didn’t like the sound of my own voice—shrill, rising. I sounded like a nagging TV mom.

Keme didn’t even glance back. He stepped outside and started to pull the door shut.

My earlier anger at—well, I almost said at Bobby, but it was really at myself, and I was mature enough (barely) to admit it—crashed over me. “Hey!” I snapped. “I’m talking to—Keme!”

The last was more of a shout than I would have liked, but only because he was getting away.

(Which makes it sound like he was a prisoner, which was definitely not the case. On the other hand, he actually was getting away.)

So, I went after him. I stepped into a pair of Bobby’s New Balances that he’d left near the door, and I sprinted out into the night.

It was dark, and the shock of the cold ripped a first, startled breath from me. The ocean sounded louder than ever, and the wind competed with it, rising louder and

louder until it sounded like a train whistle. Clouds blotted out the moon and the stars, and I could only barely make out a shape moving across Hemlock House's lawn toward the inky lines of the woods.

Charging after him, I shouted. "Keme!" I couldn't tell if my voice would carry over the noise. "Keme, get back here!" But that dark shape kept moving toward the trees. The tang of the ocean flooded my lungs with each breath. The grass was wet and cold where it brushed my ankles. Ahead of me, the little dark spot that was Keme was getting smaller and smaller, so I started to run.

By the time I reached the tree line, I was breathing hard enough that it was kind of embarrassing. Worse, I'd lost Keme. I didn't have my phone. I didn't have a flashlight. I didn't have anything. I took a few strides left, peering into the trees. Then I turned and went right. I wasn't sure what I was looking for—some sign of where he'd gone, whatever that might be. I wasn't the Hardy Boys. I couldn't track him by his footprints or a bent branch or a broken stalk of grass. (Did the Hardy Boys ever track anybody? Was I thinking of someone else?)

Then I saw the trail. It cut into the woods like a tunnel into a cave. The darkness here, on the lawn, was oppressive; the darkness under the trees was absolute. Above me, the wind tore at the branches of pine and fir and spruce, filling the air with a vast rustling sound that almost drowned out the crash of the waves against the cliffs. I risked a glance back and saw a silhouette moving in front of the house. My first thought was: Oh God. I decided if I had to see Bobby in that particular moment (on top of every other psycho behavior I'd exhibited that night, I was wearing his shoes), I'd throw myself into the ocean.

I plunged into the forest.

Within the first few paces, I knew I'd made a mistake. Darkness closed around me like a fist. The sound of the wind whipping through the branches became total,

obliterating everything else. The air was resinous, sweet, but it was also freezing, and so damp that it was almost particulate. I thought I could feel it against the back of my neck like a million tiny, invisible raindrops that never actually fell.

A crash of thunder seemed perfectly (ill) timed for me to realize that this wasn't just a lot of wind and clouds. This was a storm. And while we didn't get a ton of them on the coast, the ones we did get tended to be whoppers.

“KEME!” I called in my best Millie impersonation.

The wind sliced the air. Even over the rustle of the branches, it sounded like a scream.

I trotted forward, trying to stick to the path, hands held up to fend off any possible low-hanging branches. My heartbeat had moved up to somewhere inside my throat, and the sound of branches cracking and leaves and needles whispering against each other made it seem like at any moment, something was going to erupt out of the brush around me. It was so dark I couldn't even see my hands.

And then the wind stopped.

It was a lull, or a change in direction, or something. But the sudden silence was somehow even worse. I stopped moving—it was an animal reaction, instinctive.

Behind me, a twig snapped.

The sound hadn't been natural. The animal part of my brain knew it immediately. Something—some one—had stepped on a twig, and it had cracked.

“Keme?” I called.

The silence became a whirlpool, and I realized, in an instant, I'd made a terrible mistake.

Footsteps pounded toward me out of the dark, and I turned and plunged into the brush.

I ran blindly and prayed I wouldn't smack headfirst into a tree. The wind picked up again, howling, and branches creaked loudly enough to drown out my panicked footfalls. My world shrank down to snapshots: ferns appeared out of the darkness, slashing at my arms; old logs seemed to pop up in front of me at the last moment; the ground, covered in its thick pine duff, revealed itself yard by yard.

And then it dropped away completely.

I scrambled into a turn, and Bobby's sneakers slid across the packed duff, threatening to send me falling. One foot slid out over the drop. I thought I felt the spray thrown up by the waves crashing against the cliff. Lightning flashed, and the world was lit up like a photo negative: the stark white boles of the trees, the black scribble of the edge of the cliff, a blackberry bush that looked like it was hanging in the air, like some vast net waiting to catch me.

The wind dropped again, and another of those strange, momentary lulls descended. Over the crash of the waves below me, I could make out clearly the sound of someone struggling through the brush.

I made the decision in an instant: I sprinted toward the blackberry bush. When I reached it, I dropped onto my belly and slid under the canes. Thorns scratched my ear, the back of my neck, my arms, my hands. But I barely felt them—they were more like little, stinging tugs of resistance than anything else. I got as deep as I could, drew my legs in against my body, and tried to take slow, quiet breaths. Stars flashed in front of my eyes, and I shook as I lay there. The musty smell of dead leaves

suffocated me.

Once again, the wind began to scream, and it devoured every other noise. So, I had no warning when a shape burst out of the tree line. I tried to get a sense of it—male, female, young, old—but the darkness was too deep. Maybe if they had moved against the horizon, where I could have picked out their silhouette. But my pursuer stayed close to the trees, and I got only impressions of movement.

Movement, I realized, that was coming toward my hiding place.

I tensed. My body's automatic reaction was to draw even tighter in on itself, to make myself as small as possible. I realized too late the stupidity of my plan: I had trapped myself. I couldn't get myself free of the blackberry bush in any reasonable amount of time. If this person, whoever they were, spotted me, I wouldn't be able to get away.

As my pursuer moved closer, the sounds of their passage finally became loud enough for me to hear over the ambient noise: ferns whispering as they dragged on clothing; the scuff of needles underfoot. I wanted to close my eyes, like this was one of those movies Keme sometimes made me watch even though he knew they'd give me nightmares. (Like *Annabelle: Creation* —I didn't sleep for a week.) But I forced myself to watch.

When they drew even with the blackberry bush, the figure stopped. They were nothing but a deeper darkness against the night. And then they turned, and something glowed in the darkness. If this person hadn't been standing almost on top of me, I never would have seen it—it was designed not to be seen. But I recognized it, and because my dad was who he was, I knew what those tiny pinpricks of green meant.

They were tritium night sights.

And they meant this person had a gun.

A small eternity passed before my pursuer moved off again. Brush rustled. Ferns hissed. And then the sound of their movement dissolved into the roar of the wind and the waves, and I was alone.

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It was a long, cold, miserable night. Not least because the storm broke as I was still wriggling out from underneath the blackberry bush.

By the time I got home, I was soaking wet, scratched to, um, heck, and shivering uncontrollably.

To say Bobby was unhappy when I woke him up would have been to put it mildly. He locked me in the bathroom, and then—with nothing but a pair of sleep shorts and his gun—he secured the house. He called the sheriff's station. And then he came back and did one of the things he does better than anyone else in the entire world: he took care of me.

He got me in a hot bath. And once my core temperature was above freezing again, he cleaned up my scratches as best he could. He bundled me into fleece pajamas and put me in bed with a mug of instant hot chocolate.

And then the inquisition began.

I told him all of it, starting with when I heard Keme sneak out of the house, and I'd barely finished by the time his phone buzzed. Bobby went downstairs, with firm orders for me not to get out of bed.

I didn't. I couldn't have, even if I'd wanted to. I was exhausted, and in spite of the bath, I was still shivering. Some of that, a part of me acknowledged, was doubtless the adrenaline finally working its way out of my system. And part of it was the lingering fear. I felt strangely lucid, and it felt like I was seeing everything that had happened earlier that evening through the wrong end of a telescope. There's nothing

like being chased through a darkened forest by a maniac with a gun to put things in perspective.

Eventually, a cruiser arrived—and because it was just my luck, Tripple was driving it.

Bobby stayed with me while Tripple searched the grounds. And even though Bobby went downstairs to talk to Tripple after he finished, I heard enough to know that Tripple hadn't found anything and that he thought this was another cry for attention. You'd think, after solving how many murders, I'd get a little credit, but apparently for Deputy Tripple, I was such a glutton for the spotlight that there were no depths to which I wouldn't sink.

“Not to mention,” Tripple said, his voice carrying up the stairs, “it's our job. We're the ones who should be doing it, not some kid with a bony butt who can't stay home and mind his own business. God, he makes you look like a joke, son.”

“What did you say about Dash?”

Bobby wasn't the threatening type. He wasn't the bluster and shout and wave his arms type. He was the ask questions type. Real questions. With real consequences.

And apparently Tripple knew it, too, because he mumbled, “It's not safe for him—”

“I know it's not safe. And so does Dash. But Dash is the only reason Keme is not still sitting in a cell. And Dash is the reason we know Channelle was having an affair. Dash is the one who found her. So, if it's our job, we're doing it pretty poorly.”

Tripple said a few things that suggested his negative opinion of amateur sleuths near and far, and Bobby said something that suggested the conversation was over, although in less polite terms.

I tried to be understanding of Tripple. He'd been working nonstop, from what I could tell, ever since the murder, and so—like Bobby—he must have been exhausted. On top of that, it was a miserable night, and he must have gotten soaked, no matter what kind of poncho or raincoat he was wearing. And maybe it did seem like a hoax. After all, I couldn't prove anyone had been out there. I couldn't even give them the beginning of a description. But part of me still wanted to march downstairs and remind anyone who would listen that attention gave me hives.

When Bobby came back upstairs, there was nothing for us to do but sleep. We'd never find Keme tonight, not in this weather. So, I closed my eyes. And I emptied my mind. (I mean, I tried. I really did.) But I couldn't fall asleep, even though exhaustion kept dragging my eyelids down. Even with Bobby's arm pulling me against his chest. It was hard to remember that anything had been wrong between us. If anything had been wrong between us. If it hadn't all been in my head.

And that, of course, was when I finally dozed off.

Bobby woke me the next morning.

It was seven o'clock.

I was sure there was some kind of mistake. I mean, this wasn't the accidental, sorry-I'm-making-too-much-noise-as-I-get-ready-for-work kind of wake-up. (Bobby never did that, by the way. He was always very considerate. Plus he got dressed for work in 'his' bedroom.) This wasn't even the cute, let's-fool-around-because-I've-got-five-minutes-before-work kind of wake-up. (I knew because those started with kisses.)

This was businesslike.

This was professional.

This was rude .

“Stop faking,” Bobby said. “I know you’re awake.”

I cracked an eye.

He was already dressed in his uniform, and although he had to be exhausted, he looked as crisp and alert as ever. “I want you to stay home today, okay?”

I grumbled something.

“I don’t want you going out,” Bobby said. “Not until we figure out what’s going on. Someone tried to kill you last night. I want you where I know you’ll be safe.”

I chose not to mention what we both knew—Hemlock House wasn’t exactly the Fortress of Solitude. Plenty of people had gotten into the sprawling old house before, and several of them had wanted to shuffle me right off this mortal coil. Instead, I said, “Maybe they were trying to kill Keme.”

“They didn’t seem too particular.”

“Keme’s still out there somewhere. Keme could be in danger.”

“I’m going to look for Keme.”

“No, you’re going to work. And you’re going to do whatever the sheriff needs you to do, because it’s your job, and you’re a good deputy. And meanwhile, Keme is out there, and he could be freezing to death, he could be hurt, he could be hungry.” (I realized in order of magnitude, I’d gotten off track.)

“Keme knows how to take care of himself,” Bobby said.

“And I don’t?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“It’s what you implied.”

Bobby drew a deep breath. Tension marked his brow. Then it relaxed, smoothing away, and he said, “I don’t want to fight with you.”

And because he was Bobby, that was exactly what he meant.

It took me about five seconds of childish petulance before I could mumble, “I don’t want to fight with you either.”

“I know you know how to take care of yourself—”

“Then you know I’ll be fine!”

He waited a beat before finishing, “—but you could have gotten killed last night. This person, whoever they are, has already killed two people. They almost killed a third last night.” I opened my mouth to make my point again about how I had managed to stay alive, but Bobby spoke over me. “Dash, it’s not a question of knowing how to handle yourself. Bad things can happen to anyone, no matter how good they are at taking care of themselves. Deputies and police officers and federal law enforcement officers—bad things can happen to anyone . And if something happened to you—” He cut off. His hands opened and closed against his thighs. He always kept his nails trimmed, almost blunt. I could see little crescents where they’d bitten into his palms.

Bobby has a lot in common with the superheroes. He’s strong. He’s fast. His moral compass points true north. (No wavering, not even when you could skip leg day and nobody would notice.) And I’ve mentioned the abs. He also is a little too responsible

sometimes; I honestly think that at some level, he believes he could fix anything if he only tried hard enough.

“Come here,” I said. I gathered his hands in mine. I kissed his knuckles. I looked up at him and said, “I love you.”

He nodded, but he didn’t meet my eyes.

“I promise I will make safe, responsible decisions. Just like if I had a tiny Deputy Bobby with angel wings sitting on my shoulder.”

His laugh was short, almost more of a cough, as though he was clearing his throat. “I’d find that reassuring, but I know about the little Fox with the red horns who sits on your other shoulder.”

“You can’t lock me up and keep me safe,” I said. “We don’t know that I’m the target. It might be Keme. Even if it’s not, I’m worried about him. He’s my—what’s the word when he’s kind of your foster son, but he’s also weirdly your older brother, and he pulled your hair so hard one time it actually made you cry, oh, and he’s part wolf?”

Bobby’s eyes finally found mine. He freed his hands from my grip, and he brushed them over my hair. “Please,” he said in a low voice. “Please be careful.”

“I will.”

He considered me for another moment, still brushing back my hair. “It took me a long time to find you. And it took us even longer to get it right. I do not have the energy to go through all that again if you get yourself killed.”

“Bobby!”

That big, goofy grin flashed out. He kissed me, gave me what had to be the most weirdly endearing tug on my ear, and left.

I decided I liked him better when he didn't make jokes.

I took my time getting ready for the day. A long shower, because last night's cold seemed to have settled into my bones. My new favorite hoodie (it said CHAOTIC GAY on the front, and honestly, nothing has described me better). Comfy joggers. My Mexico 66s. I was ready for the day.

There was no sign of Indira in the kitchen, not even the breakfast she usually left me. Maybe it was because it was still so ungodly early. (Nine o'clock.) I grabbed the keys to the Pilot, told myself for the millionth time I was going to figure out how to buy a new car, and hit the road.

The worst of the storm had broken up as it moved inland, but the day was still gray and droopy. The clouds looked like someone had done them in grease stick, and precipitation hung in the air in an unpleasant, lingering way that wasn't quite mist but wasn't quite a drizzle. (Also, it was super annoying if you had to wear glasses.) The air was fresh, but it had that waterlogged smell that came after really heavy rains, as though the entire world was beginning to mildew.

It was a Tuesday, so I decided—to paraphrase Paul—to hope against hope. (Fox said that once when I made my New Year's resolution to pump iron every day, and even though it was super rude, I had to admit I liked the sound of it.) I started at Hastings Rock High.

Big surprise: Keme wasn't there.

Also, the principal wanted me to pay some of Keme's textbook fines.

And apparently there was a question about some vandalism.

And he gave me back one of my credit cards that Keme had tried to use at the lunch line.

It wasn't a great visit.

I tried the RV park next. It was on my list of places to snoop—uh, investigate—ever since I'd seen those tenant account statements in Channelle's motel room. And I wanted to talk to Foster and September about their eviction and JT putting their belongings into storage.

When I got to the RV park, though, it looked like the sheriff had had the same idea. Two cruisers were parked in front of September's little camper, and farther down the street, a bedraggled Deputy Dahlberg was holding a newspaper over her head, trying to protect her hair, as she knocked on the door of a mammoth RV. (She'd told me she was thinking about changing it—her hair, I mean. She'd loved getting the Rachel, but she thought maybe it was time. I chose not to weigh in.)

It didn't seem like I'd get a chance to talk to Foster or September anytime soon, and I didn't think it was a good idea to poke around the RV park while the deputies were canvassing it. The sheriff—and Bobby—might both be incredibly patient and understanding people, but even they had their limits.

The Otter Slide was still closed (even if it had been open, I was pretty sure Seely would have called me if she'd seen Keme). I drove by the timber yard with a sick feeling in my stomach. Keme had slept here occasionally, back before he'd started staying at Hemlock House more or less full-time. It was hard to look at the yard, with its acres of bare, hardpack dirt and logs and heavy machinery and office trailers, and think that a boy had slept here, and not feel like you—along with everyone else in the world—had failed somehow.

If he was there, I didn't see him, and the lady at the gate—who was very polite and also very (scarily) firm—wouldn't let me drive around the yard to make sure.

I was quickly running out of places to check. There were some spots the surfers liked to hang out—I had the vague thought he might be at the surf shop. Or maybe he was blowing off steam by playing laser tag, although it seemed a little early for that. It was still early enough that, if this were a normal school day, and if I were responding to yet another call from the school about Keme playing hooky, I would have driven straight to Chipper, where I would have inevitably found him hanging out with Millie while Tessa, the owner, pretended not to notice.

So, I drove to Chipper.

When I'd first moved to Hastings Rock, I'd thought (based on a brief search on my phone) that Chipper was the only coffee shop in the town. Not true! Hastings Rock had tons of great places to get coffee. Chipper, however, happened to be the only one located in, well, a building. The rest were the drive-up kind, and they were peppered all over the place. Chipper also had the advantage of being located on Main Street, right in the picturesque heart of town, amidst all the artisan glassblowing and saltwater taffy pulling and local artists' galleries and, duh, souvenir shops. (Let's not forget Fishermen's Market, which had—hands down—the best fish and chips available on dry land.)

True to its name, Chipper was painted a cheery yellow, and inside, customers had free rein to draw on the walls with crayons and markers. For the most part, the designs consisted of smiley faces and suns, and occasionally, a pair of names encased by a heart. (One of them said Bobby and Dash. Please don't judge me; I'd had about sixteen of Tessa's scones and a gallon of grasshopper latte by that point.) Oh, and God help you if you were a teenager and decided this would be a fantastic canvas for your burgeoning artistic genius and you wrote fart on the wall. We didn't put up with that kind of thing in this town. One time, I'd seen Cyd Wofford (who did his daily

Marx study at Chipper) march this scrawny tourist kid right up to the wall with one of those magic eraser thingies, and the whole time he'd been giving him a lecture on how the bourgeoisie control the proletariat with, well, coffee.

With the morning rush long since passed, Chipper had settled into what had to be my favorite time of day. A few patrons were scattered around the coffee shop—Aric Akhtar was reading on his tablet (it could be anything from *Us Weekly* to *The Economist*), and an older woman in a beachcomber hat was picking jalapenos out of her jalapeno-and-cheddar bagel. Tessa was restocking the cream and sugar, while Millie, behind the counter, cleaned one of the espresso machines. On the speakers mounted overhead, someone was crooning along to a guitar; I wanted to say it was Snow Patrol.

“Morning, Dash,” Tessa said. For someone who literally had unlimited caffeine at her disposal, Tessa had a weary-eyed look that I suspected was emotional more than physical. She also had a warm smile and a listening ear, which was probably why—even with plenty of competitors around—Chipper remained busy even after tourist season died down. “You’re up early.”

“Bobby,” I said by way of explanation

Her smile grew, but all she said was “I’m going to keep going on this, but Millie can help you. Let me know if you need anything.”

When I got to the counter, though, Millie didn’t seem to notice me. I say seem because she was bent over, looking at the espresso machine upside down like she was about two inches away from climbing inside it. She was wiping down the steam nozzle thingy (yes, it probably has a real name; no, I don’t know it), and she was doing such a focused, industrious job of it, that she looked like she was about to rip it off.

I probably would have bought the act if she hadn't kept sneaking looks at me.

I waited about a minute, to see if she'd give up. Then I said, "Hey, Millie."

She twisted herself around a little more.

"Millie."

She pushed something on the espresso machine, and it began to rattle and grind and grumble.

I rapped on the counter and sang out, "Hello."

"Millie," Tessa called. "You've got a customer."

It took a couple of seconds, but Millie slowly poked her head out from behind (well, kind of under) the espresso machine. Her eyes were red as though she'd been crying. And she had a pink stripe in her hair that most definitely had not been there the night before. She stared at me like she was considering bursting into a fresh bout of tears. And then she said, "Oh. Hi, Dash," in the absolute least convincing way possible.

"Hi," I said.

"I can't talk right now. We're so busy."

I glanced around the mostly empty coffee shop. "Yeah, I can see—"

"Tessa, can you take Dash's order? I'm REALLY BUSY!"

You might think the volume would drive patrons off. But honestly, when Chipper was hopping—with the espresso machines going full steam and voices echoing off

the concrete floor and the music filling in every gap—it was actually kind of nice. You always heard your name called. And usually Millie added something sweet to go with it. She always complimented JaDonna Powers on her hair, for example.

With a question on her face for me, Tessa abandoned the sugar and creamer. I shrugged, and Tessa came around to the register. Millie, meanwhile, had retreated to the far side of the room, and in another burst of enthusiastic cleaning, it looked like she was trying to crawl inside a microwave.

“Any idea what’s going on?” Tessa said.

“I was going to ask you the same thing. Has she been like this all morning?”

“She’s been...subdued.” Something in Tessa’s voice softened. “She’s been crying in the back on and off, as a matter of fact.”

I frowned. “Millie?” I projected my voice so it would carry. “Can I talk to you?”

From inside the microwave came “Sorry, Dash, we’re SUPER busy!”

“I can tell her to take her break,” Tessa offered.

I shook my head. I’d never seen Millie avoid a conversation—for that matter, I’d never seen Millie not initiate a conversation. But I also knew that, in her own way, Millie could be surprisingly stubborn, and when she made her decision and dug in her heels, there wasn’t any changing her mind. (Unless your name was Keme Collson.) Still keeping my volume a bit louder than it needed to be, I said, “That’s all right. I’ll have the pumpkin pie latte and—” I simultaneously loved and hated saying it. “—the Dash special. Oh, does the pumpkin pie latte still come in a two-liter?”

“You don’t have to order something,” Tessa said in a low voice. “If you just want to

wait, I mean.”

“Trust me, I need the caffeine. I wasn’t joking about the two-liter.”

One of the nice things about Tessa is you don’t get any judgy statements from her like “Dash, no human being should ‘snack’ on a pound of bacon” or “Dash, you’re not supposed to frost your waffles” or “Dash, I think your blood sugar is dangerously high.” Tessa is open-minded. Tessa has an eye to the future. Tessa let me invent this month’s latte: pumpkin pie. Not pumpkin spice. Pumpkin pie. (Although she did nix my idea about blending an entire slice of pumpkin pie with two shots of espresso. There was some concern about customers finding the bits of pie crust disturbing; I tried to explain that was the best part.)

So, a few minutes later, I was seated at the counter, enjoying a goblet-sized pumpkin pie latte, with a sampling plate of the daily breakfast sandwiches. (That was the Dash special—mostly because everyone had finally gotten sick of me holding up the line while I tried to decide.)

“Do you want me to...” Tessa asked quietly, letting the question trail off into a suggestive look at Millie, who was now wiping down each bottle of flavored syrup with excruciating attention to detail.

I shook my head. I took a sip of my latte. (It tasted like genius in liquid form. And like pumpkin pie.) And then, my voice still set to carry, I said, “I know this is going to sound crazy, but I was wondering if you’d be willing to cater the brunch for the day after the wedding.”

Let me tell you: across the room, Millie pricked. her. ears.

(Also, I’m not sure if we’re allowed to say that word.)

Tessa's eyes widened, and her face glowed with a smile. "Dash, that's—" Then she must have figured it out because she gave me a surprisingly annoyed look and finished sourly, "—wonderful. Yes, of course we could help you with that."

"That would be great. I mean, it's a little early to start planning. We don't have a date yet."

"Maybe that's because you haven't asked him yet," Tessa said. "Have you?"

"Not yet," I admitted.

By this point, Millie was listening so hard she was quivering.

"I don't know how to ask him, actually," I said. "I don't even have any ideas—"

"OH MY GOD, DASH!" Caught up in the excitement of the moment, Millie practically floated toward us. "YOU HAVE TO ASK HIM IN A BALLOON!"

You know how in Jurassic Park , the water in the cup ripples because of the vibrations from the T. rex 's steps. (Or something like that—I'm not a scientist.) Anyway, I know you're not going to believe me, but my coffee sloshed .

"No," Millie said, still levitating toward us. "You have to ask him on a picnic. NO! You have to ask him at the top of the Eiffel Tower! Or in an ice hotel. Or under a waterfall. OR WHILE YOU'RE SCUBA DIVING!"

Aric Akhtar put in his earbuds.

"But what if he says no?" I ask. "And we're underwater? And he cuts the air, um, hose, or whatever it's called? And then he ties me to some...I want to say coral and leaves me to drown."

Tessa was looking at me.

The old woman in the beachcomber hat had paused, mid-excavation of yet another piece of jalapeno, to look at me.

“Okay,” I said, “I know that sounded weirdly specific—”

“He won’t,” Millie said, “BECAUSE HE LOVES YOU!”

“Thanks, Millie,” I said. “Since you’re here and not avoiding me anymore, now let’s talk about Keme.”

Outrage flashed across her face. Then hurt. Then a flush. And then an expression I wasn’t sure I’d seen on her before—a kind of tamped-down, sullen anger.

“Sit down,” Tessa said, patting Millie’s shoulder. “He’s your friend, and you need to talk about it with someone.”

With one last look at me to make sure we were okay, Tessa moved back to the sugar-and-cream station. Millie shifted her weight and twisted a towel between her hands, but after a few seconds, she sank down onto the stool next to me.

“You’re probably not even going to marry Bobby,” she said with surprising venom.

“Well, I actually hadn’t thought about it very much until right now, but I’m definitely going to marry him. I mean, if he’s dumb enough to say yes, it’s his own fault. Also, that scuba diving thing definitely tapped into something, and I feel like I need to do some work on that.”

With a trace of despair, Millie said, “You two are so cute.”

“Actually, that’s kind of an example of how not cute—”

“I don’t want to talk about Keme.”

To buy myself time, I took a sip of my latte. “Okay, well—”

“He’s a JERK!”

“What did he—”

“And he—he’s STUPID!”

“Well, he’s a boy, so—”

“And he won’t even let me say ONE THING that I really need to tell him!” She twisted the towel some more, her body tightening. More words burst out of her. “I don’t have to feel bad for dating Louis. I like Louis. Louis is funny and smart and everybody loves him.”

I wasn’t sure about everybody ; I thought Louis might be wise to stay out of dark alleys and away from Fox and their switchblade comb. But I tried to focus on the more important part of the conversation. “Did Keme say—”

“And Louis LIKES me. Do you know the last time a guy asked me out? I shouldn’t have to feel bad because—because—because—”

And then she started to cry.

I patted her arm and gave the coffee shop a quick scan. Tessa had stopped even pretending to stock the sugar packets. Aric Akhtar lowered his e-reader. The woman in the beachcomber hat, the little jalapeno pieces forgotten, glared at me.

“It’s okay,” I whispered. I switched from patting her arm to rubbing it. “Millie, don’t cry. It’s okay. You don’t need to feel bad—”

She grabbed a handful of napkins and pressed them to her eyes. “I DON’T!”

(In case you were wondering, they did absolutely nothing to diminish the volume.)

“Right, well, good. You shouldn’t. And whatever Keme said—”

“Keme doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He doesn’t know Louis. He doesn’t know ANYTHING.” She lowered the napkins to give me a red-eyed stare. “He’s just a DUMB. BOY. It’s none of his business what I do with my hair.”

Maybe it was the choking sensation of having so many sets of eyes fixed on me. Maybe it was the prickling flush climbing my body, like I’d eaten a bad enchirito. Maybe it was simply that I didn’t want her to cry again. Whatever the reason, I grabbed onto that last line like a spar in the conversational shipwreck. “Keme doesn’t like your hair?”

From behind me came Tessa’s muttered (and despairing) “My God, Dash.”

“Uh, I like your hair. Actually, I love it. The pink part is so—” It took me about five seconds to come up with “—pink.”

(I’m a writer, ladies and gentlemen.)

Millie sniffed, although it was impossible to tell whether this was at my descriptive abilities or merely a result of her crying. She ran her fingers through the length of pink hair and said, “Louis said it would look good. He said he likes when girls dye their hair. Louis’s got lots of great ideas.”

Louis, I decided, needed to kiss a wood chipper.

“Oh,” I said. (I was channeling a particularly straight part of myself that day, apparently.) “Okay.”

Millie didn’t seem to hear me, though. She was still finger-combing that section of hair, her expression distant. When she spoke, her anger had collapsed like a burned-out fire, leaving her voice small and brittle, and it sounded like she wasn’t even talking to me. “Dash,” she asked, “am I loud?”

I did another of those rapid scans of the room.

Tessa made a motion for me to say something.

Aric took off his glasses like he was getting ready to fight me.

The woman in the beachcomber hat literally shook her fist at me.

And because sometimes the universe is cruel, the music overhead changed to a jazzy, coffee house rendition of the song “Say Something.”

I thought a few words in my head that the lady in the beachcomber hat would not have liked. And then, with a quick prayer that the patron saint of little gay boys would understand my stretching the truth, I said, “Millie, you’re not loud. Well, I mean, sometimes you are. Like that time you wanted to show me something outside, and I was trying to read, and I’d already told you, like, eight times—”

A sugar packet hit me in the side of the head.

As though speaking to someone particularly dense, Millie said, “Keme and I found a four-leaf clover, and I wanted to show you.”

I still didn't believe the four-leaf clover part, but the rest was definitely on brand—on separate occasions, I'd been dragged away from perfectly good naps, video games, and cupcakes to see, respectively, a rainbow that had conveniently disappeared by the time I got outside, and Millie's favorite rock (she'd forgotten which one it was by the time we got out there), and the, quote, "cutest cricket."

But I managed to say, "What I meant was, you're enthusiastic. You get excited about things. And everyone who knows you loves that about you. We all love that about you."

Millie didn't say anything, but her expression remained clouded, and she touched the pink stripe of hair.

I thought I had a good idea of who had told her she was loud, and a wood chipper wasn't good enough for him.

Finally, she seemed to rouse herself from her thoughts. She gave me a small, unhappy smile that was so un-Millie-like that the need to cry surged up inside me for a moment, and I had to take a deep breath. Then she said, "You didn't come here to listen to me complain. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Millie, if Louis is making you feel—"

She shook her head, and in a definitive end to the subject, said, "What's up, Dash?"

I considered the best way to ask my question. Then I said, "Do you know where Keme is?"

Millie shook her head.

"Do you have any ideas?" I asked.

This time, she hesitated.

“Because I need to find him—”

“I don’t know. He won’t answer any of my messages. And I don’t think—I don’t think he wants me to tell people about the places he goes sometimes.” In that strangely forlorn voice, she said, “He’s mad enough at me already.”

I opened my mouth to jump on that, but some smarter part of me made me stop. Millie had been avoiding me when I’d come in. But, from what I could tell, it didn’t have anything to do with her new hair color, because she’d been more than happy to talk to me about that. She’d even answered my question about Keme, even if I would have appreciated her, well, telling me where Keme might have been hiding. So, the question remained: why had Millie been so determined not to talk to me when I’d shown up at Chipper?

“Millie,” I said, “what happened Sunday night?”

She froze in the act of brushing her hair back. Then she slid toward the edge of her seat. “It was nice chatting, Dash, but Tessa really needs me to—”

“No, she doesn’t. What happened?”

“Nothing happened.” Then her face lit up with wary optimism. “I mean, it doesn’t even matter anymore, does it? Because Keme’s innocent, and the sheriff knows he’s innocent, and she let him go.”

“It might matter,” I said, “considering someone might be trying to kill Keme.”

I filled her in on the events of the night before.

When I'd finished, Millie's eyes were huge, and she said, "Dash, you have to HELP HIM!"

"Hey, I might have been the intended victim too. Did you miss that part? What about me?"

"Do you think that's why he's not answering my messages?" She looked on the brink of tears again. "Do you think he got hurt?"

A sugar packet hit me in the back of the head again.

"I don't know," I said. "That's why I need your help. If someone is trying to hurt Keme, it's because he knows something or saw something—or the killer thinks he did. That's why you're going to tell me what happened Sunday night."

"But nothing happened!"

One thing I'd learned from Bobby—when it came to questions like What did you do this afternoon? and How was your writing today? and Did you eat that entire cake?—was that sometimes, wait time worked wonders.

(The alliteration on that was chef's kiss.)

"It—it wasn't a big deal," Millie said. "It was a misunderstanding."

I kept waiting. I even folded my arms until I realized it made me look like a disappointed dad.

(Nailed it on the alliteration again.)

Millie seemed to deflate as she sighed. "Louis and I went to this party. He knew some

of the guys.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. A frat house near the college.”

That helped. Kind of. Arcadia College wasn’t anywhere close to the Gull’s Nest, and I had a hard time imagining that the killer was a college-aged kid who had a heretofore unknown connection to JT and Channelle.

OMG.

What if Louis was the killer?

Although that actually made zero sense, and I immediately regretted thinking it.

“And what happened?” I asked.

“Nothing happened,” Millie said.

“You told the sheriff Keme was at the party.”

“He was.”

“But not all night.”

“No, he left.”

A question occurred to me. “How did Keme end up at that party?”

Blushing, Millie said, “I told him about it. I mean, he’s eighteen. He can go to a party

if he wants to.”

Sure, I thought. But he wasn’t twenty-one, and if Indira smelled alcohol on him—well, you want to talk about zapping.

“Louis said he wasn’t there very long,” I said.

Millie nodded unhappily.

“Why’d he leave?”

The delay seemed longer this time. “He didn’t want to hang out with Louis; Louis teases him too much. I tried to tell Keme he doesn’t mean anything by it.”

I was fairly sure Louis did mean something by it. Guys like Louis tended to be unforgivably perceptive when it came to spotting potential threats—and potential victims. I wasn’t sure which one he’d pegged Keme for. Possibly both.

“Did they get in a fight?”

“What? No!”

“Are you sure? Because Keme looks pretty bad.”

“They didn’t even see each other. Keme showed up while Louis was getting us drinks. We talked. He left. That’s it. That’s all that happened.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Millie.”

“I’M SURE!”

But she squirmed on her stool and wouldn’t look me in the eye.

I decided to change tack. “What did you want to talk to him about?”

“What?”

“Keme. When I showed up, you said he wouldn’t talk to you even though you had something important to tell him.”

The blush intensified in Millie’s face until it was almost neon. Finally, she stammered, “Wh-what I said earlier. About how he’s dumb.”

I gave it some wait time, but even though Millie shifted and wriggled and crossed and uncrossed her arms, that was all I got. Finally, I said, “Yeah. Sure. Listen, Millie, I think there’s something you’re not telling me, and I think that’s a mistake because Keme—or, and I can’t emphasize this enough, I—might be in real danger. So, I’m going to ask you one more time: is there anything else you want to tell me?”

Staring at the floor, she shook her head.

“If you see him,” I said, “or if you talk to him, will you please tell him to come home? It’s not safe for him to be out there by himself.”

Millie nodded, but her voice had a strangely unguarded optimism as she said, “But you’re going to make sure he’s okay. You’re going to figure out who the killer is, and Bobby will arrest him, and then Keme will be safe.”

“Or I will be safe,” I said. And then I sighed. “And it’s kind of hard to solve a murder when most of your suspects are either dead or missing. The deputies are all over the RV park, which means I can’t talk to Foster and September about how they conveniently forgot to tell me they’d been evicted and are now squatting, or whatever the legal term is. And Channelle managed to get herself run over, which—not to be insensitive—put a real damper on my theory that she’d killed her husband to get rich. And this guy from Orange County could be anywhere—”

“Woody?” Millie said. “Woody Vance? He drives a car that says Orange County Sheriff’s Department on it?”

The best word for my silence was stupefied. Finally, I managed to say, “You know his name?”

“Oh sure! He came in here for coffee—you know all the tourists do. I saw it on his credit card.”

“I honestly can’t bring myself to ask the next question, Mildred.”

She made a face. “Stop calling me that. You know how Mrs. Knight owns her dad’s place now, and she says it’s a rental, but, like, nobody wants to stay there because it’s so far out of town and because the lot is so overgrown? Well, when Woody came in—”

“You’re on a first-name basis?”

“—I said, ‘Boy, somebody looks like he could use a coffee,’ and he said, ‘More like a shot,’ and I said, ‘Make it a double,’ and he laughed because it was so funny—”

No offense to Millie’s potential career as a standup comedian (comedienne?), but I guessed Woody Vance of the Orange County Sheriff’s Department had laughed

because she was young and vibrant and beautiful.

“Let’s skip to the important part.”

Millie frowned at me. “And I said ‘Rough night?’ And he said, ‘Long night. Rough morning.’ And I said—”

“Millie.”

“Remember he said he liked your hair,” Aric chimed in.

I turned around to glare at him. Cheeks reddening, he sank behind his e-reader.

Millie, however, was not to be sidetracked. “And I said, ‘Nothing like a hot shower and good coffee after a bad night,’ and he said—”

I couldn’t help it. I groaned.

“—‘Don’t talk to me about a hot shower. The place I’m staying only has cold water. How’s that after I hacked my way through a jungle to get to the front door?’”

“That’s it?” I said.

“And then I laughed because that was so funny—”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“—and I asked him if he was staying at Mrs. Knight’s dad’s place, and he said yes.”

I opened my mouth—potentially to scream something like And you didn’t think it was important to tell anyone? , even though I knew it was unfair; there was no way

Millie could have known I was trying to find this guy. Well, trying to find makes it sound like I'd made an effort—I hadn't had a chance, with the nonstop rush of the last couple of days.

Before I could verbalize any of this, though, I remembered where I'd heard the name Vance before. Or, more precisely, seen it: on the California driver's license in Channelle's motel room.

"Send me the address for Mrs. Knight's rental," I said as I lurched off my stool. "And call Bobby. Tell him what you told me."

"And tell him about Woody?"

"Yes, obviously."

"Should I tell him about the party too?"

"Tell him everything.

"Even about my hair?" With an undisguised note of pride, Millie added, "The color is called Virgin Pink."

I hesitated, hand on the door.

And then, because I'm a very bad person, I said, "You should definitely tell him that. Describe the process to him. Send him pictures."

I dodged one last sugar packet from Tessa and darted out the door.

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Mrs. Knight's dad's place—which was a really cumbersome name, by the way, and probably not ideal for a listing on Airbnb—was so far outside of town that it must have been sitting on the city limits. Hemlock House was like that too, but Hemlock House was south of Hastings Rock, sitting on the bluffs, commanding a priceless view of the Pacific. (I've never used the phrase “commanding a view” before, but now I'm obsessed.)

Mrs. Knight's dad's place—see? it's cumbersome—was east of Hastings Rock. Inland. Not far from the Swift River, where the ground was marshy, and the conditions seemed to be ideal, even in October, for a mosquito love-fest. The conditions also appeared to be ideal for plants. Millie—and, for that matter, Woody—hadn't been exaggerating when they'd talked about the overgrown lot. When my phone told me I'd arrived at my destination, the only clue was the edge of a gravel turnoff; the rest of the drive was hidden by thick growth of what I thought might be rhododendrons.

Since I didn't want to scratch the Pilot (and lose my boyfriend), I parked on the side of the road and continued on foot. It was late morning. The sky was still churning with those grease-pencil clouds, and the wind ran through the brush so hard that it crackled and bristled and looked like a dog's hackles standing on end. It ripped at my hair and tugged on my glasses, and I don't want to get into the details, but my current situation in the pair of joggers I was wearing was approaching a wedgie. The air smelled like moldering vegetation and, from farther off, thin, dispirited smoke. I felt like I should have been wearing a cool vest and pants with lots of utilitarian pockets while I huddled around a campfire.

Instead, I pulled my joggers out of my, um, crack and pressed forward.

Up close, I could see where the rhododendron branches were broken where a vehicle had forced its way through them. Below, ancient ruts in the gravel held rain from the night before, with a faint sheen that suggested motor oil. I pushed forward, and leaves rustled around me; if anybody was paying attention on the other side, there was no way they wouldn't hear me.

It would have been a stretch to call the space beyond the rhododendrons a clearing. It was too overgrown, for one thing—most of the ground was covered in a low, gnarled brush that had turned a rich gold in autumn. I'd been in Oregon long enough to hear the locals complain about Scotch broom—pretty or not, the plant was invasive, and it loved taking over.

The other reason you couldn't exactly call it a clearing was that it was so full of junk. An old coin-operated washing machine poked its head out from the Scotch broom. A rust-eaten Thunderbird sat on blocks, its windows either down or gone, the interior looking like a veritable bonanza of opportunities to get tetanus, beginning with the rusty springs poking out of the upholstery. A raccoon had gotten into the trash, and a mess of bones suggested fried chicken had been on the takeout menu recently. Farther back along the building, several large plastic barrels had been roped together into a pyramid. Why? To what end? These were the kinds of mysteries we paid archaeologists to speculate about.

Sleepily nosing up out of the scrub and junk was a house. It was a hardboard-sided bungalow, and it had a wood shingle roof that probably met every definition of 'green' you could find—it had plants growing out of it, for heaven's sake. At some point, the structure had probably been painted a color, but over the years, it had faded to a gray that blended in perfectly with the dismal autumn day.

I had a hard time imagining anyone willingly staying there. For that matter, I had a hard time imagining the house staying upright the next time a squirrel sneezed. (Do squirrels sneeze? See, that's the kind of thing that will make the intrepid writer

bravely stop composing to look it up and make sure his story is one hundred percent accurate. And then he can come back to his writing the next day. Or after a long weekend.) On the other hand, if you were looking for somewhere to stay in a small town during its off-season, when strangers would stick out like a sore thumb—well, in that case, maybe it was perfect.

Following the trail of flattened, broken brush, I continued along the side of the house. Where the gravel drive curled around the back, a white sedan was parked. It had a light bar and the words ORANGE COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT painted on the side. Foster had said he'd seen a police officer, and while a sheriff—or a sheriff's deputy—wasn't exactly the same thing, I didn't think Foster was persnickety about his law enforcement terminology. I tried to think of a reason why a California deputy would be hiding out in Mrs. Knight's dad's place. Nothing legitimate came to mind. I'd done enough research about jurisdictional procedure to know that if this guy, Woody Vance or whoever he was, had come to Hastings Rock for a professional reason, he would have been in contact with Sheriff Acosta. But if he wasn't up here for a legitimate reason, then why come in his official vehicle?

Great question, I told myself. The only problem was that, to answer it, I was going to have to, you know, ask him.

Which was how I found myself on the porch, knocking on the front door and praying I didn't Big-Bad-Wolf Mrs. Knight's dad's place. (They seriously needed to come up with a better name for it. Like Huckleberry Cottage. Only not that, because that name was cute, and I came up with it.)

The squeak of a floorboard came from inside the house. Then silence for several long seconds. I had the distinct feeling I was being watched. Certain inconvenient facts began to present themselves: a killer was still loose; someone had tried to kill me (or Keme, or both of us) the night before; I was standing on the porch of someone who might very well be said killer, without any convenient neighbors or passersby to act

as witnesses; and nobody in the world knew where I was except Millie, who had once forgotten to go to work because she was chasing her chickens. (It was not a euphemism. Also, it was not a great four weeks when Millie decided she wanted to have chickens.) I was easing my weight back, considering a quick return to the road, the Pilot, and the safety of civilization, when the door swung open.

A man stood there, staring at me. He was a bull-necked Latino guy, his salt-and-pepper hair faded on the sides and combed straight back. His dark eyes made me think of the way Bobby looked sometimes. Like a cop. He carried himself the way some of those guys did too, like their shoulders were too big for their bodies, and they were hoping you'd get in their way. He wasn't dressed in uniform (a tiny voice in my head said, Duh); he wore jeans, a tee with a logo I didn't recognize, and a lightweight jacket. Southern California, I reminded myself. I wondered if his toes had frozen off yet.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Are you Woody Vance?"

He didn't move, but something about him changed: a hardening of his expression, although it had already been fairly hard to begin with.

"I thought so," I said. "My name is Dash Dane. I need to talk to you."

"Who are you?"

"Dash—"

"No. Are you a deputy? State law enforcement?"

"No, but—"

“Then I don’t have to talk to you.”

As he started to shut the door, I blurted, “I think Channelle was stealing people’s rent money.”

It hadn’t been a conscious decision—nothing even remotely close to a plan. But people liked to talk, um, crap about their exes, and if this guy really was Woody Vance, and if Channelle Haskins had, at one point, been Channelle Vance, then maybe he’d want to talk crap about her. Of course, if Vance was her maiden name, and she was his sister, maybe he’d be less thrilled about my theory.

Woody stopped. He gave me another, more assessing look. Then he said, “That sounds like Channelle.”

Trying not to exhale in relief (or not too loudly, anyway), I managed to say, “I was hoping you could tell me about her. Anything you think might help. See, the sheriff believes my friend might have been involved, but he wasn’t.”

“If he wasn’t, then the best thing you can do is hire him a decent lawyer, keep your mouths shut, and wait for this to sort itself out. Have a good day, Mr. Dane.” He started to shut the door again.

“What did you mean when you said that sounded like her? Did Channelle steal from people when she lived in California?”

Woody stopped again. His cheeks darkened, but his voice was even—almost amused—when he said, “You could say that.”

“You were married, weren’t you? I know her name used to be Vance.”

Out in the trees, something moved. A branch bent, dipped. Then it sprang back up

again, tiny pearls of water flying from the needles. They fell soundlessly into the brush.

Woody nodded.

“You heard what happened to her?”

He nodded again.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Mr. Dash, I can’t help you. I came up here to get my wife to finalize our divorce. She’s dead now. That means I’m going home. I don’t know anything about what happened to her. Frankly, I don’t care. This may make me sound like a bit of a meanie—” (He might have used a different word than meanie .) “—but I’m glad she’s gone. I’m going back home, and I’m going to get on with my life.”

The little writer part of my brain pinged, and a sign lit up that said MOTIVE, but all I said was “Is there anything you can tell me about her? I mean, did she tell you anything about her life here? Or maybe you can help me understand her better.”

“Sure, I can help you understand her. She was a selfish, spoiled child. I met her on a call-out; her dad was trying to knock out her mom’s teeth one by one. She was seventeen when she moved in with me. I didn’t know that at the time; she lied to me right up until her eighteenth birthday, and then she told me we were getting married. She wanted out of her dad’s house, you see. And the other thing about Channelle? She didn’t want to work, but she liked to spend. I gave her a budget, told her that was the end of the discussion, and you know what happened? Credit cards in my name. My cash going missing. Then, one day, I came home, and she was gone, along with—” He cut himself off; from the look on his face, it was a struggle. “That was the last time I saw her. Then I found out she was living up here. Fine. All I wanted was a

divorce.”

“That’s why you went to the RV park’s office. That’s what you and JT argued about.”

“I tried to tell him who he was dealing with. He didn’t want to listen.” A struggle played itself out in his body: his hand opening and closing around the door, his lips pressed tight. The words broke from him. “As soon as I saw him, I knew. Another old man.” He gave a bitter laugh. “Somebody with stability, security. Somebody she could wrap around her finger.” Woody blinked, and then he narrowed his eyes. He swung the door back and forth. When he spoke again, his voice was flat. “I think we’re done here.”

“Her necklace is missing.”

Woody didn’t say anything, but he didn’t slam the door.

“It has a heart-shaped sapphire,” I said. “It’s part of a set. Someone took it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Someone broke into the RV park’s office. And someone broke into Channelle’s motel room. And someone has a necklace that belonged to Channelle. So, if you wanted to talk to me about what you’re really doing in town, explain what’s been going on, help me understand—that’s great. And if not, well, I guess the sheriff will be by with a warrant.”

Woody opened the door. It hit the wall with a soft thud, and he planted one hand on it, pinning it there. He was bigger than I’d realized—or he seemed bigger in that moment, like he filled the doorway. When he stepped out onto the porch, I took a step back. My heel came down on thin air, and for a moment, I wobbled and almost fell.

Woody moved forward again.

I told myself to stand my ground.

But he kept coming.

And I stepped back again.

I tried to take into account the step down. It wasn't far, and I was moderately coordinated. (Ignore the sound of Keme laughing in the background.)

Then Woody shoved me. The movement wasn't fast. It wasn't sneaky. I tried to twist away, but the heel of his hand struck me just above the solar plexus, hard enough to send me stumbling backward into a fall.

I landed on my butt, and as my brain was still processing the jolt, Woody closed the gap between us. He planted one big boot on my chest and bore down—not quite a kick, but hard enough that the rubber treads bit into my skin through my hoodie. He forced me onto my back. The pressure of his boot on my chest increased until discomfort became pain. My ribs creaked. It was hard to draw a breath. I grabbed his ankle and tried to force his foot away, but it was like trying to uproot a tree with my bare hands. He didn't even seem to be breathing hard. The pressure on my chest increased more. Black spots swung in my vision.

And then he lifted his foot.

I sucked in air. The black spots thickened as blood pounded in my ears. I tried to flop over, tried to squirm away, but Woody crouched next to me and grabbed me by the hair. My vision was still clearing when I realized he was holding something in front of me. His phone.

On the screen was a picture. A photo. It showed a staircase and a couple—a man and a woman. They were kissing. A bright red door showed in the background, and I recognized the Bay Bridge Suites. I recognized the people too. The woman was Channelle, of course. And the man was Foster—September’s live-in waste-of-space.

“I’m showing you this so you’ll leave me alone,” Woody said. He shook my head by the hair, and tears sprang into my eyes. His tone was so cool it was almost uninterested. “Threaten me again, and I’ll kill you.”

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After Woody went back inside, I picked myself up and, somehow, made it back to the Pilot.

For a while, I sat there, my chest aching, my scalp throbbing. Drive, I told myself. But I didn't. I sat there with my eyes closed, breathing short, shallow breaths, my whole face hot. When I opened my eyes again, I gave myself a once over. A muddy boot print showed on my jacket and, where it had hung open, on my hoodie. Another patch of mud was drying on my cheek from when I'd tried to roll away from Woody. More mud on the back of my neck. A few pieces of straw-like grass in my hair. Red eyes. Well, pink really. I gave myself a few experimental pokes. I drew deep breaths. I didn't think I had any broken ribs.

Part of me wanted to drive back to Hemlock House. Part of me wanted to take a hot bath and stay there until either: a) I dissolved, or b) Bobby came home and took care of me. (This was what Millie not-so-endearingly referred to as my "sadness baths".) Part of me wanted to cry and feel sorry for myself and maybe—maybe!—see if I could talk Bobby into shooting Woody Vance.

But that was only part of me.

Another part of me was red hot. And that part of me kept seeing the photo of Foster at the Bay Bridge Suites, kissing Channelle outside her motel room.

I drove to the Gull's Nest.

When I reached the RV park, it looked different from the last visit. Awnings had been rolled up and put away. Hammocks had been taken down. Tarps covered lawn

furniture and grills. The wind raked my hair and pulled on my jacket; the tarps billowed like parachutes, and the tie-downs snapped and thrummed. In the tiny, sad marina, the boats were battened down, bobbing anxiously in the water. Everywhere I looked, the park was hunkered down, waiting. It felt strangely apocalyptic. I wished I had a flame-thrower.

I stopped at a spigot outside the park office and washed my face. The water was freezing, and it had a faintly metallic odor. I decided to consider it bracing ; that seemed like something Will Gower would say. I felt better once I'd washed off the mud and picked the grass out of my hair. I gave the park office a quick glance. Police tape warned me off, and a chain held the front door shut. I could see where the jamb had splintered when someone had forced it—just like at the Bay Bridge Suites. When I glanced in through the windows, the interior was dark, but I could make out the signs of a frenzied search: a drawer stood on end; papers made a ski trail across the floor; a lamp lay on the floor next to its shade, and it gave me the sensation that somebody had ripped its head off. I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass. Hair spikily wet, face washed out, collar damp. I looked like a million bucks that had gone through the laundry backward.

(I wasn't sure backward made sense, but I liked it so much I kept it and decided I'd use it for Will Gower one day.)

A quick glance showed me that the office's other doors—the garage door, and the back door—were also locked. I briefly considered trying my lock-picking skills, but then I decided against it. That wasn't why I'd come here, and if I did want to commit some light breaking-and-entering, I'd come back later, after everyone was asleep. I couldn't remember who, but I remembered someone telling me this place was like a fishbowl, and as I swept a gaze around me, at all the huddled RVs and campers, I couldn't shake the feeling of eyes.

When I got to September's pull-behind, a bag of trash lay next to the concrete pad,

eviscerated and spilling its guts on the ground—empty bottles of Buffalo Trace and New Amsterdam, disposable vape pods, those little plastic tubs that dispensaries sold joints in, plus more depressing stuff like the flattened cardboard shells of takeout chicken wings. Raccoons, I wondered as I stepped around the garbage, or deputies?

Muddy footprints tracked across the concrete pad and up onto the camper's single step. I followed them to the door. The piece of paper that had said COLLSON was gone now, along with whatever had been beneath it—what I suspected had been the eviction notice. Torn scraps of paper were still stuck to the fiberglass under the remaining tape. I listened, but this time, there wasn't the muffled noise of a television. No Price is Right . The wind picked up, and wood creaked, and a few fat drops of water fell from heavy branches. It went right down the back of my jacket, and I shivered.

I knocked.

The sound rang out hollowly and then died away. It sounded like a long way off that I could hear the water lapping in the marina.

I knocked again.

Nothing.

I started to get a larcenous itch. Or maybe not larcenous, since I wasn't going to steal anything, but definitely felonious. The lock on that camper door wasn't anything. I wouldn't even need my picks. I could just pop it out of the frame—

From inside came the sound of glass rolling, and then a clink-thunk as it fell and hit the floor. Someone moaned.

The image of Foster came back to me, kissing Channelle at the Bay Bridge Suites.

And Foster's cold eyes. And the way Foster had forced that pill between September's lips. The hair on my arms did its best impersonation of a hedgehog.

Run, a sensible voice in my head said. Call Bobby. Put on a bulletproof vest.

But this was Keme's mom.

When I tried the handle, it turned, and the door opened easily. The sound of the hinges was almost nothing—lost under another rush of wind that batted at my wet hair and rippled the pines around us. When it faded, the soft sound of breathing came out of the camper's darkened interior. All I could make out was the layout: the sofa where Foster had been lounging on my last visit, the kitchenette, the slide-out dinette where September and I had sat.

And then my eyes fixed on a shadowy bulk that I didn't remember. After several long seconds, I realized I was staring at a pair of feet sticking out from the dinette slide-out.

I stepped up into the camper. It rocked slightly, squeaking on its aging suspension. The noise seemed enormous, swallowing up the sound of those small breaths. The far end of the camper seemed even darker, if possible. I could barely make out the weird octagonal bunks in the bedroom; next to them, the door to the tiny bathroom was ajar. The faint, acrid bite of vomit hung in the air.

September lay on the slide-out's bench, her head under the table. She was still breathing, but she didn't seem to know I was there. My eyes went to the darkness behind the bathroom door. I couldn't see anything, but I had that same sense of eyes again. A fishbowl, I thought. The world's tiniest fishbowl. I wanted to laugh, and I bit my lip so I wouldn't.

"September," I whispered. And then, a bit more loudly, "September. Can you hear

me? It's Dash, Keme's friend."

Something in her next moan sounded like acknowledgment.

"I'm going to help you sit up," I told her. "You're sick."

She didn't object, so I got hold of her arm and tugged. She was dressed in some sort of billowy, ruffled blouse and velvety trousers, with about a million necklaces that clicked and clattered as I tried to maneuver her. The whole ensemble looked like something Janet Joplin would have put together. Wait, was it Janet Joplin or Janis Joplin? And I thought maybe she wore glasses, so September lost a few points there.

Something in the camper popped.

I cut my eyes back to the darkened opening of the bathroom.

Nothing but darkness.

My heart didn't care. My heart was galloping at about a million miles an hour.

"Up," I whispered, and the fraying edge of my patience was clear even to me. "Sit up. September, you've got to sit up!"

She wasn't exactly a rag doll, but she wasn't doing much to help, either. She groaned. A lot. And her weight on the bench's cushion meant that when I pulled too hard, she threatened to come sliding off the bench, cushion and all. Finally, though, I got her upright. Her eyes were open, and even in the dimly lit interior, I thought her face looked puffy from crying. She looked at me, but she didn't seem to see me.

"September, did you take something?" I asked.

She stared out at me from behind glassy eyes. Her breath was so high in her body that it sounded like it was in her mouth.

“What did you take?” I asked. “September, I need you to talk to me.”

“You’re Keme’s friend,” she said, the words slurred.

“That’s right. We’re going to get you some help. You’re going to be okay.”

As I dug my phone out of my pocket, she said, “Keme’s such a good boy.”

“Uh huh,” I said. I placed a call to Bobby, but it rang until it went to voicemail.

What now? I could call 911. But would it be better to load her into the Pilot and drive her to the hospital myself? I mean, she was breathing, and she was conscious (kind of).

“I need to—” September’s voice dissolved into breathy confusion. “Help.” She struggled again. “Foster.”

“What about Foster? What did Foster do?”

“Foster,” she said. In the storm light filtering in through the windows, past the old aluminum mini-blinds and the vinyl clings of happy ghosts and goblins, her face still held that Disney princess beauty. And then she gripped the table and, to my total and one-hundred-percent surprise, dragged herself clear of the slide-out.

“No, wait—” I said.

“Foster,” she mumbled. She took one wobbly step. She threw out a hand and caught the three-quarters-sized fridge. One of her knees buckled, but she stayed upright and

took another step. It was pure willpower, I realized, and for a moment, I saw, and I understood. The boy who refused to give up. The boy who hadn't let anything stop him. Ever.

And then she folded.

I caught her before she hit the floor, and we did a staggering two-person dip until I could lay her down.

"September?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

She was still breathing, and her eyes were half open, and she even made a sleepy sound of awareness.

The idea flashed into my head.

Sometimes, I decided, I wasn't a very good person. A very good person would have called 911 right then.

But she was breathing. And she seemed like she was okay, albeit knocked out.

I spent another ten seconds trying to decide if I really was a good person.

And then I turned on the flashlight on my phone and started to search. There were two things that were still missing: the murder weapon (although if the killer was smart, they would have thrown it into the bay by now), and Channelle's necklace.

It was a quick and easy search. The camper had a lot of nooks and crannies for storage—trying to maximize the use of every inch of available space—but, since JT had moved September's belongings into storage, there wasn't anything in them. I went as quickly as I could, checking September every few seconds, making sure she

was still awake and breathing.

And then, in the tiny bathroom, I popped off the cover of the exhaust fan, and cash came tumbling down.

My phone buzzed with a call from Bobby as I gathered up the bills.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “Where are you?”

“September’s camper.” I filled him in and said, “I think Foster tried to kill her. Remember how I told you about that super weird thing with the pill the last time I was here?”

“Dash—”

“He obviously had something going with Channelle. Maybe she was giving him a cut. There’s got to be five hundred dollars here. I mean, the jackass didn’t have a job, so where did he get this much money?”

“Dash—”

“And then Channelle threatened to cut him off, or maybe he knew something about the murder and tried to blackmail her, and it all went wrong, so he ran her down with his car.”

(That last part was a little foggy since I wasn’t sure Foster had a car.)

“Dash!”

“What?”

“Foster didn’t poison her.”

“I know it’s only a theory until we can talk to September—”

“No, he didn’t poison her. Salk and Dahlberg picked him up a couple of hours ago. September was fine when they left. Foster’s been here ever since. He’s sitting in a cell right now, waiting for his lawyer.”

“Wait,” I said, trying to get my thoughts to settle.

“I’m sending an ambulance over there right now.”

I heard the words, but I said, “They arrested Foster?”

“He had Channelle’s necklace.” Something twisted in Bobby’s voice. “It was in a box on the table when Salk and Dahlberg interviewed them about the eviction. He was going to give it to September as a present.”

I opened my mouth to—what? Argue? But why did I want to argue? I’d had the same thought, hadn’t I? I’d seen the photo of Channelle and Foster. As soon as I’d seen September, I’d jumped to the conclusion that Foster had done this to her. And now that Bobby told me he’d been arrested, I could see how the other pieces fit: Foster was a mooch, using his boyish good looks to live off the women he met, like September or Channelle. Foster was our only eyewitness to the events of the night JT had been murdered, which meant he could have told us whatever he wanted, made up any story he wanted. Like Keme getting into a fight with JT. He would have known that Keme’s clothes were in JT’s garage, and he would have known which clothes were Keme’s so he could use them to frame him. He had Channelle’s necklace. I had known, the first time I’d met him, that there was something dangerous under the pretty surface—a darkness that rippled when he lost control.

So, why was my first, automatic reaction to tell Bobby that they had it all wrong?

I didn't know, so I didn't say anything.

After several seconds, Bobby said into my silence, "Try to keep her awake, Dash. The ambulance is on its way."

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The paramedics came. Then the deputies—Tripple and Bobby. A crowd gathered, mostly middle-aged, mostly White, men and women who emerged from their RVs with careful steps, drawn by the scent of blood in the water. Tripple kept them back; he was about as good at that part of his job as he was at everything else, meaning he snapped at people, barked orders, shouted, and generally acted like the rear end of a particularly stupid donkey. He was the perfect example of a guy who had let the tiniest amount of power go to his head, and watching him bully a woman on the other side of the caution tape, I couldn't help but feel like Tripple was genuinely angry. Probably because he took any challenge to his authority personally. I felt numb in the aftermath of finding September and learning Foster had been arrested, but watching Tripple in action still made me simultaneously sick and tired.

The sheriff came, and I gave my statement—not that there was much to give.

“Go home,” the sheriff said when we'd finished. “Get some rest. You've been through a lot.”

I hadn't, not really, but I said, “Are you sure he did it?”

“The investigation is ongoing, Dash.” But she was a good sheriff—good in so many ways. So, she let out a breath and said in a lower voice, “He admits they argued. His version is that she gave him the necklace as a way of buying him off.”

“But she kept the other pieces? The ring and the earrings?”

The sheriff shrugged. “It's just one of the places his story seems wobbly. Seems to me it's more likely he took the necklace off her after he killed her, but it might be

true. We can place him in her motel room; his fingerprints are a match.”

Something about that theory bothered me, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. “Okay, but whoever killed Channelle hit her with a car. Does Foster have a car?”

“We’re working on that.” More dryly, she added, “If you happen to spot a white sedan with some fresh scuffs, I’d be interested to hear about it.”

“The car was white?”

Realization of her mistake tightened her mouth. “Don’t even think about it, Dash. You’re going straight home. Among other reasons, because I don’t need one of my deputies angry that I sent his boyfriend out to chase down leads.”

“Bobby—”

The sheriff held up one finger. “Straight. Home. Do you hear me?”

I nodded.

Bobby drove me home; I told him he didn’t have to, but he did anyway. He got me settled in the billiard room with coffee and a slice of Indira’s red velvet cake (in the spirit of the season, she’d made it look extra bloody, and we were legally obligated to call it dead velvet cake). He put a blanket over my lap. He fussed with Netflix, trying to find something he thought I’d like, until he finally settled on Real Rob.

“I can call in,” he said.

“Don’t do that.”

“I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine.”

He crouched, brushed my hair back, and twitched my glasses into place. “You’re not fine. Nobody would be fine after that.”

“I know. But I’m fine , you know? I mean, I don’t need you to stay. I’ll be all right.”

Unhappiness drew at the corners of his eyes.

“Go,” I said with a tiny laugh. “I’ll call you if I need anything.”

“Do you mind if I take the Pilot? Otherwise I have to wait for Tripple to pick me up.”

“It’s your car, Bobby. And I’m not going anywhere.”

He studied me.

“And Real Rob ?” I said. “Some weird show about Rob Schneider’s life? That’s the kind of TV you think I want to watch?”

“You like reality TV.”

“I like bad reality TV. And there’s bad reality TV and bad reality TV.”

“You watched four hours of Ultimate Beastmaster yesterday. You told me it was, quote, ‘ Ninja Warrior meets Sylvester Stallone’s abominable brainchild.’”

“Bobby, that’s a competition. It’s—it’s a demonstration of ability. There are feats of strength.”

“And there’s that guy whose shorts always slip and you can see his Hollister

underwear.”

Ladies and gentlemen: I gasped .

“Okay,” Bobby said, “I’m going to work now.”

“That is—I can’t—how dare you?”

“Feel free to change it to Ultimate Beastmaster after I leave.”

And he left before I could offer my stinging rebuttal (that I was still working on).

Also, for the record, I did not change it to Ultimate Beastmaster after he left.

(And in my defense, the guy with the Hollister underwear was swinging on a rope , for frick’s sake. I’m not made of stone.)

I tried to get into Real Rob. I really did. I ate cake. I drank coffee. I did my best to slip into the semi-hypnotized, dissociated state that junk TV usually induces. (It’s the cure for what ails ya.)

But I couldn’t. In part, because my brain kept looping back to September in that tiny camper, and the smell of vomit, and how pale she’d been. How hard she’d been trying to reach Foster. The same woman who hadn’t gone to the sheriff’s station when Keme, her own son, had been arrested because she’d been afraid it would look bad.

And in part because something was still nagging at me about Foster. I knew he was a bad guy. I knew he used women. I even believed, after seeing him with September, that he wasn’t above hurting a woman. But that he’d killed JT, and then Channelle, for money?

I mean, yes. It was possible. It was even believable.

So why didn't I believe it?

Eventually, I gave up on TV and dragged myself into the den. I got myself settled at the computer. I did a quick check of Crime Cats (there was a stunning exposé on this little gray kitten that was “illegally smol,” and let me tell you: it was Pulitzer-worthy stuff), and then, somehow, it was forty-five minutes later, and I told myself I had to write.

The only problem was that I didn't know what.

I had my plot. Ish. Will Gower was looking for his—well, whatever it was. And he was going to find it. Or not. And something bad was going to happen. Or something good. I basically had it locked down. I was definitely thinking Vancouver. Unless I was missing a real opportunity with Portland so close to me.

The real problem was the relationship side of the story. I knew I wanted something complex, something like Hammett, a tangle of desire and love, selfishness and selflessness. But I didn't want it to be exactly like Hammett. I guess I could have just gayed up *The Maltese Falcon*. Brigid could become, um, Bridger (see? this is why they pay me the big bucks). And he could be beautiful and seductive, a master manipulator of men, only to fall in love with Will Gower and then, um, betray him? I guess.

But as I said, I didn't want exactly that. What I wanted was that same tangled messiness, but with my own spin on it.

Twisty—and twist ed —relationships were a hallmark of the mystery genre. The Golden Age mysteries, for all their supposedly stout, staid reserve, were actually full of them. Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was a good example.

(Spoilers incoming.) The murder victim, Emily Inglethorp, is married to a much younger man, who appears to be a gold digger. (Apparently, a gold digger used to be called a fortune hunter.) She has stepsons from her first marriage who are also hoping to inherit her fortune. And she has a companion (which is apparently what single ladies did back then—good work if you can get it) named Evelyn, who supposedly hates Alfred, and who does her best to convince Poirot and the others that Alfred killed Emily. The supposedly probably gives it away, but it turns out that Evelyn and Alfred are secretly in love, and they conspired together to kill Emily.

Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* was another good example. (More spoilers!) For a good portion of the book, the protagonist—and the reader—are convinced that Mr. de Winter (the unnamed protagonist's husband) is still desperately in love with his deceased first wife, Rebecca. It turns out, though, that he hated Rebecca. (Frankly, with good cause—she was unfaithful, cruel, and a bit of a psychopath.)

Noir fiction had its own share of it too. Raymond Chandler's most intricately plotted book, *Farewell, My Lovely*, revolves around two obsessive relationships. (Spoilers!!!) The book opens with poor Philip Marlowe getting dragged along as ex-felon Moose Malloy goes on a (literal) rampage looking for the girl he left behind when he went to prison, Velma Valento. Then Marlowe gets involved in a separate, and seemingly unrelated, case involving the beautiful (and promiscuous) Mrs. Grayle, who is being blackmailed. (Also, she's a blonde, which is a thing for Chandler.) It turns out—big surprise—that Mrs. Grayle is Velma Valento. She's also unfaithful, treacherous, and a bit of a psychopath herself.

Boiled down like that, all the plots seem superficial and obvious and lackluster. But that's not doing them justice. When you read them, when you were living out the story word by word along with the protagonist, they were engrossing, almost claustrophobically enveloping, placing you in the center of the web of lies and half-truths that the protagonists were struggling to unravel. More than anything, when you read them, you felt the power of those messy emotions: people who loved and hated

deeply, passionately, secretly, in ways that weren't neat and nice and proper. Maybe that, more than anything, was at the heart of crime fiction: the belief that the human heart was wild, untamable, always burning. That love, as the ancients thought of it, was a disease.

What I really liked about these stories though? In all of them, a character you thought was good (or the victim)—Brigid, Emily, Rebecca, even Mrs. Grayle—turned out to be much more complicated. And their relationships, with each other and with the protagonist, were never what they seemed.

So, I knew what I wanted. I just didn't know how to do it.

My mouse was sneaking down to open up Crime Cats again when the front door opened.

"Oh, thank God," I muttered.

Footsteps raced toward the den, and Millie appeared in the doorway. Her usual manic, caffeinated energy seemed to have been compounded—in the sense that she also looked like she'd been struck by lightning. Her hair stood up in clumps. Her eyes had a shellshocked look to them. She was wearing a Hastings Rock sweatshirt, pumpkin-print pajama pants, and two—TWO—mismatched slippers that were meant to look like witches.

"Millie, I'm in the middle of writing—" I said (mostly for form's sake).

"You have to stop him!" Her voice trembled, and she waved a piece of paper at me. "Dash, you have to STOP HIM!"

"Stop who?" Setting the laptop aside, I started to get up, an idea already forming. "What's—"

“KEME IS LEAVING!”

“What do you mean he’s—”

She shoved the paper into my hands, turned, and ran toward the back of the house, screaming, “INDIRA!”

I mean, I know she was upset, but I swear to God: the house shook .

That only registered at a distance, though, because I was staring at the paper. I recognized Keme’s blunt little pen strokes, the stiff letters that were so angular and linear, with such complete disregard for lower-case letters, that they could have passed for runes. It was one word. And it was GOODBYE .

“What’s going on?” Indira asked from the doorway. Her eyes were storm-dark, and she was holding Millie in her arms as Millie wept uncontrollably. “I can’t get a word out of her.”

“Keme,” I said and handed Indira the note.

She looked at it for longer than it took to read the word. She closed her eyes for several seconds, hugging Millie to her. When she opened her eyes, they glistened. Her voice lacked its usual briskness as she said, “I didn’t think...” But she trailed off and didn’t finish.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Goodbye? What does that mean? He can’t leave, can he? I mean, where would he go?”

“He can’t go,” Millie said, pushing herself away from Indira and wiping her nose. “He CAN’T!”

The sound of the front door came again, and Fox appeared in the hallway behind Indira and Millie. “What’s going on? Millie texted me 911—what’s wrong, dear?”

“It’s Keme,” Millie managed before dissolving into another wail.

Indira and I filled Fox in as best we could, but there wasn’t much to say, since none of us knew anything.

“I’ll see if I can find him,” Fox said. “He’s hurting, and he’s not thinking clearly. He needs someone to talk some sense into him.”

“I tried calling him,” Millie said through her sobs. “He won’t answer. I need to talk to him. I just need to talk to him, and then everything will be okay, but he won’t answer.”

“Go with Fox,” Indira said to me. “I’ll stay with Millie in case he decides to come here.”

“Um, why don’t you go with Fox?” I said. “The last couple times I’ve tried to talk to Keme, it hasn’t—well, it hasn’t exactly been a resounding success. I think he needs someone he actually, you know, likes.” I tried to make it sound like a flash of inspiration when I added, “Like you.”

Indira looked at me.

Fox arched both eyebrows.

Millie raised her head and stared .

“You know what?” I said. “We should call Bobby.”

I pulled out my phone and placed the call. And then, because they were all still trying to incinerate me with their eyes, I turned my back on them.

“Are you okay?” Bobby asked. “Hold on; I’ll be right there. I’ve got to tell Tripple I’m leaving.”

“No, Bobby, I’m fine.” I had to stop, because in that moment I recognized that Keme had never known what it felt like to have someone drop everything before you could even open your mouth. It took me a second before I could say, “It’s Keme.”

After I’d told Bobby everything we knew—still not much—he said, “That’s so weird. I just got a text from Ziggy.”

(Listen: you, like me, can probably use your powers of deduction to figure out with a name like that, Ziggy was a surfer friend.)

“He said Keme asked him for a ride—” Bobby continued.

“Get over there,” I said. “Grab him and throw him in the car and bring him back here.”

No one, not even Bobby, said anything.

“Uh, only a little less like a kidnapping,” I said.

“Hold on,” Bobby said. When he spoke again, his voice was troubled. “Ziggy’s not responding.”

What did that mean, I wanted to know. All my earlier thoughts about writing a twisty/twisted relationship came back to me. In a really dark mystery, the classic character relationship twist would be, well, mine and Keme’s. I’d spend the whole

book thinking he was my little brother (or, if you were Fox and Indira and Millie and Bobby, my big brother), and there'd be increasing signs for the savvy reader that I was wrong, like Keme shoving me out of my chair at the station, or slapping my hand away when he'd come home to Hemlock House. And then, in this exact moment, I'd realize Keme was the real killer, and we'd find each other and have a final, deadly showdown.

But that was only in books.

Right?

"I'm going to head over there," Bobby said. "You said Fox is with you? Why don't you two check the Starlite's bus stop; there's a Greyhound later tonight."

"Uh—"

"I love you. Be careful."

And then he disconnected.

When I turned around, I said, "He's going to check with this friend, Ziggy—"

"We heard all that," Indira said.

Fox was raising their eyebrows again. "Come on, we need to go."

"About that—I still think Indira should be the one—"

With cool efficiency, Indira unloaded Millie on Fox. Millie kept crying, and Fox patted her on the top of the head and gave me, of all people, a dirty look.

“Dashiell,” Indira said, “I’d like to have a word with you.”

It wasn’t a question.

She led me to the kitchen. It was warm, and it smelled like cinnamon and the lingering hint of rising dough, and on the other side of the windows, the sky had cleared and frozen until the moon looked like it was trapped in a sheet of black ice.

Indira planted herself, folded her arms, and said, “You’re going with Fox.”

“But—”

“No buts. Keme needs you. I understand that this kind of thing is difficult for you. I’m not insensitive. But Keme is your friend, and you, Dashiell, are a good man. So, I’m asking you to be brave and to do this, even though it scares you, because right now, Keme needs to know he’s loved.”

“Right, I know. And I’m not trying to be a coward or weasel out of this. I mean, maybe I’m weaseling a little , but—” The look on her face cut me off. “I agree with you: what Keme needs right now is to know we love him. That’s why it should be you. You’re the one he’s closest to, well, except maybe Millie, and right now—”

Something in Indira’s expression softened until it approached grief. And then the moment passed, and she was all cold resolve again. “A year ago, you’re right: it might have been me who needed to go. But things have changed. Who does he play video games with every afternoon? Who does he spend a ridiculous amount of time with, jumping off benches and trying to climb up walls?”

“It’s called parkour, actually—”

“Who does he hang out with for hours and hours, Dash? You made that horrible

movie on your phone—”

“Bride of Sasquatch was a misunderstood work of genius.”

“—and you ruined a priceless carpet with your squirt gun fight—”

“Ruined is kind of a subjective term, if you think about it.”

“—and you gave each other tetanus trying to build a fort—”

“That nail only went into his hand, like, a quarter inch.”

“—and don’t think I don’t know about that time the two of you ‘cruised the boardwalk’ playing that awful music so loud that Bobby had to give you an official reprimand.”

“Well, the deputies are legally required to call it a warning, not a reprimand, so—”

“Dashell!”

“I know, Indira. I mean, I’m not an idiot. A month ago, it was like we were—”
Actually saying the word *brothers* would have hurt too much, so I settled for
“—really close, but now everything I do is wrong. And that makes me feel bad, because I thought—well, I guess I thought a lot of things were different. But they’re not.” I struggled for a moment to keep my voice level. “And that’s just what it is, and I don’t want to keep making things worse. So, I think you should go.”

Brushing back that lock of witchy-white hair, Indira watched me for what felt like a long time. My face was hot. My chest prickled. I was having a hard time meeting her eyes, so I was surprised, when she spoke again, to hear how her voice had softened.

“Sometimes, Dash, when people are hurting, they—”

“They lash out. I know.”

She didn’t say anything. And I had the strangest feeling that I’d been wrong, that whatever she’d been about to say, it had been something different. But she didn’t correct me. She didn’t say anything.

“I just—I know this isn’t what you want to hear,” I said. “But trust me: it’s pretty clear what Keme’s trying to tell me.”

The wind rose again, wrapping itself around the house, jarring the shutters, howling at the windows. The sky still looked like I could reach out and tap it, and it would shatter, and the moon spilled a long, white avenue of light on the restless lines of the ocean.

“He’s not trying to tell you something,” Indira finally said. “He’s trying to ask you something.”

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Riding in Fox's van—which was literally a 1989 Toyota Van, perhaps the least creative name in the history of automotives—was like the responsible adult version of an acid trip. Tonight, for example, there was a large pirate's chest (I couldn't think of any other way to describe it) in the back. It was wrapped in heavy chains, and although I know it was probably only my imagination (it was almost Halloween, after all), I swear I heard something thump inside it. There was also a mobile made out of tennis skirts hanging from the exact center of the van's roof, which rendered the rearview mirror totally useless (and which I think would have made Bobby whip out his little black book of ticket-writing). There was a purse on the floor with Jackie O's face silkscreened onto it; someone had come along after the fact and given her googly eyes. The rest of the space was taken up with trash bags full of enough fake (and multicolored) fur to outfit an entire squadron of pimps.

(Are we still allowed to say pimps? Should I say night entrepreneurs ?)

It was easier to focus on the bewildering contents of the van than to think about—well, everything else. Keme. And Indira. And whatever Indira had meant by that final, cryptic comment. Keme wanted to ask me a question? Sure, great. What question? But Indira had refused to say anything else. Wouldn't do anything, in fact, except bundle me off with Fox. Sending me to my (impending, gruesome) death, which would happen as soon as Keme caught sight of me.

You will doubtless be unsurprised to learn that Hastings Rock, our picturesque little town, didn't have a Greyhound station. It didn't have any bus stations, as a matter of fact, although there was a regional commuter bus that did pickups and drop-offs in front of the town visitors' center. Instead—as I had learned tonight—we had a bus stop. Singular. As in, one place in town where the Greyhounds stopped. And it

happened to be at the Starlite Cinema.

So, as Bobby had suggested, Fox and I drove north through Hastings Rock. I'd been to the Starlite plenty of times to catch movies with the Last Picks. (Memorably, the month before, Keme had forced me to go see *The Nun* with him, and he'd had to hold my hand the entire second half of the movie so I didn't run out of the theater screaming. I had nightmares for a week, by the way, and I'm pretty sure Bobby had *The Talk* with Keme—*The Talk* being: no more scary movies for Dash.)

The theater was part of a relatively newer development in Hastings Rock, and because it wasn't in the quaint, touristy downtown, it looked a lot like any other strip-mall movie theater. It was a big, windowless building with movie posters in display cases. A marquee with flashing lights projected out above the doors. This week, you could see *Venom* (already seen it three times), *A Star is Born* (yep, date night with Bobby, and yes, I cried), and yet another entry in the seemingly interminable series of Halloween movies (not yet, especially after *The Talk*, but before all the craziness of the last few days, Keme and I had agreed it was probably safe to sit through the first half hour and then decide if it was too scary for me). Unlike the touristy sections of Hastings Rock, it had plenty of parking (perfect for the van, which made an ominous grinding noise as Fox maneuvered the old battleship into the lot), as well as a quasi-outlet-mall array of retail—an Eddie Bauer store, a Pendleton store, a Cold Stone. I was hopping out of the van when I decided that Cold Stone would be the perfect place to stake out the bus stop, since a) there was ice cream, and b) it was warm, and c) ideally, Keme wouldn't see me and therefore murder me.

As I opened my mouth to explain this plan to Fox, they shouted, "He's getting away!"

And then they hit the gas, and the van lurched forward, and my door clicked shut.

So, like a certified genius, I stood there and watched as the van trundled off after a

dark-haired boy on a bike, who was rapidly disappearing down a cross street.

I had my doubts about the boy being Keme. I was also suddenly aware that shouting things like He's getting away and then chasing down teenagers in a mysterious van that smelled like a Dragon Musk air freshener and then forcing teenagers into said van was probably not a great plan.

I turned around to wait for Fox in the Cold Stone—or, more likely, to wait for the deputies who would inevitably come to arrest us—and saw Keme.

He stood on the grassy verge under a streetlight, near a small sign I'd never noticed before—red, white, and blue, with a leaping greyhound pictured on it. His long dark hair was hidden under a beanie, and he wore a familiar-looking canvas jacket that, last time I'd seen it, had been in my closet. The boy who wore frayed shorts and cracked slides all winter was now dressed in jeans and dark footwear—boots, I thought, but it was hard to tell in the dark. The light dusted the top of his head and his shoulders, but it left his face in shadow. It didn't matter. I knew it was him.

He twisted at the waist, hiking up the backpack he was wearing, and saw me.

I knew he saw me because he froze mid-twist, his whole body locking up in an instant. He stayed like that for a moment. Then he squared his shoulders and came toward me.

"Oh, hi, Keme," I said in what had to be the least convincing attempt at acting natural in the history of the world.

He planted himself in front of me and folded his arms. "Go away."

"Um, no?" It wasn't supposed to sound like a question, but you try sounding firm and authoritative when Keme's bottomless dark eyes are staring back at you. After

Indira's bracing little speech, though—which had mostly consisted of Don't be a coward—I felt obligated to add, "I'm glad I caught you. I was hoping you'd come home so we could talk about this."

He stared at me for five more seconds before he turned and strode back toward the bus stop.

Because I didn't have any better ideas, I followed him.

"I know you're, uh, upset," I said as I trotted along at his heels. "And that's totally understandable. Totally. I, like, completely get it. I was mad too when—okay, could you slow down? I was mad too when they thought I killed Vivienne, and—and I know it's different because you grew up here and everyone knows you and it's so much worse when you realize the people you've spent your whole life with believe you're capable of murder..." I trailed off when I heard myself industriously making this situation so much worse. "But, um, we love you, and we want you to come home. The end. End of speech. Finito."

He stopped at the little Greyhound sign, shrugged his backpack up again, and stared across the street at an empty office that used to be a dry cleaner. A lone car whizzed past us. In its wake, the buzzing of the security light mounted high above the bus stop seemed louder than before.

"So," I said, "great talk. Why don't we get some ice cream and wait—"

"No."

"Okay, we could get some popcorn from the concession stand in the lobby, I guess. Oh! And Red Hots—"

He rounded on me so abruptly that I rocked back on my heels. "Go. Away."

“Keme, I know—”

“You don’t know anything! I’m not going back there!” He looked like he tried to stop there, but after a beat, words hot with frustration slipped out of him. “Leave me alone!”

Silence again. And the droning sound of the light overhead.

“What about Indira?” I said. “You’re going to break her heart.”

“She understands,” Keme muttered, but he couldn’t look at me.

“What about Bobby? What about Fox?”

He looked smaller now, huddling against the cold.

“What about Millie?”

He made an ugly noise. And then he spat.

I wasn’t sure why, but that made my brain go red. “That’s really nice, Keme. She’s bawling her eyes out back at Hemlock House because you’re leaving, but I guess that doesn’t matter to you.”

He shook his head.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked. “You don’t care that she wants you to stay?”

“Nope.”

“Poppycok.” (I mean, that’s kind of what I said.) “I’m supposed to believe that you don’t care that your best friend in the entire world—”

His head came up. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“—the girl you spend every waking minute with—”

Keme’s gaze swung back to me. “Stop talking.”

“—the girl you’re desperately in love—”

“I said shut up!” The scream was so loud it got mangled in his throat. “Shut up!”

Across the parking lot, a family of four glanced over at the sound of Keme’s cry, slowing to watch.

“No,” I said, but I lowered my voice. “No, I’m not going to shut up. You can pretend nobody else knows, and you can pretend she doesn’t mean anything to you, but I’ve seen you with her, Keme. I know how you feel. And I get that it’s hard right now. I get that you’re hurt, and it feels like everyone has abandoned you, and Millie is dating Louis—and I know how hard that is, because I went through it with Bobby. But I’m standing here right now, Keme. I came looking for you. Fox is looking for you. Bobby is looking for you. Indira is at home with Millie, hoping you’ll show up. Because we don’t want you to leave.” I drew a deep breath. “Did you even consider the fact that maybe Millie is dating Louis because she doesn’t know you’re interested in her as more than a friend? If she knew how you felt about her, Keme—”

He made an ugly, hocking noise, spat again, and shook his head.

“I know it’s scary,” I said, “but I think you owe it to both of you to give it a chance—”

“You think?” His voice had a flat, icy disregard that was worse than his shouting. “You think? What do you know? You ran away, Dash. That’s the whole reason you’re here. You ran away. So don’t stand there and tell me you know how hard it is. You don’t know, because you ran.”

My face heated. I was distantly aware of the family of four settling into their minivan, doors clicking shut, the engine starting. The flashing lights of the marquee blurred, and I blinked to clear my eyes. “Yeah, I did. I ran. That’s how I know it doesn’t fix anything.” I cleared my throat. “But I stayed for Bobby, Keme. And I think you need to talk to her—”

“You’re so stupid,” he said in that same horrible, lifeless voice.

“—and tell her how you feel—”

“You’re a joke. You know that? This is pathetic, chasing after me because you don’t have a life of your own. Everyone thinks you’re pathetic.”

“—and I promise you, Keme, because I know it’s terrifying, that things are going to be okay. Millie loves you too, and once you tell her—”

He spun toward me again, and this time, I took a step back.

“I did tell her, you idiot! I went to that stupid party, and I told her! And you know what she said?” He paused, as though waiting for an answer, but I couldn’t open my mouth. “She said she was dating Louis, but she hoped we could still be friends.” He stopped. Struggle twisted his face, in a moment of clarity cut out of the welter of emotions, I realized he was trying desperately not to cry. His voice was thick when he said, “And you know what her stupid boyfriend did? He and his friends followed me out of the house and jumped me.”

The night seemed to rush out from underneath us, like a dark tide pulling away. In that vast outwash, Keme looked very small, like he was already moving away from me. His chest rose and fell in savage breaths, and he stared at me. There was a challenge in that look. A fight that part of him, I could tell, wanted. A single tear escaped and slid down his cheek, and it glimmered under the security light before he dashed it away.

“But she wants to talk to you,” I said. The words were reflexive. They were full of my own hurt. And as soon as they were out of my mouth, I wanted to call them back because of how childish I sounded.

Keme shook his head. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, the sheen of tears was gone, and they were dark again. The rattle of a diesel engine reached us, and he turned toward the street as the Greyhound came around the corner.

I stood there. I felt again like the world was washing out from under me. I’d read that the universe was still expanding. That it was still getting bigger. And that was this feeling. That the universe was nothing but objects trying to fly away from each other as fast as they could.

The Greyhound rolled to a stop, and the door opened. An older man in overalls and a satin Ducks jacket got down, followed by a pregnant woman who couldn’t have been older than twenty, her hair in pigtails under a train conductor’s cap. Another woman in a rumpled pantsuit followed, helping two children off after her. And then there was no one else, and Keme took a step forward.

Before my brain could catch up with me, I followed.

Keme must have noticed because he stopped and turned around. I stopped too. He waited. And then he turned to the bus. I followed again. He stopped. It’s like something off TV, a dull voice said at the back of my head. It’s like a skit we

practiced.

“What are you doing?” Keme said.

“I don’t know.” But that wasn’t the right answer, so I said, “I’m going with you, I guess.”

A surprisingly adult weariness spread across his face. “Go home, Dash.”

But when he took a step, I did too.

“Knock it off,” Keme said as he turned to face me again.

“No.”

“You’re not going with me.”

“I am.” My own laughter startled me. “I know this is crazy, but I actually think I am.”

“No, you’re not.”

Another choreographed pair of steps.

“Dash!”

“No, let’s do this,” I said. “Come on, I’ll buy the tickets.” I started to step around him. “Where are we going—”

The shove caught me off guard. He was so much stronger than he looked, and I almost lost my balance. Where his hands had connected with my chest, a blunted ache was already taking shape, and I realized with something like shock that I was

going to have bruises.

“You’re not going with me,” he said, the words so low I had to strain to hear them.

Another laugh worked its way out of me, shakier than the first one. “It’s a free country, Keme, I can go wherever I want—”

When I took another step, he shoved me again. Harder this time. I stumbled, my sneaker caught a crack in the sidewalk, and I fell. I landed hard on my tailbone, and the thud sent a jolt of pain up my spine.

“Hey,” the bus driver shouted, but his voice was muffled. “What’s going on down there? I’ll call the cops.”

Keme stared down at me. His eyes were blank, like he wasn’t seeing me. Rage made his features almost unrecognizable. I’d joked a lot over the last year and a half about being scared of Keme, but in that moment, the emptiness of his expression was the first time I’d truly felt afraid of him.

My chain of thought was automatic, the result of years of telling myself the same thing over and over again—because it was so often true, and because it had become truer, or seemed truer, the more I thought it. I was bad at relationships. I was bad at people. I could never read a situation right. All the years I’d spent with my anxiety spiking every time someone texted to invite me out, or every time I got cornered at a party, every interaction that made me question what I was supposed to say or do, what the other person wanted from me. It had been worst with Hugo, because there had been so much at stake, but that feeling of confusion and uncertainty and lack of confidence in my ability to have a healthy relationship—romantic or otherwise—went back as long as I could remember.

So, this was my fault. Again. I’d tried. I’d shown up for Keme, literally. I’d been

brave, pushing myself beyond my comfort zone, because of what Indira had said. And what had happened? I'd made a fool out of myself. Keme hadn't been waiting for someone to show up and love him. He hadn't wanted a friend—or, at least, he hadn't wanted me. The doubts from the last few days crept in again: we'd never really been friends, and all the bullying had been because I was exactly what he'd told me—a joke.

And then, through the pain of a bruised butt and bruised pride, I heard myself saying only a few minutes before, It feels like everyone has abandoned you .

His dad, who had died when he was a child.

His mom, who was always disappearing into her pills, or into the next man, or into herself.

Bobby.

Millie.

And Indira saying, He's not trying to tell you something . He's trying to ask you something .

I planted my hands on the sidewalk.

“Stay down,” Keme said. He was opening and closing his fists at his sides, and in the cold air, his breath burst from him in white shreds.

“No,” I said. The word came out sounding surprisingly confident—surprising to me, anyway. But everything in that moment felt surprising: the rawness of my scraped palms, the frozen grit of the sidewalk as I pushed myself up, even the ache where I'd landed. “I'm going with you—”

Before I could get upright, Keme shoved me down again.

“Hey!” The Greyhound driver honked the horn. “Hey! You don’t knock it off, and I’m leaving without you!”

“Go home,” Keme said. He’d moved. Or I had. Or maybe the bus. Because now he was standing in front of the headlights, and his silhouette was crisp-cut against the rest of the night. “Go away! Leave me alone!”

I shook my head. I gathered myself. “I’m going with—”

He shoved me down again. Harder, this time. And when I hit the ground, the force of the push flattened me, and my head cracked against the sidewalk.

Shadows moved over me. Clothing rustled next to me. Someone’s breathing sounded close and wet and labored. In the distance, air brakes popped, and gears made a grinding noise. There was something hot at the back of my head, but my neck was cold.

“Just leave me alone,” Keme said, his anger thinned out by—what? “I just want you to leave me alone.” And then he rose from his crouch, and I realized the shadow over me had been him, and I stared up at the ice sheet of stars.

He was asking me a question.

Over the rumble of the bus, the sound of his steps clipping away came back to me very clearly.

The thought came again with dreamlike lucidity: He was asking me a question.

Somehow, I rolled onto my side.

His dad.

His mom.

Millie.

Even—if only in Keme's mind—Bobby.

I focused on getting on my hands and knees. That sense of wetness curled along my nape, ran warm then cold over the side of my neck. The bus was rattling so loudly that the noise seemed to take up all the space inside my skull, and when I moved, the world seemed to zoom in and out greasily. Darkness irised shut at the edges of my vision. Adrenaline, that little writer voice said at the back of my head. And maybe a touch of shock.

But somehow, I got to my feet.

Because he was asking me a question.

And I was going to answer it.

My vision was still doing that weird zooming thing, and for what felt like a long time, I couldn't seem to find him. Then I did. He was lit from the side by the glow of the headlight. His face was twisted with an expression familiar from long hours of watching me be unbelievably terrible at Xbox—like I was too stupid to survive. He made a drawn-out sound in his throat, the pitch rising toward the end, and took a threatening step toward me.

"I'm not leaving," I said. The words hung in the emptiness of the night, like the string of a tin can phone stretching out between us.

Keme took another of those challenging steps. “Why are you so stupid? I don’t want you to go with me. I don’t need you. I don’t need anybody.”

I nodded. It made silent fireworks go off inside my head—no pain, only those bright, disorienting flashes.

Keme advanced again. “Don’t just stand there!”

I probably should have said something to that, but I seemed to have run out of words.

He reached me on the next step. Over his shoulder, the bus seemed to float, lit up inside with low-wattage light like the world’s grimmest UFO. The driver had gotten out of his seat and was staring at us. And maybe it was the concussion talking, but I could have sworn he was holding a carpet sweeper like a baseball bat.

“You’re a loser,” Keme said. His breath was hot in my face, white, whipping away on the breeze. “You’re so freaking sad. Do you have any idea how pathetic you are?”

He shoved me, but his heart seemed to have gone out of it—it was barely a push, and even in my current condition, it didn’t move me. He pushed me again, and this time I caught his wrist.

“I don’t need you,” Keme said. His voice was coming apart the way paper did when it got wet. “I don’t need anybody!”

My hand was still latched on to his wrist. I pulled, and he came.

“I hate you,” he said. “I hate you!”

He shoved me again as I drew him into a hug.

For one long moment, he was a bundle of wiry muscles and raised hackles and, God, so many elbows. And then he collapsed against me and started to sob.

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Believe it or not, the people at Cold Stone are not thrilled when you come inside covered in blood. I guess, to be fair, it's probably a health code violation. They did still let me use their restroom, but you could tell they didn't like it, and attitude goes a long way in the service industry.

"Stop being such a baby," Keme said as he dabbed at the back of my head with a paper towel. His heart wasn't really in it, though—the words were snotty and loose. His eyes were so red and puffy that I was surprised he could see what he was doing, and his hands trembled against my hair. A few seconds later, he mumbled, "Sorry."

"It's okay," I said. I still had that lucid brightness that might have been a warning sign. "I'm actually planning on being a huge baby about this."

Keme's groan might have qualified, barely, as subvocal.

"I'm going to make Bobby do so many sweet things for me."

His sound of disgust, on the other hand, definitely moved into the vocal range.

"I'm going to make him give me a million kisses."

"Why are you like this?" Keme moaned, but mostly to himself. "Why can't you be a normal gay who can actually help me with my hair?"

"Keme, that's such an ugly stereotype. And I did help you with your hair. Remember when Indira had to cut off that chunk in back because I got chewing gum stuck in it?"

To judge by the look on his face, Keme did, in fact, remember it, and I was quickly losing whatever pity points I'd earned.

The laceration on the back of my head had stopped bleeding, and aside from the beginning of a massive headache, I felt normal. Ish. Between the two of us, we got each other moderately cleaned up. Because I was now the walking wounded and, for a few precious hours, had the moral high ground, I insisted Keme let me buy him some ice cream, mostly so I wouldn't be the only one eating ice cream. Also because I wasn't sure the last time Keme had eaten.

In late October, Cold Stone didn't exactly have a line out the door, so it wasn't long before Keme and I were settling into a booth, me with a chocolate-dipped waffle-cone bowl of Birthday Cake Remix (extra sprinkles), and Keme with the boyest of boy flavors: Peanut Butter Cup Perfection.

We ate in silence for a while. Keme couldn't look me in the eye.

He put his spoon down abruptly and said, "You might have a concussion."

"I don't think I do."

For some reason, that made him roll his eyes. "You need to see a doctor."

"Maybe."

He picked up the spoon again and poked at a peanut butter cup. In a low voice, he said, "Bobby's going to hate me."

"Why? I tripped stepping off the curb, and you were nice enough to stick around and help me."

“You can’t tell him—”

“That’s what happened, Keme. That’s what I’m going to tell him.”

Keme went very still and covered his eyes. His whole body tensed as he struggled. When he spoke, the words were so distorted they were almost unintelligible. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “No more apologizing, got it? We’re friends; friends don’t get hung up on the little stuff.”

He shook his head.

“You’re still my friend,” I said. “Am I still yours?”

It felt like a long time before he whispered—pleaded, really—“Dash.”

“And I love you.”

Honestly, the best part was I could actually see his adolescent boy horror rising at the prospect of feelings . He made himself smaller in the booth. His shoulders came up. He pressed his hands more tightly against his eyes. But you’ve got to give it to Keme: he doesn’t back down. Finally, he managed to say in a breathless rush, “I love you too.”

I let him dangle for about five seconds. Then I said, “That was literally the best thing of my life. I’m going to remind you, like, ten times a day that you told me you loved me. God, I wish I’d gotten it on camera.”

He dropped his hands. His eyes were wide and even redder than before, but a lot of the guilt and self-loathing had been replaced by, well, the usual mixture of teen

indignation and outrage. “What is wrong with you?” he asked and then attacked his ice cream.

For a while, we sat in silence.

“It was the rent money,” Keme said. He was speaking into his ice cream, his gaze fixed on the dish—probably, I guessed, so he wouldn’t have to look at me.

“What?”

“That’s why I got in that fight with JT.” And then, as though I might be an idiot: “I didn’t kill him.”

“I know you didn’t kill him. What happened?”

“Mom said she’d paid him. The back rent, all of it. She gets a check every month, and I gave her some—” He stopped and blushed and then, as though daring me to ask follow-up questions, said, “I had some money for Homecoming tickets. I wasn’t going to use it, so I gave it to her. But then she told me it was too late, and they’d gotten evicted even though she paid the rent.”

“Had she paid it?”

He pushed his ice cream around morosely. “I don’t know. She’s not good at that stuff. She forgets.” His eyes came up in another challenge. “She’s not a bad person.”

There were so many things I wanted to say to this boy who was trying to defend the woman who had abandoned him. They all got caught in my throat, though, so I only nodded.

“I went to talk to JT about it. But he said she’d never paid, and I said she had, and he

said if she didn't have a receipt, then she hadn't paid, and—and I lost my temper.” He picked at the vinyl banding on the table with his thumb. “I was already mad.”

He didn't have to say, From seeing Millie and Louis , for me to know what he meant.

“My guess is Channelle was stealing rent money,” I said. “It'll be hard to prove because she and JT are both dead, and I don't know if JT was in on it.”

“He wasn't,” Keme said. “He was fine until she came along.”

That was interesting, and I wanted to follow up on it, but there was something else to address first. “I don't want to make you mad, but Foster might have stolen your mom's money. I found a stash in the camper. Of course, he might have gotten it from Channelle—did you know they picked him up for the murders?”

Keme snorted. “He didn't kill anybody.”

And he sounded so intensely self-satisfied that a sneaking suspicion raised its head.

“Keme,” I said.

He looked up from his ice cream.

“Did you beat Foster up?”

Keme's got a great poker face, but you could practically see the testosterone radiating off him.

“Never mind,” I said. “I don't want to know.” A hint of bitterness slipped out in spite of my best efforts as I added, “It would have been nice to get one solid lead on this murder, though.”

Neither of us seemed to know what to say to that.

I was the one who broke the silence, of course. Keme could have sat there all day and not said a single word. Literally.

“Do you want to talk about Millie?”

He glared at me over a peanut butter cup.

“I’m proud of you for telling her how you feel,” I said.

He made an unspeakably rude gesture that you definitely aren’t supposed to do in a Cold Stone.

“I know it’s not going to make you feel any better right now,” I said, “but I think you should be proud of yourself too. It takes a lot of courage to do what you did.”

That made him screw up his face into an even angrier look. He dug around with the spoon for a while before he finally burst out, “What does that mean?”

“What?”

“Why’d you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

He kicked me under the table.

“Oh my God, Keme!”

All I got, though, was a scowl.

“I was just thinking, though,” I said, “that the downside to acting like an adult, and to being brave, is that once you do it, well, you kind of are supposed to keep doing it.”

He ate some more ice cream before grudgingly asking, “What does that mean?”

“It means Millie wants to talk to you. And I know it’s going to be hard, but I think you might want to hear her out.”

“I don’t. She already said everything she needed to say.”

“If you believe that, you obviously don’t know Millie. More to the point, though, you two used to be inseparable. You were best friends. I’m not saying your relationship isn’t going to change, but it’d be a shame to throw it all away because you can’t get over a little embarrassment at having your pride hurt.”

Keme scraped his spoon around his now-miraculously empty ice cream dish. “This?” he said. “You acting like an adult? It’s so gross.”

“Thank you.”

He made a disgusted sound, tossed his spoon in the paper cup, and shoved it away. He stared out the window. He looked like every teenage boy in every teenage movie who is considering doing something he absolutely did not want to do.

“Being vulnerable is a two-way street,” I said into that gloomy, hormone-filled silence. “Yeah, it was very brave of you to tell her how you feel. But it takes a lot of bravery to listen, too. To sit there. To open yourself up to the other person when they need to tell you something. Because it means leaving yourself unguarded. And it means you can get hurt.”

Keme shook his head again, but it was softer this time, more tired than anything else.

“No one can blame you for feeling the way you do,” I said. “You have every right to be hurt, to be angry. The world isn’t a fair place, and it’s been particularly unfair to you.” I tried to think of the best way to say it, but I was tired and drained and possibly concussed, so I said, “But you don’t have to feel that way forever. Not if you don’t want to.”

Something spread across his face—the faintest ripple of whatever was moving deep below those still waters. “She doesn’t need me anymore. She has Louis.”

“No, Keme. She doesn’t need you. That’s a good thing, actually, because not a lot of healthy relationships are built on need. But she wants you. Wants you in her life, and maybe a lot more. And I think you want her in your life, too. But it means being brave again.”

He sat motionless. And the boy on the other side of the glass, that thinned-out reflection, he didn’t move either. When Keme spoke, the words were so quiet I could barely pick them up over the buzz of the fluorescents. “I don’t want to be brave anymore.”

And what I heard was I don’t want to get hurt anymore .

“Everybody feels that way sometimes,” I said. “That’s why we have friends. People who love us. Who will help us until we can be brave again.”

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t nod. He stared out the window some more, and he looked as tired as an eighteen-year-old boy can be.

“Keme,” I said. “Please come home.”

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I texted everyone to let them know Keme was okay. Fox arrived not long after. They got out of the van as Keme and I exited the Cold Stone, and then they stood there, wringing their hands as Keme and I approached. When we reached the van, Fox darted forward to grab Keme in a hug. Almost as quickly as it began, Fox released the boy, and words spilled out of them.

“You won’t believe the merry chase I’ve had. An aspiring bicycle thief! And me, the town darling, a pillar of civic-mindedness, practically a hero. Here we go, everyone in the van. Lovely to see you again, my boy. You look as handsome as a young James Dean. And you, Dashiell—”

“No,” I said.

“—look like a young Demi Moore.”

I sighed.

“In that movie,” Fox clarified, “when she does all the push-ups. Although perhaps not that young.”

“Please get in the van,” I told Keme, “so we can get this over with.”

I thought maybe he’d be too tired to smile, or too numb. But it was there. A weary shadow curving his lips, although it didn’t quite reach his eyes. He didn’t even snap at me, shove me, or pull my hair when I helped him into the back of the van.

Then Fox and I stood there. Fox was trembling: top hat quivering, monocle about to

tumble, Victorian-waif-style fingerless gloves thrumming against their thighs.

“He’s okay,” I said. “He’ll be okay.”

Fox gave a jerky nod. For a moment, I was sure they were going to cry, but they pulled themselves together, patted me on the shoulder, and, with false cheer and a terrible English accent, called out, “Tally-ho!”

They did it about three more times on the drive home. And then, when we stopped at a red light, they yanked a sequined handkerchief out of one pocket, impresario-style, and wiped their eyes and shook with a single, violent, silent sob. I rubbed their back and glanced to see if Keme had noticed. I was pretty sure he hadn’t, mostly because the only part of him I could see were his legs; the rest of him was hidden by the tennis-skirt mobile.

My first sight of Hemlock House was of it at the top of the hill, every window lit up with a warm, yellow glow that defied the night. The nerd in me (which is pretty much all of me) thought of Tolkien, and the last homely house. Fox parked at the front door, and we went inside. I practically glued myself to Keme—in case he tried to run, sure, but also because I knew what it was like to come back, the mixture of embarrassment and relief, and the uncertainty of not knowing how to act.

Indira must have heard us, because she stepped into the hall at the same time we did. Her eyes went immediately to Keme. The boy stiffened. Then he took an awkward step toward her (being a teenager, I was starting to remember, was absolutely excruciating). Indira broke the tension of the moment by running to him. I’d never seen Indira run, but she did it the way she did everything—gracefully. She wrapped Keme in a hug, and after several long seconds, he put his arms around her, and his body softened. I had to look away, and instead, I traded an awkward glance with Fox; it wasn’t our moment, and we both knew instinctively that we had no right to it.

The sound of a footfall drew me back.

Millie stood at the end of the hall. Her eyes were red. She was clutching a tissue in one hand. Her flyaways had multiplied into the millions, and she was staring at Keme. Keme stared back. He had stepped away from Indira and was caught in a high-schooler's pose, one thumb under the strap of his backpack, as though frozen mid-hoist. The rise and fall of his thin chest gave him away, though. It was like the flutter of a bird's wing. A strand of hair that had fallen loose from his beanie drifted on the restless movement of his body.

"Keme?" Millie whispered.

And it was, in all the time I'd known her, the first real whisper.

Another second passed, and I seemed to realize at the same time as everyone else that Keme wasn't going to move. I stepped over to him and whispered, "Do you want me to talk to her? You can do this later."

He didn't answer except to blink frantically as his eyes welled. And then he looked at me. And it was a question.

"It's going to be okay," I said. "Whatever happens, it's going to be okay."

In slow motion, he re-settled the backpack's strap across his shoulder. And then he nodded.

He walked down the hall toward Millie, and Millie started to cry again, pressing the wadded-up tissues against her eyes. He said something to her, and she shook her head, and they stepped into the billiard room, and Keme slid the doors shut behind them.

I let out my breath slowly and turned to see Indira and Fox not looking much better. They were, to my surprise, holding hands. Fox was a mess, weeping openly now. Indira still held her usual composure, except for a shimmer in her eyes. She surprised me again when she released Fox's hand so that she could take me into a hug. Her arms were light, barely settling on my shoulders, and the night was full of surprises, because then she kissed my cheek and said, "Thank you."

Before I could say anything—like explain that I'd pioneered being-beaten-up-by-a-teenager as a parenting style—the front door opened. Bobby entered the hall a moment later. He was still in uniform, and he glanced up and down the hall before his gaze settled on me.

"With Millie," I said, jerking a thumb at the billiard room.

Bobby nodded, and then his expression morphed into concern when he said, "What happened to you?"

"Nothing—"

"You've got blood on your shirt."

"Oh, that. It's nothing."

"Uh huh," Bobby said, and he put his hand on my back and steered me toward the stairs.

In our bathroom, Bobby sat me on the toilet while he inspected my scalp. When you knew someone really well, you could tell a lot about them by the way they breathed. For example, as Bobby cleaned the laceration, I could tell he was upset. If upset meant: filled with boiling rage. I could also tell because he was very, um, aggressive in applying some sort of stinging gel to the wound.

“I don’t think you need stitches,” he said as he crouched in front of me. “Do you feel dizzy?”

“No.”

“Tired?”

“Pretty much constantly.”

“Headache?”

“Uh, minor. Also, what did you put on that cut, because it feels like someone slapped jellied gasoline around and then set it on fire?”

Bobby caught my hand as I reached up to check if this was, in fact, the case.

“Any problems focusing?” he asked. “Do you feel like you’re thinking clearly?”

“Bobby, I’m fine.”

“Fantastic. Then you know what’s going to happen if I catch you messing around with that laceration.”

“Uh—yes.”

“And you can explain what exactly happened tonight.”

“Well, I found Keme—”

“In detail.”

At the look on his face, I swallowed. And then I squared my shoulders (as best I could while perched on a Victorian-ish commode), and said, “I tripped when I stepped off the curb.”

Bobby said some words that deputies are not allowed to say on duty.

“I did,” I said. “I’m notoriously clumsy. I fell off the sofa the other day.”

“Because you were asleep.” Bobby straightened. “I don’t care if he’s having a hard week. I’m going to talk to him.”

“Bobby, I tripped.” I grabbed his hand. As carefully as I could, I said, “It was an accident, and it’s not going to happen again.” His face was still stone, so I added, “Please?”

Unhappiness settled across Bobby’s features, but after another moment, he relaxed. He pulled me against him, ran his fingers carefully through my hair, and said in a gravelly voice, “I hate seeing you get hurt.”

“I know.”

“I should have been there.”

I shook my head, which was no mean feat with my face tucked into him. He smelled nice—like something delicious. It took me a moment to pinpoint it as fried chicken (it was strangely homey). After a few more moments of letting myself relax against him, I drew back and said, “I do think you need to talk to him, though. He needs to know you guys are—how do surfers say ‘we’re still cool’?”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“We’re totally going to chillax, bro.”

Bobby brushed my hair back from my forehead.

“Everything’s gnarly, buddy. Ten-four.”

“Ten-four?”

“I meant hang ten.”

Bobby sighed.

“Surf’s up. Cowabunga. Tubular.”

He slapped my thigh, and I yelped.

“Oops,” Bobby murmured. “Come on. You need to get out of that bloody shirt. And then a bath—no showers until that’s had a day or two to heal.”

It’s surprisingly hard to resist an armed deputy, who also happens to be your incredibly handsome boyfriend, when he decides to take your clothes off (in case you ever find yourself in a similar situation).

“You know what the worst part is?” I asked as Bobby started the hot water. “I thought if I could talk to Keme, if I could get him to open up to me, I’d finally be able to figure out what was going on. I thought he’d have some key piece of information, some tiny detail that didn’t seem meaningful to him, but that could unlock the whole investigation?”

“That’s not always how real investigations work,” Bobby said. “Sometimes, there are no witnesses. Sometimes, there aren’t any clues. Sometimes, bad people get away

with doing bad things.”

“I hate that. That’s terrible. Real-life mysteries should always follow the three-act structure. They should have a femme fatale who complicates everything with a web of relationships, including a big one that surprises you at the end. They should have an intrepid detective who sees through her, um, malarkey.”

“That sounds kind of sexist.”

“It could be an homme fatal. Or a them fatal! What if Fox is the killer?”

“How hard did you hit your head?” Bobby asked as he checked the water. Then he pointed to the tub. “In.”

This was where we got back to the I’m-basically-a-straight-guy-so-casual-nudity-doesn’t-faze-me thing. I stripped out of my joggers and trunks, and I slipped into water hot enough to sting at first, and then I melted. My eyes closed. I sank down until my chin touched the water. I swear to God I could feel every aching muscle loosening up all at once.

The jingle of a belt made me open my eyes.

Bobby was taking his belt off.

“What is happening right now?” I asked.

“I’m taking a bath with you.”

“Why?”

And because he was Bobby, and because this was the kind of thing he could say, he

said, “Because I miss you, and I want to be with you.” He made a face as he unbuttoned his shirt. “And because I smell like a McDonald’s kitchen.”

“More like a KFC,” I said. He looked at me, and I mumbled, “Uh, just guessing.” In an attempt at a recovery, I said, “Somebody needs to tell Tripple he has to clean out those cars. It doesn’t matter if he’s retiring; it’s not fair to the rest of you.”

“I told him,” Bobby said as his trousers came off. He was wearing gray boxers. Gray. That was it. They didn’t even have cute pink stitching or a llama or one single video game reference on them. Admittedly, my outrage was low because I was focused on, um, other things. “I think pretty much everybody has told him. He’d stay late to do a deep clean, he said. I guess we’ll see if it makes a difference.”

“Maybe he’ll buy a Taco Bell air freshener.”

Bobby did not look amused, but I wasn’t too bothered, because that was the exact moment he was letting his shirt slide off him. I mean, my God. It was like the man had never even heard of cake. I hadn’t realized somebody could be cute when they took off their socks, but Bobby was so focused, so intent, that my heart exploded inside my chest. The boxers went next. And yes, since I know you’re all wondering, he folded his clothes. I didn’t pay too much attention to that, either. I had my eyes on other things.

When he straightened up, he caught the look on my face and grinned. He flicked water at me as he climbed into the tub, and my cries of outrage didn’t seem to bother him as he settled at the other end. It was a strange sensation, our legs slotting together under the water. The texture of his skin felt different—not that I’m complaining.

Then the grin dropped off his face, and he leaned forward, and in a voice that could only politely be described as curt said, “What’s that?”

(Let me tell you: my mind didn't go to a very mature place.)

But then I processed his tone, and I said, "What's what?"

"That bruise on your chest that looks like someone stepped on you." He started to rise, water streaming off him. "You said you stepped off a curb—"

"Bobby, wait!" I grabbed his hand. Water rolled down my wrist, cooling as it went, and I tugged. "Sit down. It wasn't Keme. Come on, sit down."

He sank into the water again, but if anything, his expression got even more grim. "What happened?"

I realized that, in the chaos of the day, I hadn't told him about Woody Vance. So, I told him now—the strangeness of Vance hiding out in Mrs. Knight's dad's place, and his barely veiled anger at Channelle, even though she was already dead. The story about how they'd met, and how she'd lied to him—and, in his opinion at least, how she'd used him. And the sudden burst of violence at the end.

"We're going to the station," Bobby said. "You're going to press charges."

"Um, well, maybe—"

A glacial calculation happened on Bobby's face. And then, coolly, he said, "Fine."

"Oh no. No way. You're not going over there and beating him up."

"I wasn't planning on beating him up."

"Bobby, you're missing the point."

“I’m missing the point? That’s battery, Dash.” His voice tightened in a way I wasn’t familiar with. “He put his hands on you.”

“I know, I know. I’m okay, though. And if you want me to press charges, I will.”

“I do.”

“Okay. We can do that.” The rare burst of anger from Bobby—even as controlled as it was—made me scramble for a way to redirect the conversation. “Doesn’t it seem strange, though? I mean, think about it. He tracks his ex-wife down across state lines. And he’s in such a hurry, he drives up here in his take-home car, even though I’m sure that’s against regulations. He’s not in Hastings Rock for more than a day before JT dies. And then Channelle dies. And we know this guy is angry and violent. In my mind, he’s a way better candidate for a killer than Foster.”

Bobby was silent for several long seconds. When he spoke, his voice still held some of that tension, and I had the sense he was fighting to relax it. “A psychological profile is kind of like motive, Dash. It might help. But it might not. In the end, it comes down to putting someone in the room, so to speak. Opportunity is a much bigger deal. And we know Foster and Channelle were having an affair. We can place him in her motel room. He stole her necklace. That’s a lot going against him.”

“I know. And I know it’s just more lazy armchair psychology, but I don’t think Foster’s a killer. He’s a waste of space, sure. He’s a loser. There’s definitely some meanness to him—he’s definitely a bully, and he’ll pick on people he thinks he can push around.”

“I would have loved to see his face when Keme knocked him into next year,” Bobby said, and the edge in his voice was blunted by what sounded like amusement.

“Wait, you knew?”

Bobby's look told me: yes, he'd known. There was also a hint of: it was incredibly obvious.

I laughed in spite of myself. "Yeah, well, Channelle picked the wrong guy this time. Foster definitely wasn't going to be able to take care of her—if anything, I think Foster was hoping she'd be an upgrade, and he could leech off her money for a while."

"Maybe that's why they argued," Bobby said. "Maybe that's why the argument escalated."

"And he killed her," I said sourly. "I know. I still think it was Woody, though."

Bobby made a face. And then he splashed me again.

Laughing—and, yes, shrieking a little—I tried to shield myself with my hands.

"Bobby, stop! Stop! Stop it! You're getting me all wet!"

"You're in the bath," he said as he kept splashing me.

"My wound!"

He instantly stopped, of course; he's a softie. And his expression was so contrite that I almost felt bad when I smirked at him.

Contrition gave way to a smile that spread slow and hot across his face. "You jerk," he said, and some of that same heat scorched the bottom of his voice. He got up on his knees and splashed his way toward me.

"What are you doing?"

“What do you think I’m doing?” he asked in that same hot-enough-to-smoke voice. He straddled me. And then he kissed me.

Listen: we were in a bath, and we were warm, and I love him. I’m not responsible for my body having ideas.

He chuckled, and it had that same black-bottomed heat to it as he kissed a line down my neck.

I made a little sound. I shifted around, sending the water in the tub sloshing, to try to get more of him—touch more of him, press harder against him. He had one hand on my chest, and I knew without looking that he was touching the bruise Woody had left. His mouth was soft on sensitive skin, and the faintest hint of his stubble—because he never had much—still made me squirm.

And then my brain started to race, of course. Because of what had happened last time. And how stupid I’d been. And the possibility that it would all happen again—him saying things, and me being, well, me.

Bobby was working on what I suspected was going to be a truly admirable hickey on my collarbone when he must have sensed the change. He stopped, sat back, and looked me in the eye.

I broke first. “I’m sorry about last time. What I said. I feel like I messed things up.”

“You didn’t mess anything up. I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t. I mean, you didn’t. I know you’re trying to express yourself, and I know you’re trying to tell me how you feel about me, and Bobby, I love that so much. It means so much to me. I’m so happy that you want to do that for me. I just—” I hesitated, trying to think of the clearest way to say it. What came out was “I’m just so

freaking weird.”

The corner of his mouth tilted, but it wasn’t exactly a smile. “You’re not weird. And I’m glad you told me.” He hesitated, and I recognized—with surprise—the sudden vulnerability behind his silence. “I, um, did some reading.”

I sat up a little straighter. “Oh.”

“Because I don’t ever want you to feel uncomfortable or unhappy or—” He took a breath. “I guess I want you to know I really do think those things about you. I wasn’t just saying them. But I also want to recognize that you might not see yourself the same way, or you might feel uncomfortable hearing those things, or feel some kind of pressure.”

“That’s what I was saying. I’m a weirdo, so I’m going to work on this. I told Keme it’s important to listen to what your partner wants to tell you, because that’s a way of making yourself vulnerable, and I want you to know that I do want to make myself vulnerable with you, and I want to be here for you, and emotionally available, and—”

“Dash.” He waited, and since I was smart enough to let him speak, he continued, “I do want to express myself with you. That’s a me thing, and I’m working on it. And I’m going to keep doing better. But I also think there’s something else we could try, you know. When we’re together. To communicate.”

My eyes stung. I reached up to touch the part in his hair, and my smile felt so soft it was almost a noodle. “Bobby, you don’t have to fix everything.”

“This isn’t a fix,” he said, and to my surprise—and relief—I got the goofy grin. “This is a pivot.”

We dried off, and he led me to bed, one hand holding mine. There was something so

sweet about it, so gentlemanly, that I wanted to cry all over again, and maybe some of that emotion showed in my face as we lay down because he touched my cheek, a question in his eyes. I nodded, which was as close as I could come to telling him I was okay. When he kissed me, it was barely more than a brush of his lips. Another question. I slid my fingers into his hair and kissed him back.

He was always so attentive. Always so careful and thorough, leaving kisses across my shoulder, down my chest. The press of his mouth made me shiver, and I wasn't ready when he looked up at me, those earthy bronze eyes hooded and dark, and whispered, "Your skin is so soft."

And weirdly enough, somehow, that was different—sweet, but not too personal. Not too much.

He scooted back up to straddle me again. He found my hands and brought them to his chest. His gaze was so earnest that I couldn't look away. He said, "Do you feel how warm your hands are on mine?"

And I could. I could feel their heat, trapped between Bobby's hands and his chest. And it may sound silly, but there was something so intimate about that recognition, about the fact that we both felt it, and that he had put it into words.

"I like how the hair on your legs scratches against mine," Bobby said, and he gave a little wiggle so we could both feel it again. An unexpectedly wicked smile touched his mouth. "And I like the way your breath catches when I do something you like."

The tears fell before I could stop them. Because he had done this for me. He had cared enough to learn how to do this for me. And because he was Bobby, and because I got to share these things with him. All these things that brought us together.

Bobby, of course, saw the tears and said, "Oh. Hey. I'm sorry—"

“No,” I said. “It’s good. It’s perfect. You’re perfect.”

He might not have believed me because he bent to check on me, brushing the back of his hand across my cheek. “Dash,” he said, and there was so much worry in my name.

So, I did the only thing I could think of: I tried to meet him halfway.

“Your breath feels like sunlight on my neck.” I curled my hand around his nape. “Like in winter, when it comes out from behind the clouds.”

For a precarious moment, Bobby’s eyes filled with tears. He smiled. And his voice was thick as he said, “That’s not fair. You’re a writer.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

I must have slept, because I woke, loose-limbed and warm and content, with one of Bobby's hands lazily wrapped around my arm like I might fly away during the night. It still caught me off guard sometimes, how much Bobby liked touch, physical contact, snuggling. I'd always enjoyed those things as parts of a relationship, but they'd never been the focus for me. With Bobby, though, it seemed like he was always finding a way to touch me: his hand on the back of my neck when he walked behind me, or his head in my lap while I read, or stopping to hug me, with no reason or explanation. A smile touched my mouth in the darkness. And lots and lots of sex. I thought, sometimes, it was because there was so much he wanted to tell me, and body to body was the only way he knew how. But, of course, that wasn't true. Because it turned out, Bobby had plenty of things to say.

Of course, the snuggling got slightly less romantic when I needed to pee.

After fighting a losing battle, I finally wiggled out from under Bobby's hand. The room was cold in contrast to the warmth of the blankets (and Bobby), and I shivered as I hurried into the bathroom. When I eased the door shut behind me, I caught a whiff of a deep fryer smell—a fast food smell. It was disorienting until I turned on the lights and spotted Bobby's neatly folded clothes near the tub. They say odor is the sense most strongly associated with memory, and I liked the memory of Bobby hugging me to him, and the way the scent of crispy chicken goodness had clung to him. (I'm a simple guy, and I like what I like—sue me.)

I did my business. And, while I was stuck there with nothing better to do, my mind wandered.

Bobby was right, I decided. I needed to let go of this investigation. Step back.

Remove myself. Bobby hadn't put it in exactly those words, but I'd understood the subtext. Keme was in the clear. The sheriff had a viable suspect. If Foster was innocent, the truth would come out during the trial. I no longer had any reason to stay involved.

Except.

There was the small fact that someone had tried to kill me. Or possibly Keme. Or both of us. That was a fairly good reason to stay involved, in my book.

And, a little lower down on my scale of priorities, I had to admit that criminal trials were rarely about truth. They were far too often about power and money, of which Foster had little. If he was innocent, it might come out at trial. Or it might not.

But aside from shouting, Woody did it! I had no idea what to do or how to proceed. I was sure I was missing something, but I didn't know what it might be. There was something I'd overlooked. Something I'd taken for granted, or an assumption that was wrong. I needed that moment in my story—er, so to speak—when Sam Spade realizes Brigid O'Shaughnessy has played him for a fool. Or when Philip Marlowe realizes the truth about Mrs. Grayle. Or when poor Mrs. de Winter finally knows the real Rebecca. When some superficially true relationship flips or twists or suddenly reveals itself, and someone you thought was vulnerable or a victim or good—

Having a revelation while you're peeing isn't the most dignified experience. I guess, in hindsight, I was just lucky my aim stayed true.

She'd gotten ready for a night out: perfume, a dress, her jewelry.

Someone had sent her roses.

She'd been having an affair.

The fact that she'd argued with Foster at the motel. That he'd been in her room.

And that Bobby's clothes smelled like fried chicken.

And the basic truth of all mysteries: that people lie.

If you've never seen someone frantically wrapping up a pee, it's not a great experience—the flushing, the rapid washing of hands (I'm not a barbarian), the frantic whisper-screaming of “Bobby! Bobby!”

By the time I stumbled out of the bathroom, Bobby had raised himself up on one elbow. He was rubbing his eyes. “What's going on? Are you okay?”

“I know who did it,” I said. “And I know how.”

“Huh?”

“Get up!” I whisper-screamed as I grabbed a pair of joggers. (Admittedly, slightly less romantic than how we'd been spending our evening about five minutes earlier.)

“We've got to go before it's too late.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

The Hastings Rock sheriff's station was a concrete building with a flat roof and a bit of stone veneer near the door that softened the otherwise severe, authoritarian, designed-and-built-in-Warsaw look. In the spirit of the season, Jaklin Ruiz (who worked dispatch) had put several jack-o'-lanterns out front, the light-up kind that glowed orange in the darkness.

And it was dark. Dark and cold. The Pilot's clock said it was past two in the morning, and the station's front parking lot was empty except for a single truck dusted by the overhead security light. Shadows pooled everywhere else, deeper along the edges of the lot, and then swallowing up everything else. I knew we weren't in the middle of nowhere. This was still Hastings Rock. There was a loan servicing office next door, and on the other side of that was a storefront church, and on the block behind the station there was another church and a run-down apartment building that looked like it could give you tetanus if you walked too close. But right now, the darkness had eaten up all of it, and the sheriff's station might as well have been an island.

Bobby wasn't exactly grumpy. Bobby didn't do grumpy. But he did look tired, and his hair had little spikes at the front that weren't usually there, and in his Sheriff's Office windbreaker and jeans he did give the impression that, if I didn't wrap things up quick, he might throw me in the drunk tank and go home to get some sleep.

He hadn't been thrilled at being woken up, which was totally fair, because he'd been working nonstop for days, and he was exhausted. And he'd been even less thrilled when I told him my revelation. And let's just say he didn't love my enthusiasm to go out and catch a murderer right. now.

But he'd gotten out of bed, which really tells you something about his moral caliber.

(Moral fiber? That sounds like something that has a recommended serving from the FDA, although moral caliber isn't much better. What's the expression?)

I had noticed, as we'd left Hemlock House, that Keme and Millie were still awake and still talking. At least, I thought I heard them talking. They must have heard us too, because they fell silent as soon as we reached the hallway. But I could have sworn I'd heard Keme laugh.

Now, with the shadowy bulk of the sheriff's station in front of us, Bobby eased the Pilot into a parking stall and killed the engine.

"Is anybody in there?" I asked, peering at the darkened windows. Aside from what were clearly a few emergency lights, the station looked dark. "What if there's an emergency?"

"Someone'll be on dispatch," Bobby said. He opened his door and slid out of the Pilot—which apparently was exhausted-Bobby speak for, Come on .

He led the way across the lot toward a security fence at the back. I didn't know a lot about fences, but I knew this one looked like it went above and beyond the call of duty—it had those vinyl slats that made it difficult to see through, and it was topped by razor wire. That much security was probably overkill for a little town like Hastings Rock. But then again, maybe not—what did I know?

Bobby unlocked a pedestrian gate, opened it, and ushered me through. I don't know what I was expecting on the other side, but it was more of the same: a parking lot, albeit one filled with sheriff's office cruisers. A few security lights broke up the darkness, and a pair of cameras were mounted under the eaves.

Bobby led me down a row of cruisers and stopped in front of one that looked like all the others: the words Hastings Rock Sheriff's Office on the sides, with the star-

shaped badge behind them. The car itself was white. I crouched, took out my phone, and used its flashlight to inspect the bumper. I didn't see any obvious damage, but an expert would need to examine it. If any of the paint had embedded itself in Channelle's clothes or skin, they might be able to match it back to the car, too.

The wind picked up, and I shivered. A hoodie and joggers had seemed like good clothing for sneakery—they were dark, they were comfortable, they, uh, allowed for a good range of movement. Back at Hemlock House, when my adrenaline had been up, Bobby's suggestion of a jacket had seemed unnecessary.

"You need a real flashlight," Bobby said as he unlocked the driver's door. "You're not going to see anything with that."

He was kind enough not to add, If there's anything to see .

We'd disagreed about the urgency of tonight's mission. I was convinced that waiting until morning might mean losing valuable evidence—and without it, I didn't know how I could get the sheriff to believe me. Bobby, on the other hand, was a firm believer in letting the authorities handle things. The conversation had ended when Bobby yanked on his jeans and muttered, "Because if I don't go, you'll get yourself killed," which I was choosing to call a compromise.

Somehow, the wind seemed to blow even harder, and I shivered again. In fact, I was pretty sure I could feel goose bumps breaking out.

"You're going to freeze," Bobby said as he opened the car door.

"I'm fine," I said. "Please don't give me your jacket. I feel bad enough dragging you out here."

For some reason that got me a lopsided—albeit tired—grin. "I'll grab yours from the

Pilot.”

“I didn’t bring one.”

“I know.” Even the little white puffs of his breath looked amused. “I put one in there for you. I keep it in there.”

“You did? When? Why? No, don’t answer that.”

“First day of autumn,” Bobby said as though it were obvious. As he passed me, he tweaked my ear. “Flashlight’s in the door pocket. And I know you’re going to be tempted, but please don’t shine it in my eyes as a joke when I’m coming back.”

“Okay, rude—”

“And don’t shine it in your eyes because you want to prove you can stare at it longer than Keme.”

“Bobby, that was one time—”

“It’s a Pelican, and it will literally blind you.”

He jogged off toward the Pilot. I pocketed my phone since the little flashlight really wasn’t up to the job and retrieved the much bigger—and manlier—flashlight from the pocket of the door. It was black. It was heavy. It had probably been described in the sales copy as tactical. I immediately understood why Bobby had said what he had; I’ve got all the maturity of a thirteen-year-old boy, and like every teenage boy ever, my first, automatic impulse with a flashlight was to blast someone in the face with it.

But since that wasn’t an option—on account of the possibility of blinding someone—I clicked it on and started to search the inside of the car. The cruiser’s

dome light worked fine, I was sure, but the Pelican was much brighter, and it made the search easier.

The first thing I noticed was that the cruiser was spotless. It smelled faintly like the perfume of a cheap cleaner that a government agency would buy in bulk. The seats were clean. The footwells had been vacuumed. From the stories Bobby told, I knew the sheriff's office cruisers got to experience every aspect of the human condition—which was a polite way of saying a lot of people puked, pooped, and peed in the back of these cars. But you couldn't tell with this one. And the fast-food smell that I'd noticed on Bobby was gone too. There were no candy wrappers, no takeout bags, no empty water bottles or cans from energy drinks. I mean, Bobby never would have allowed that kind of thing. The Pilot was so clean, inside and out, that it made me think of the few times I'd needed a rental car—freshly washed, perfectly vacuumed, even a hint of that new car smell. Or when I'd visited my grandma, years ago, and ridden in her Toyota Avalon that she'd owned since the second Clinton administration and that had eight thousand miles on it when she died. (Oh, and ask me sometime about the time (once!) I left a cup from Chipper in the Pilot. Bobby hadn't yelled at me. It had been so much worse: we had a talk .)

After a few more minutes, I let out a breath. This wasn't working—sure, there were lots of interesting things, like the mobile data terminal (powered off); and the buttons that I knew were for the lights and sirens because one time, after I'd begged and begged and begged, Bobby had turned them on for me, and then he'd floored it, and we'd shot down the highway for half a mile; and, of course, the shotgun (locked into its mount—yes, I checked). The problem was that there wasn't anything approaching tangible, usable evidence. Not as far as I could tell, anyway. No threads of fabric I could link back to Channelle's dress. Not a single hair to provide DNA. Every surface in the car looked freshly—and thoroughly—wiped down, and I knew without anyone having to tell me that there wouldn't be any usable fingerprints.

Channelle had been in this car. The night she died, after she dressed up to go out,

she'd gotten in this car. I knew she'd been in this car; the smell on her clothes, the night I'd found her, was all the evidence I needed.

A judge and jury, on the other hand, might want something a little more substantial.

Maybe a trained team of forensic experts would be able to find something—

I wasn't sure what made me raise my head. A sound, maybe. So soft it was on the edge of hearing. Or maybe it was some other animal sense, the way sometimes you can tell that there's someone else in a house, even if you can't see them.

Deputy Tripple stood in front of the cruiser. He was dressed all in black, with a hood pulled up, but I could see his face. He looked tired. Frustrated. Annoyed, maybe, was the best word for it.

And he was pointing a gun straight at me.

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For several long seconds, Tripple didn't move. And neither did I.

"I want you to listen to me very carefully," Tripple said. His voice barely carried, even though the night was still. "Do exactly what I say, and Bobby won't get hurt."

My mind, which had been blank with shock, now lurched into motion. Bobby. Bobby had gone to get—

Where was Bobby?

I couldn't stop a glance in the direction of the gate. It was still open. We'd parked the Pilot on the other side. It should have taken Bobby a minute, less, to get whatever he'd said he was going to get. A jacket, I thought with rising panic. He was going to get a jacket for me because I hadn't listened the first time he'd told me. This was my fault. He'd walked through that gate, and Tripple had been on the other side, and—this was all my fault.

"Are you listening?" Tripple asked.

Something blunt and ugly wedged itself under my breastbone. I couldn't seem to draw a full breath.

"Hey!" Tripple snapped.

"I'm listening. I'm listening!"

"Get out of the car. Slowly."

I hadn't really been in the car—I'd had my head and shoulders inside as I peered around with the flashlight. But it didn't seem like a time to quibble. As slowly as I could, I eased myself out of the cruiser. I brought my hands up. The flashlight weighed a ton now; at the same time, I felt like someone had attached a hook to my back and hoisted me a couple of feet off the ground, like every part of me had turned to air.

"Where's Bobby?" I said. Will Gower would have been cool and self-possessed. Will Gower would have made a joke, or he would have turned the tables on the bad guy somehow. But I felt like every atom of me was vibrating, and my voice pitched as I asked, "Is he okay? Bobby? Bobby!"

"Be quiet!" Tripple moved the pistol like he wanted me to see it again, and I swallowed Bobby's name. Tripple waited. He cocked his head as though listening. Then he said, "Rule number one: Be. Quiet."

"I want to know if he's okay—"

"He's fine. He'll be fine as long as you do what I tell you."

I barely heard him. My brain was still running laps. I hadn't heard a gunshot; that was good, right? It didn't look like Tripple's pistol had a suppressor, but even if he'd used one, I still would have heard something. Suppressors weren't totally silent, and if he'd fired the gun, with the rest of the world so quiet, I would have heard it.

On the other hand, if I knew one thing about Bobby, it was that there wasn't much short of death itself that could stop him when he set his mind to something. If he knew I was in danger, he'd be here—if he could be here.

So, where was he?

Maybe Tripple had distracted him. Maybe he'd lured him away. Maybe I just needed to buy Bobby some time.

That ugly, heavy thing was still lodged behind my breastbone, but somehow, I made myself say, "You killed—"

"JT," Tripple said. "Yeah, I did. I didn't mean to, but I did. He put me in a bad spot. Let's not have it happen again."

"Were we right? Was it an argument?"

Tripple looked like he might not answer, but then the words came as though slipping out of him. "He kept getting in my face. I told him to calm down. I told him to take a step back. He shoved me. He said I was a fool. He said she—"

Whatever JT had said, Tripple didn't seem to be able to say it.

"It was an accident," I said, casting another glance at the gate. Still nothing.

"I didn't mean to. I grabbed...something. I just wanted him to stop talking." The light dusted the all-black outfit, resting fuzzily on his shoulders and hood. "A hammer. I hit him once. That was all. I didn't mean it. Once in the head with a hammer. And that was it. My life was over."

"It didn't have to be, though. Isn't that what—"

"Channelle told me. Yes."

Yes, I was panicked. Yes, I was terrified for Bobby—and, admittedly, for myself. But I couldn't help a flash of annoyance. Once, one time, I'd like to be the one who—

“I felt it the very first time I saw her,” Tripple said. “It was a call-out. A domestic. I worked a lot of the calls at the RV park. I knew people there. And the first time I saw her—” He stopped and swallowed. “I thought falling in love would feel like something else. I don’t know. But I knew she was hurting. I knew she needed someone to protect her. I couldn’t stop thinking about her. After that, every time I went to the Gull’s Nest, I saw her. And then there was another call-out. She couldn’t stop shaking. I was only going to put my arm around her, and all of a sudden, she was pressed against me. And that was it. That was when I knew she felt it too.”

Another piece of the puzzle clicked. “She told you she was going to leave JT.”

“She had some money she’d saved up. She was waiting for the right time.”

I wasn’t sure about the saved up part; my guess was that Channelle had stolen the money from JT and from the tenants at the park. But all I said was “And then Woody showed up. He said something to JT that made JT suspicious—Channelle had stolen money from Woody, too, when she left him.” Tripple didn’t say anything, so I continued, “JT found the money, didn’t he? And that’s why he and Channelle fought. And that’s when you got the call-out. You argued, and—”

“I was going to retire,” Tripple said, and he sounded weary—worn to the bone. “We were going to leave. I had my pension; that would have been enough. It had been an argument. I’d been defending myself. Why should I have to lose everything because I’d been defending myself?” Tripple’s gaze sharpened on me. “I should have realized, when I thought of using that boy’s clothes, that you’d get involved. At the time, though—let’s just say I wasn’t thinking too clearly. All I knew was that Channelle was right: it had to be someone else. I knew that boy had gotten into it with JT earlier that day. His clothes were right there, boxed up in the garage. Everybody in town knew he was trouble. Aggressive, violent, strange. I waited until it was late and went in through the back, and then I made the call to the station and pretended I was JT. Had a phone call with myself to push back the time of death. I called the motel and

bothered May until she got the idea that JT was trying to get in touch with Channelle. And it all went the way I thought it would until I saw you at the station. You had to stick your nose in.”

“What happened with Channelle?”

His gaze sharpened as though he’d only now remembered me. He cleared his throat. “Story time is over.”

My arms were beginning to ache from holding them in the air. The flashlight’s weight seemed to have doubled. But I said, “You’ll never get to tell anyone else. I know you cared about her. I know you didn’t want to hurt her.”

“I never would have hurt her.” The words were so vehement that they verged on a shout. In what sounded like a strained attempt to control his volume, Tripple continued, “I loved her. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I didn’t know she was—”

But he stopped.

And I said, “You didn’t know she was fooling around with Foster.”

A tiny laugh escaped Tripple, and there was so much hurt in the sound that, for a moment, I almost felt sorry for him. “She kept telling me she wanted to wait until she was divorced. She said she loved me, but she wanted to wait because it was the decent thing to do.” His hand holding the gun dipped slightly, and his voice softened. “I had a key to her room; I thought I was going to surprise her. I went inside and smelled her perfume. She’d been trying on dresses. I’d brought roses, and I just stood there, holding them. I heard her coming back. Heard her with...him. Heard her give him that necklace and tell him to pawn it. The necklace I’d given her. After he left...”

“You confronted her.”

“I told her I was done. We were done. I said I was going to tell the sheriff what had happened. I’d parked behind the motel because of the cameras, and she followed me. She kept trying to tell me I’d misunderstood. She kept trying to explain. But now that I’d seen, I knew.” That hurt, disbelieving laugh trickled out of him again. “I knew how JT felt. Only I hadn’t spent years believing the act, which I guess was a mercy. She got in the car. She checked her hair in the mirror. Wanted to touch up her lips. Then she tried—” His voice buckled, and under it was a silence that went down for miles.

I was the one who broke it, because now I knew. “You didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“She wouldn’t stop, so I hauled her out of the car. I was done talking. I started the engine.” He faltered again. “She was crazy . She threw herself right in front of me. I couldn’t have stopped if I’d tried.”

Out on the water, what had to be at least a mile away, the blat of an old boat horn sounded like something from another world.

“There wasn’t anything I could do for her,” Tripple said softly. “I was going to leave, but then I remembered the hammer. She was supposed to get rid of it, but what if she hadn’t? I’d left my key in the room, so I had to force the door. I didn’t have much time. I tore that place apart as quickly as I could. And there it was. She’d kept it. She told me she was going to get rid of it, and she kept it.” He fell silent once more. “I took the hammer, and I left.”

“But it wasn’t over,” I said.

“No.” His voice was rough, but an edge came into it. “Because you couldn’t leave things alone.”

“That’s why you came to the house. The night I followed Keme out into the woods, the night you tried to kill me—you were waiting for me. You wanted to make sure I didn’t figure out the truth.”

He laughed again, and it sounded harsher this time. “I was there because I was going to take the tracker off Bobby’s SUV. I thought, with the kid off the hook, you might give it a rest. Then I saw you two run out of the house, and I thought maybe I’d make sure you gave it a rest, just in case.”

The casual way he said it, the tone that bordered on amused disappointment that he hadn’t quite managed to kill me, left me without words for several seconds. Finally, I managed to say, “That’s how you found us tonight.”

“Geofencing is a nifty thing, isn’t it? Anytime the Pilot left Hemlock House, I got a little ping. Of course, that meant I spent a lot of time following Bobby around the other night instead of you. But nothing’s perfect.”

“This isn’t going to work,” I said. “We’re standing in the secure lot of the sheriff’s station. There are cameras. There’s somebody inside on dispatch. People here know you; you won’t get away with this. Things are going to go better for you if you turn yourself in. You can call the sheriff right now and tell her you need to talk.”

He stared back at me. From somewhere beyond the fenced lot came the sound of an animal moving in the brush. It made me think of the strawberry tree and the squirrels, when Bobby and I had stood out here after my pathetic attempt at interviewing Keme. That felt like years ago. And it made me unexpectedly relieved, loosening the tightness across my shoulders, in my chest, down my back. Keme was safe now. And Millie and Indira and Fox. And maybe, I could hope, Bobby too. That was all that mattered. If there was a way to keep Bobby safe. I remembered the peeling bark. I could still see the bright red berries, and feel the weight of the sunlight. It was strange to look back fondly on a time when I’d been hurt so badly. But I remembered it. And

it had been beautiful.

“You know, I never understood how you did it,” Tripple said with a little bark of a laugh. “All these people spilling their guts. I mean, my God, some of them even turned themselves in. But you’re good. You’re real good. You had me going there for a second. But it’s not going to work, smart guy. I turned the cameras off when I was cleaning the cruiser earlier today. So, we’re all alone. Nobody’s going to bother us. Nobody’ll ever know we were here.”

“That doesn’t change anything. The sheriff will—”

“Here’s what we’re going to do.” Tripple’s voice was a cop’s voice: flat, sure, squashing my words without even trying. “We’re going to go for a ride.”

I knew what that meant. We’d drive somewhere, and he’d shoot me. Or he’d push me off a cliff. Or he’d find a way to run the car off the road with me in it. If anyone ever found me, it’d look like a terrible accident.

My tongue was numb, and it didn’t seem to work right as I said, “What about Bobby?”

“Bobby’ll be fine.”

But I knew what that meant, too. I knew it in a way that was like ice in the marrow of my bones. He couldn’t leave Bobby alive. Bobby would look for me. Bobby would want to know what happened. If I thought there was a chance—

There wasn’t, though.

There hadn’t been, not from the moment Tripple got the drop on us.

He was waiting for me. His expression was as close to friendly as it ever got. What went on inside someone's head, I wanted to know, when they could hold a gun on you, plan to kill you, and still look like that weird uncle who's trying a little too hard to be social?

Think, I told myself. Use your brain and think. For Bobby.

The lights and siren. But the car was off.

The shotgun. No, it was locked in its mount.

If he got close enough, I could club him with the flashlight. It was heavy enough that my muscles burned from holding it over my head throughout this conversation. But he wouldn't make a mistake like that—

The flashlight.

Something gave me away. My face. Or a change in my body language. Blankness came down on Tripple's face like a visor, and his gun hand steadied.

I flipped the flashlight toward him and blasted him in the face with the beam. Then I threw myself down.

Tripple shouted. Then the clap of gunfire ripped open the night. Distantly, I was aware of the sound of glass shattering, and I felt shards rain down on me, plinking against my back as I scrambled away from Tripple.

My plan was simple: put as many cars, trucks, and SUVs as possible between me and Tripple, and hope whoever was on dispatch called a deputy back here before he flushed me out and killed me.

It wasn't a great plan.

I made my way to the back of the cruiser, crawled around the sheriff's office SUV parked next to it, and got to my feet. Tripple was still screaming, and a lot of the words were ones you won't find in the deputy's handbook, but he hadn't fired again—Bobby hadn't been joking about the flashlight. I risked a glance at the gate, but there was no way I'd make it. I'd have to run right past Tripple and then across twenty feet of open ground. Tripple's sight might be impaired from the flashlight, but he only had to hit me once.

Pressing my back to the wall of the sheriff's station, I moved in a shuffling crouch, trying to stay low and keep behind the vehicles. The concrete wall scraped my back. Pebbles skittered underfoot. I caught the first whiff of gun smoke, and it made the hair on my arms bristle.

"That was stupid," Tripple shouted. His voice sounded unhinged—manic, and then I realized: excited. "That was really stupid!"

I didn't say anything back. Believe it or not, sometimes I can keep my mouth shut. I continued shuffling along the wall, aware, at the back of my head, that I was doing Tripple's work for him, because I only had another fifteen feet before I cornered myself. Yes, it was possible I could try the flashlight trick again, or I could jink or juke or deke or dive my way to safety and sprint out of the parking enclosure. But the most likely outcome was that Tripple would pin me down and put a bullet in me.

It didn't matter. Every second I was alive, every second I slowed him down, was time for someone to come. Someone who might not get here in time to save me, but who would save Bobby.

"I can see you," Tripple sang out.

The flashlight, my brain said.

It was still on, and I was shining it right at my feet, creating an ultrabright puddle. I snapped it off, but it was too late.

Tripple's laughter was even worse than his voice. Like this was a game. Like he was having fun. And then he fired.

The sound of the gunshot made me jump. Concrete cracked, and something stung the back of my neck. The old, animal part of me took over, and I ran. Sheriff's office vehicles blurred. The fence loomed up in front of me. At the top, the razor wire glinted in the security lights.

Tripple appeared in the corner of my vision, stepping out from behind one of the SUVs. He fired again.

I dropped, and it saved my life. The bullet shattered concrete again. Old asphalt tore up my joggers as I crouched behind the last cruiser in the row.

Despair made me heavy. My knees, lacerated from my fall, stung. My head pounded with blood and adrenaline. I wanted to be sick. I wanted to close my eyes and go to sleep. I wanted Bobby. But most of all, I wanted him to be safe.

"You should have gone for a ride," Tripple said. He was breathing faster than usual, but he didn't sound winded. "This all could have been a lot easier."

"I hate this part," I said. The words escaped me before I could stop them. "I hate every stupid bad guy who thinks he's the one exception to murder, that he was justified, that he didn't do anything wrong, and that somehow I'm the problem, I'm the idiot, I'm the one who messed everything up. You messed everything up, you—you jackanapes!"

(It was one of Fox's favorite words; it just slipped out.)

Tripple's silence suggested he was on unfamiliar ground. For that matter, so was I—I hadn't done a lot of yelling-at-murderers in my life, so I figured we were both figuring this out as we went along.

"And for that matter—" I said.

And then a loudspeaker boomed: "HEY! OVER HERE!"

My horrified realization came a heartbeat behind: it wasn't a loudspeaker.

It was Millie.

I opened my mouth, but when I tried to simultaneously scream "What are you doing?" and "Get out of here!", it all got caught in my throat.

Tripple started to turn in the direction of Millie's voice.

I mean, you can't really blame him, can you?

And then Keme launched himself out of the dark. Somehow, he'd circled behind Tripple, and now he sprinted toward him and jumped on his back. Tripple shouted and staggered under the impact. Keme rained down blows on Tripple's head, and Tripple stumbled, rocking under the unfamiliar weight of a second body. The gun went off. Muzzle flash lit up the night in a single stroke of flame, and then the dark descended again. Keme did something—I didn't see what—and Tripple screamed . He tried to run, lost his balance, and fell. And Keme stayed with him, clobbering him as he rolled with him.

My feral wolf-child. My beautiful, brave, tremendously stupid feral wolf-child. Who

was also, if you asked anybody else, apparently my big brother.

I ran. I didn't even think about it. Tripple had dropped his gun when he'd fallen, and I scooped it up. He was still trying to roll away from Keme, and Keme was still beating the stuffing out of him. I wasn't even sure Keme was seeing him—the boy's eyes were huge, his pupils dilated, and he was screaming—which hadn't registered until now. The little armchair psychologist inside my head suggested maybe—just maybe—this wasn't entirely about Tripple for Keme. Maybe Keme had a lot of feelings he was getting out. Maybe this was catharsis.

It also looked like if I let it go on for too much longer, it might end in a very cathartic manslaughter. (Not to mention, Millie had appeared, and she was carrying a paving stone almost as big as her head, and it looked like she might want some catharsis too.)

“Keme, that's enough.”

Apparently, it wasn't.

“Keme! Hey! Get off him! Millie, put that thing down.”

Keme just kept punching.

Genius struck. “Keme, stop it right now, or I'm telling Indira!”

Mid-slam, Keme froze. He looked over at me, eyes wide and unseeing, his thin chest rising and falling frantically. One hand was still tangled in Tripple's hair.

“It's okay,” I said. “We're all okay. You can stop now.”

A second passed. And then another. A hint of awareness flickered deep in his eyes, and with what looked like a surprising amount of effort, he released Tripple's hair

and flexed his fingers stiffly. Tripple's head fell to the pavement; if the deputy was still conscious, there was no sign of it. Hey, at least he was alive.

Millie took Keme by the arm and helped him up, and I reached them a moment later. I didn't even know I was going to do it until it happened and I pulled both of them into a hug. After a heartbeat, Millie started to cry—not exactly a surprise. What was a surprise, though, was that Keme did too.

“Everybody's okay,” I said. “You guys did so good. You're idiots, and I'm going to yell at you later, but you did a fantastic job, and I love you so much.” Pushing back from them, I said, “Millie, scream if Tripple moves. I've got to find Bobby.”

Keme was still sobbing, and I wasn't sure he heard me. Millie, though, for all her tears, had a look of grim resolve. I figured if Tripple moved, he might get the paving stone first—and then she'd scream.

I raced through the gate. On my way, I passed Dahlberg, who was standing by her car, hand on her holstered service weapon.

“Tripple,” I said. “You've got to arrest Tripple, he's—”

And then I saw Bobby. He lay on the ground in a crumpled heap next to the Pilot.

That blunt, ugly thing in my chest doubled in size. It was too big for my lungs to expand. Too big for my heart to beat.

I might have stayed like that forever if Bobby hadn't moaned and rolled onto his back.

My legs herky-jerked me over to him before I could even think about it. I dropped onto my knees as he propped himself on one elbow. It was a strangely sleepy

movement, the way he roused himself in bed sometimes, when I came in late and he wanted to say goodnight. It was hard to see him all of a sudden. My eyes were hot.

“What’s wrong?” he mumbled. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“Am I okay? Bobby, are you okay?”

He gave an almost imperceptible nod. But he didn’t say anything, and the tightness around his eyes told me he wasn’t okay, not entirely.

“DEPUTY DAHLBERG IS ARRESTING DEPUTY TRIPPLE!”

She was standing right behind me, and I almost shot out of my shoes.

Bobby murmured, “Who’s that?”

I stared at him. And then I caught the shadow of that ridiculously goofy grin. I slapped his shoulder. “Don’t do that!”

He let out a wounded cry, which of course made me feel terrible, and then he grinned about that too. I thought about beating him up some more, but instead, somehow, I ended up sitting on the asphalt, Bobby’s head pillowed in my lap, insisting he not move until the ambulance got there. Keme and Millie sat with us as cruisers began to arrive, lights and sirens blazing.

And we were still sitting there, our shadows shifting in the spinning lights of the deputies’ cars, when Keme held out his hand.

It took me a moment.

And then, with a tired smile, I slapped him five.

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Believe it or not, we made it to Halloween.

It would be oversimplifying things to say that the investigation was over. If anything, the real investigation was only beginning. Tripple was under arrest (and, thanks to Keme, in the hospital), and the sheriff had informed me that they'd found Channelle's fingerprints on the cruiser's visor mirror—one place that Tripple had forgotten to wipe down, apparently. Now the sheriff had to start unraveling the mess Tripple had created. JT's and Channelle's murders would be bad enough; what would be even worse, though, would be the ripples that spread outward: all of Tripple's arrests, all of his convictions, all of his work as a deputy—it would come under a microscope now. A lifetime's work undone because he'd been selfish and violent and, in a word, evil. And because he'd been in love.

Bobby was okay, it turned out—although he'd had a bad headache for the next day. Tripple had used a chokehold to knock him out. It took, on average, nine seconds for someone to lose consciousness when a chokehold is correctly applied. Bobby had been unconscious before he'd even really had a chance to fight. The downside to chokeholds was that they could all too easily be fatal, one of the reasons modern police departments no longer trained LEOs to use them. An old-timer like Tripple, though, knew all the dirty tricks. I was just grateful Bobby hadn't had anything worse happen to him.

Keme—to my absolute delight, and to his panicked embarrassment—had received a commendation from Sheriff Acosta for, among other things, saving my life. I suspected it was also meant to convey, implicitly, Acosta's apology for the way Keme had been treated at the beginning of the investigation. The actual ceremony wasn't for a few more days, and I cannot fully express my genuine pleasure in

watching the boy swing from swaggering teenage machismo to terror at the prospect of standing in front of all those people. (In case you're wondering, the swaggering teenage machismo tended to win out whenever Millie was around.)

For the record, Bobby—and Indira, and I, and even Fox—had all performed the obligatory chorus of Don't ever do that again . It had taken the wind out of Keme's sails for about an hour, especially when no one seemed particularly impressed by his and Millie's display of initiative. (They had apparently overheard Bobby and me leaving and assumed that I would somehow manage to get myself killed if they didn't tag along. I mean, they weren't wrong, but I didn't feel like they needed to say it out loud.) All our hard work had gone out the window, though, when Millie had posted a long—and LOUD—video on social media explaining how my boyfriend, Keme, did the most amazing thing . After that, Keme looked like he had enough testosterone pumping through him to pick a fight with a bullet train.

Oh, and by the way: they didn't even have the decency to tell us. Keme and Millie, I mean. We all would have gone on wondering and guessing and hoping if we hadn't heard those magical words— my boyfriend, Keme . There was no elaborate courting ritual. They didn't sit us down and gently explain it to us. Millie didn't even ask me for Keme's hand in, uh, boyfriendship? They acted like they always had. With way more kissing.

(I was starting to understand how Keme felt about me and Bobby. I was also starting to knock—loudly—every time I entered a room.)

Hemlock House was always busy on Halloween—not only because it was the only fully operational Class V haunted mansion on the entire Oregon Coast (don't quote me on that), but also because over the years, Vivienne had created something of a tradition, which could be boiled down to: full-sized candy bars, and plenty of them. This year, with money tight, we'd had to resort to fun-size options, but honestly, the kids didn't seem to mind (aside from one little cowlicked runt out of the Archer clan

who clamored for his full-sized Snickers—his mom had to drag him away, vamping off-stage to her own embarrassed laughter).

Eventually, it was time for me and Bobby to head upstairs and help Keme get ready for the dance.

“And maybe change into your own costume while you’re up there,” Fox said, giving me an appraising look. “Or are you going as a disheveled stoat?”

“I’m already in my costume, thank you very much. And I’m not going to engage with this—with this abuse . My costume is cute and clever and cute and—”

“Clever?” Fox said drily.

“Bobby!”

“Here we go,” Bobby said with a squeeze to my shoulder that I was sure was supposed to convey his boundless support and his wholehearted agreement that my costume was, in fact, cute and clever. Bobby, for his part, was definitely cute—the Marty McFly getup had made a second appearance, and the word of the night was yum . (When he’d cuffed the sleeves of the denim jacket, something had happened inside me, and I’m not ready to describe it.)

“We shan’t let you down,” Fox informed me as they opened yet another fun-sized Kit Kat. Tonight, Fox’s ensemble included a knee-length dress with leg-of-mutton sleeves; a white pinafore; and ankle-strap shoes. They’d added a featureless metallic mask that made their voice boom oddly, and they’d tripped over the hassock twice, going, uh, ankle-straps over pinafore. The whole effect was Battlestar Galactica meets Alice in Wonderland, and when I’d wondered aloud to Bobby (a little too loudly, it turned out) if it was a costume or an ordinary outfit, Fox had let out an indignant huff and walked straight into the fireplace.

Indira, in a version of her hippie costume she'd worn on Sunday, gave me a small smile. She was good at controlling her expression, but I knew her well enough to see the worry and hope battling in her features.

"He's going to want you to give him your seal of approval when we're done," I told her. "You know he will."

Her smile got a little bigger, and Bobby and I headed upstairs.

In keeping with all the other recent developments, I'd finally put my foot down about Keme's "secret" (notice the liberal use of air quotes) bedroom. I'd been willing to play along and let Keme sleep in one of the secret passages while his own living situation was...well, unstable, to put it politely. But now that his mom had been evicted, and since Keme was eighteen and a legal adult, I'd decided it was time to put an end to the charade. He hadn't liked it. And it had almost threatened to tip over into a fight—if you can fight with somebody who just hunches his shoulders and won't make eye contact and keeps trying to sneak past you so he can slip out of the house.

And then Bobby had looked around the secret turret, scanning Keme's dirty clothes and his half-empty boxes of breakfast cereal and the jumble of mismatched furniture Keme had pilfered, and said in his usual I'm-Bobby-so-I-actually-am-honestly-asking-this tone, "Are you going to bring Millie up here?"

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was that.

We found Keme in his new bedroom. He was dressed in black trousers, a white shirt, black suspenders, and a black bow tie. A pair of Chucks (mine, for your information) rounded out the ensemble. He was staring at himself in a cheval mirror, his face dark.

When Bobby and I stepped through the door, he looked over and said, "I look like a wiener."

Boy, if you wanted to hear a nervous laugh. “Uh, Keme, Indira is right downstairs, and I don’t think you can say—”

“You look handsome,” Bobby said. He moved over to Keme and adjusted the bow tie. Then he tugged on the tight knot of Keme’s hair. He did something with his eyebrows that was apparently the way straight boys asked each other questions. (Bobby was an honorary straight boy.) Keme made a disgruntled sound and nodded, and Bobby set to work undoing Keme’s hair and starting over.

For my part, I flopped on the bed.

“Everyone’s going to be wearing a suit,” Keme said into the silence.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” I asked. “We would have gotten you—”

Bobby gave me a surprisingly stern look.

I shut my yapper.

“You didn’t want a suit,” Bobby said.

“But everybody’s going to be wearing one.”

“Millie doesn’t expect you to wear a suit.”

“That’s what you’re supposed to wear to a dance,” Keme said with surprising stubbornness.

“You look very handsome,” Bobby said again.

And then he gave me another look—a look that said, quite clearly, that I needed to

start carrying my weight in this conversation.

“Think about it this way,” I said. “Millie’s already been to a high school dance with an awkward teenage boy dressed in an ill-fitting suit. You know? Because she’s older than you, and she already went to all her high school dances, and she—”

Bobby was staring at me.

Keme was glaring at me.

The enormous horse in the giant oil horse painting was looking at me like it had freshly rediscovered the joy of trampling.

“Uh, what I mean is—”

“Nice save,” Bobby muttered.

“—you aren’t one of those boys. You’re an adult, Keme. You’ve been an adult for a long time. Why would you want to look like the rest of those—” I cast a glance at the door and, just to be safe, lowered my voice. “—wieners?”

That, at least, made a smile flicker across his face, but it went out almost immediately. Bobby finished re-doing Keme’s hair in silence; when he’d finished, it was a low, loose bun—almost messy, in fact, and even though it probably shouldn’t have worked, it made Keme look much more mature as a result. He inspected Keme, frowned at the lingering bruises on his face, and said, “I’m going to get concealer.”

I popped upright. “You have concealer?”

A beat. And then, slowly, “From Indira.”

“Oh. Right.”

Bobby and Keme traded a look that I couldn't read but, I suspected, wasn't exactly flattering, and Bobby left.

Turning back to the mirror, Keme fussed with his bow tie for a few minutes. I watched him. There wasn't anything wrong with the bow tie, but sometimes, a guy just needed to fidget—that was something I understood completely.

After a while, I said, “I have a surprise for you.”

Fingers stilling, he glanced at me in the mirror.

“Bobby and I volunteered to be chaperones at your dance.”

His jaw dropped.

It's not often I get a reaction out of Keme, and it's even less often that it's a big one.

He must have seen the amusement in my face because his expression solidified into a glower, and he stomped across the room and shoved me onto the bed. Then he shoved me a few more times, really getting it out of his system.

Apparently, we were back to normal.

I was still giggling as he returned to the mirror.

When he spoke again, it was a mumble, but I still caught the words. “Foster went back to his parents in Portland.”

“Oh. Oh! That's good, right?”

Keme shrugged, staring at something on the other side of the mirror. “My mom asked me for bus money to go after him.”

“Oh Keme.” I tried about a million different possibilities out in my head. And then I said, “I’m sorry.”

“I gave it to her. It’s fine. She—she’s like a kid sometimes. She doesn’t listen when I try to tell her things. Or she listens, but then she does whatever she wants.” He sounded much, much younger when he said, “She’ll come back. She always comes back.”

I ran my hand over the bedspread.

Keme shook his head at something. Or at nothing. He ran his fingers over his eyebrows.

And then he started to cry.

Where was Bobby, I wanted to know. And how long could it take for Indira to find some g-d concealer?

But since I was fresh out of handsome, earnest, and emotionally intelligent deputies, I slithered off the bed and hugged Keme. At first, he cried harder. I rubbed his back. And somehow, I got him to sit down on the bed with me, but then he seemed to fall apart completely, sobbing into my shoulder. It made sense, in a way. He’d been holding himself together by sheer willpower for the last few days. He’d been through so much. And even though he was a boy who’d learned how to handle himself young, he was still only a boy, and sometimes, you just needed someone to tell you everything was going to be okay.

We sat like that for a while. My arm around him. His face nestled in the crook of my

shoulder. A quiet rhythm between us that settled into the larger rhythm of the ocean. I had read somewhere that the ocean has its own music, made up of incredibly low frequencies—too low for humans to hear. But I thought, maybe, sometimes we could feel it. Right then, I thought I could feel it, whatever it was that was moving between us, the slow flood and ebb of this moment.

I shifted so I could look him in the eye. He only lasted a second before he cut his eyes away, so I waited until they came back. And, because this was Keme we were talking about, when they did, they held a hint of defiance—a kind of de facto combativeness.

“I wish a lot of things had been different about your life, Keme. Because I love you, and because I can’t imagine anyone not loving you, and wanting to take care of you, and making sure you had the best life they could give you. And I know nothing I say can change the past, or make up for it, or give you what you should have had. But I do want you to know that you have a family now. And we love you. All of us. And we’re here for you. And if you need anything—”

“I need two hundred bucks for the dance tickets,” he said, wiping his eyes—which now looked remarkably alert. Even predatory. “And another hundred to take Millie somewhere for dinner.”

“Uh, I meant more in an emotional—”

“And I want to drive the Pilot because Millie has a girl’s car.”

He considered me for a moment, as though trying to decide if he had any more demands, and then—to my complete and utter and total and all-encompassing surprise—he hugged me. And then he kissed me on the cheek.

“Everything all right?” Bobby asked from the doorway.

“Yeah,” Keme said, bouncing up from the bed. “He’s just being a donkey.”

Bobby made a noise that suggested this was not outside the realm of possibility.

I might have been, as Pippi would have put it in one of her books, a little misty-eyed, but I managed to say, “He just extorted three hundred dollars out of me.”

Laughing, Bobby set to work with the concealer.

“Yuk it up,” I told him. “He wants to borrow the Pilot too.”

The best word for Bobby’s expression was startled .

For an honorary straight guy, Bobby had a surprisingly deft hand at concealer, and Keme looked good to go in a few minutes. His eyes weren’t even red, which was totally unfair since I was still intermittently misty-eyed.

We headed downstairs. Voices from the vestibule drifted out to meet us.

“What if he’s a wig thief?” Fox was saying. “But he specializes in dusty wigs that he attaches to his, uh, rump?”

“If you’re talking about my costume,” I said, “I’m not listening, and I’m not going to respond. And Bobby’s going to beat you up.”

Bobby, though, did not look like he was going to beat anyone up—especially not in that Marty McFly getup (have I mentioned the vest?). In fact, at that moment Bobby was whispering something in Keme’s ear that I suspected was some sort of blend of fatherly wisdom, brotherly advice, and a deputy’s reminder that he could and would find you if you decided to horse around in his SUV. Keme’s expression was caught somewhere between annoyed embarrassment and an extreme eagerness to reassure.

“Oh!” Fox said. “Or what if he’s a nightmare—you know, like the mythological beast? Only he’s old and decrepit, and that’s why his tail looks so dusty—”

“For Pete’s sake,” I snapped as we reached them. “My costume is not that hard!”

To judge by the mountain of Almond Joy wrappers, Fox had chosen not to leave any for the rest of us. Indira was reading a book called *XKREKHS: MY ALIEN GRUMP – A SCI-FI ABDUCTION ROMANCE FATED MATES SWAP* (which featured an incredibly well-developed blue torso on it). Last week, it had been *Calvino*.

“Of course not,” Fox said. “It’s obvious you’re—what do you call that bristly thing you use to clean—”

“He’s a dust bunny,” Keme said absently. He was checking himself in the window, using the faint reflection there to fiddle with his bow tie.

The stunned silence that followed wasn’t exactly polite. But when I recovered, I held out a hand toward Keme in a there you go slash finally gesture. I also made a strangled noise that suggested, in general, how frustrating everyone had been.

“You look very cute,” Bobby murmured as he scruffed my bunny ears.

There probably would have been more, except at that moment, the front door opened, and Millie stepped into view.

She’d curled her hair, and she wore makeup that managed to do amazing things while still, well, leaving her looking like Millie. The flared skirt of her champagne-colored mini hit her at mid-thigh, and the best way I could describe her shoes was sparkly. She looked beautiful. Beyond beautiful. She looked like a princess. And when I saw Keme, how his face slackened and his thoughts dribbled out of his ears and he became one giant, goopy boy who finally got to be with the girl he’d been in love

with for years, the pang in my heart was so intense that misty- eyed doesn't even begin to describe it. Bobby noticed, of course, and he slipped an arm around my waist.

(I wasn't the only one, by the way. Indira was mopping her eyes, and Fox was suspiciously silent inside their helmet.)

The dopey look on Keme's face was less cute a few moments later.

"Did he have a stroke?" I murmured.

Bobby gave me a warning squeeze.

"You look beautiful, Millicent," Indira said. "Keme, go grab her corsage from the refrigerator."

Keme still hadn't moved.

"Maybe someone should stick him with a pin," Fox said in their least helpful voice.

Bobby took Keme by the shoulder and steered him toward the kitchen, and I moved over to join Millie and Indira, adding my own compliments. Millie answered in murmurs and broken fragments—I still hadn't heard a complete sentence out of her, let alone an ear-shattering burst of excitement. Then Keme came back, and it turned out Millie had a boutonniere for him, and the two of them fumbled through the process of helping each other with the flowers.

"You look nice," Keme finally managed to say.

"Nice?" Fox said.

Color rushed into Keme's face. "You look beautiful."

"And did anybody notice," I said, "that Keme looks like a total wiener?"

Keme flashed me a look that promised a quick, savage murder as soon as he was back from the dance. Millie laughed. Indira had the air of a woman who was wondering if she should wash my mouth out now or after Keme and Millie left. Fox muttered a despairing, "Dust bunny," under their breath and shook their head.

And then—after I had handed over all the money I had in the world, plus Bobby's spare keys—it was time for Keme and Millie to leave. We all exchanged hugs. As I hugged Millie, I said, "You're gorgeous," and then, loud enough for Keme to hear, "You can do better."

Keme scowled.

Millie laughed, but it sounded like she might cry.

When I found myself hugging Keme goodbye, I was surprised when his arms tightened around me, pulling me close. And I was even more surprised when he whispered, "Thank you." And then, in a broken little voice, "I love you." I was less surprised when I felt something sharp jab me under the ribs, and he added, "If you ever tell anyone I said that, I'll kill you."

If you've never dispatched a budding teenage psychopath to a high school dance, let me tell you: it's a real mixed bag.

The old folks watched from the door as Keme helped Millie into the Pilot, and then he walked around and got in the SUV. They went down the drive, their headlights floating in the dark. And then they were gone.

“I hope they have a good time,” Indira said.

“I hope they bring some of my money back,” I said.

“They’ll have a great time,” Bobby said. He ignored my comment about the money, but he added, “I hope they make good choices.”

“I hope they don’t wreck your car,” I said.

The expression on his face suggested he wasn’t grateful for me opening my trap.

“I hope someone spikes the punch,” Fox said. “And they all get detention and decide to play pranks on the dean. Oh! And that there’s a werewolf that dances on top of a van.”

“That’s a lot of different movies,” I said.

And in an unbelievably haughty voice, Fox said, “I am aware.”

A bit later, the doorbell rang, and it was time for more trick-or-treaters. Supplies were running low, so Bobby and I went to the kitchen to restock. I had the important responsibility of pre-sorting the candy, to make sure we didn’t miss out on any of the good stuff, and I was diligently weeding out the plain M&M’s (and looking for any stray Butterfingers) when I realized Bobby was staring at me.

“They’re plain chocolate,” I said, “and I know they melt in your mouth, not in your hand, but we have to prioritize, Bobby: nougat, caramel, heck, even crisped rice—”

“You’re going to be such a good dad.”

It was the way he said it as much as the words themselves, as though the fact had

only now clicked. As though it were something wonderful. He was leaning against the counter, arms folded, the earthy bronze of his eyes catching the light. In the distance, the excited screams of children suggested another round of trick-or-treaters at the front door. The little packet of M&M's rustled under my hand.

I cleared my throat and tossed it into the for-trick-or-treaters pile. "Yeah, well. I don't know about that. I mean, my God, Bobby, you've met my parents."

"You are. I just wanted you to know. If you want to be a dad, you're going to be a great one. I thought you should know that."

And what in the world was I supposed to say to that?

"Thanks, I guess," was apparently the extent of my conversational aptitude at that. As I resumed my search of the candy, I said, "Anyway, Keme's definitely not my kid. He's way too strong, for one thing—it's a little freaky, actually. And he'd probably eviscerate me during my next nap if he thought I was trying to claim him. He's more of a—what's the word for someone who's good at video games, but sometimes he lets you win, and you have to take care of him but you can't let him know you're taking care of him, and one time you were playing red hands, and he slapped you, like, really hard, but you didn't cry even if he says you did, and for some reason everyone thinks he's your big brother?"

Bobby, as usual, knew what I was thinking. He held up a Butterfinger, gave me that goofy grin, and flipped it to me. When I caught it, it made his smile get even bigger for some reason. And I was smiling too, even though I wasn't sure why. And yes, gosh darn it, I was misty-eyed again. And in what was, doubtless, a moment of weakness, I thought maybe I'd save the Butterfinger for Keme.

"That," Bobby said, and he kissed my cheek and grabbed the bowl of candy and steered me toward the front of the house, "is called a friend."

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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 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 concoction 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, Cassandra 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. Cassandra 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 Cassandra 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 Kassandra 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 spear-fishermen 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 get 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?” Kassandra said.

Angeline stared at Millie, the look full of venom. “At least Mary’s boyfriend could talk. What’s he 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.”

“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 un popular. 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, Kassandra 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," Kassandra 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.”

“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?” Kassandra 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.”

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.

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 know how you 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 loves 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 once seen in Cassandra’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."