



Owen: Meeting Sang #9 (The Academy Ghost Bird)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: The Academy: Ghost Bird series in a different look at the very beginning. Read Introductions with a whole new perspective—the boys.

Mr. Blackbourne had never seen his team in such disarray as of this past week. Incomplete tasks. Willing to give up Academy jobs and favors they desperately needed. Not only were the other members of his Academy team completely distracted, they were keeping secrets.

Among a team like theirs, secrets were unacceptable.

And when Dr. Green finally introduced him to the core of their distraction, a young woman with haunted green eyes

Devastatingly beautiful. Extraordinarily kind.

And something terribly wrong that no one wanted to name, but it felt all too familiar.

Within moments of meeting Sang, priorities were already shifting, for the team, for himself. Walking out on jobs. Making room for her in their already busy schedules.

Mr. Blackbourne should have known their fates were sealed the moment Miss Sorenson walked in— including his own.

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OWEN

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Mr. Blackbourne's arrival in the main office of Ashley Water's High School was met with perplexed expressions from staff who hadn't been at prior meetings when he'd been "hired." The administration office staff looked at him, paused, blinked, and assessed in pure silence. When Mr. Blackbourne didn't falter as he found his own way to the right hall, headed all the way to the end and opened the office door with confidence, no one questioned why.

Not to his face, at least.

Somehow, he could sense the whispers behind him more than he could actually hear any.

Who was he?

What was he doing here?

Some returning senior who was there to help out for registration day? Too young to be anything else.

There was a high probability someone would come to his new office to check in on him. He anticipated this, and waited, positioning his messenger bag underneath his desk, taking a moment to analyze the arrangement of desks Dr. Green had left.

Facing each other.

He would do that. Dr. Green likely didn't wish to get caught when he relaxed, watching cat videos and folding origami in idleness.

Mr. Blackbourne never said anything about this, except when Dr. Green was fully capable of doing something more productive on more pressing issues. But Mr. Blackbourne understood people needed a period of rest, to let the mind heal itself, sorting synapses, locking appropriate things into long term memory and releasing the unnecessary things.

Mr. Blackbourne assessed the layout. He made minor adjustments, sliding the desks a more comfortable distance from each other that wouldn't cause them to shift and bump when opening and closing drawers. He rearranged his own desk in a way that suited him, with appropriate accoutrements on top and less necessary things into the drawers.

The school handbook meant for employees, he tucked neatly into the bottom drawer, likely never to be seen again. He knew the contents, and didn't like most of it. Leftover rules and regulations from a bygone era that very much needed updating.

Just as he was testing the pens on a spare page of paper to ensure the ones available all had working ink, there was a gentle knock at the door. It was so light that Mr. Blackbourne wasn't totally sure someone wasn't knocking on a door nearby.

Mr. Blackbourne readied himself. "Come in," he said with a voice he used with some authority.

There was a short pause, followed by the door opening.

A middle-aged woman stood in the doorway. Her dark hair was pulled back into a

severe bun. The black dress she wore with an orange flower print shifted a little as she stepped into the room. She gazed around, noting the desk arrangement.

Mr. Blackbourne rose from his chair, standing to address her with respect. “May I help you?” he asked in a calm, composed tone.

The woman refocused on him with a flicker of discomfort. Understandable. He was new.

Mr. Blackbourne dressed more mature at times, and would do so for the immediate year following, for the sake of the mission at hand. For younger people, this fooled them into believing he was more...in charge, and older than he really was.

Actual mature people, however, were not fooled as easily. The youthful look of Mr. Blackbourne's face in their eyes often said 'lacks experience and authority.'

“Sorry to disturb you,” she said in a neutral tone. “I was looking for Mrs. Keats. This is her office...” She trailed off as if trying to articulate that he wasn’t supposed to be in here.

Mr. Blackbourne summoned up what smile he could to try to disarm her. He could tell that the woman was not here to see Mrs. Keats. “My apologies, Ms...” He trailed off and paused to give her time to fill in the open question.

She hesitated, clearly not expecting proper manners from someone much younger. “Ms. Walter.”

Mr. Blackbourne nodded gently. “Ms. Walter. I believe Mrs. Keats was let go early this summer.”

Ms. Walter eyebrows raised nearly to her hairline. “W...what?”

"I don't recall the details," he said gently, which was a mild half-truth. She was let go by Principal Hendricks, although the full reason was never discovered, but it was Mrs. Keats who became the 'whistleblower' that alerted the Academy about what was happening with the school, which raised a call to action. "However, I am a new supervisor sent by the school board to analyze the upcoming school year," he confessed, his voice steady and confident. "I understand that my arrival may have caught some staff members off guard, but rest assured, I am here to support and contribute to the success of Ashley Waters High School."

Ms. Walter raised an eyebrow, suspicion still evident in her gaze. "We haven't been informed of any supervisor being assigned," she replied, her tone cautious. "And as far as I know, our budget for this year is already stretched thin. I can't imagine how we would have the resources to accommodate another staff member."

Mr. Blackbourne leaned back in his chair, a calm smile playing on his lips. This was likely the excuse from Principal Hendricks for why they couldn't have raises for several years in a row. "Of course," he said, his voice almost conspiratorial. "I understand your concerns. Ashley Waters has faced its fair share of challenges – overcrowding, understaffing, low budget – but my salary is low on the list. Your low funding is part of my work here and will be...corrected."

Her eyes widened slightly, her curiosity now mingling with surprise. "I see," she replied cautiously, her gaze flickering around the room as if searching for any hints or clues as to his meaning, maybe particularly worried she'd be asked to cut her salary.

Again.

Or worse, being let go entirely, like Mrs. Keats. Mr. Blackbourne could practically see the gears turning in her mind as she was debating if she should play nice to keep her job or to warn everyone and possibly make enemies with him to make his job more difficult.

"You have every right to be concerned, Ms. Walter," Mr. Blackbourne continued, his tone sympathetic. "But I assure you, my primary objective is not to cut corners or make more demands on an already strained budget. Rather, I am here to identify areas where we can optimize our resources and find creative solutions to the challenges we face. And where appropriate, allocate additional resources."

The woman's eyes flickered with relief, but followed up with skepticism. He knew it was all too easy for her to dismiss his promises as yet another empty gesture. There was no more budget for resources, as far as she was aware.

But something about the way she studied him made Mr. Blackbourne want to prove himself to her. As she took in the office, noting the meticulously organized desk and layout of the room, he felt a sense of satisfaction. He and Dr. Green did not just come in and accept the way things were, not even in the mundane arrangement of office furniture.

"I appreciate your reassurance," she said carefully.

Mr. Blackbourne nodded politely at Ms. Walter. "Of course. I understand this is an unexpected change. Please feel free to check in with me if you have any other questions or concerns. My goal is transparency and open communication."

Ms. Walter pursed her lips, still seemingly unconvinced but willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. "Very well. I'll leave you to get settled then." She turned to leave but paused in the doorway. "Oh, and good luck with registration day. I remember my first one being utter chaos." A faint smile played on her lips.

"Thank you, I appreciate it," Mr. Blackbourne replied, mirroring her expression. As Ms. Walter left and closed the door behind her, Mr. Blackbourne leaned back in his chair with a soft sigh. One introduction down, many more to come. But at least she seemed less suspicious now. Skeptical still, but no longer looking at him as if he was

an imposter.

The initial introduction to staff would be the nicest role he would play this year. It wasn't his job to make friends. He would play the hard case. Dr. Green would play the sympathetic ear. It was all part of the plan for their purpose. Mr. Blackbourne pushed. Dr. Green consoled, and then peppered them with asking questions, hoping for answers teachers and staff otherwise might not have divulged.

He guessed Ms. Walter would be back in the central office with other assistants, and would alert them all, talk about him, and the school board. One of those staff members might call a friend who is on the school board to confirm who Mr. Blackbourne and Dr. Green were. The school board knew they were here, although they weren't totally aware of why. Only that Mr. Blackbourne and Dr. Green were brought in from higher up the chain.

Maybe this friend would also suggest the staff be on their best behavior.

As they should.

It had all been arranged by the Academy. Advise everyone at the school of outsiders. Keep them on their toes.

And see who did not comply.

Those people would join the top of the list of suspects.

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Mr. Blackbourne was about to start some preparations for registration day—in which Dr. Green should have been present—when he received a message from Dr. Green declaring he had to go rescue Luke Taylor.

And then, about a half hour later, a text message alert came to Mr. Blackbourne's cell phone. He glanced at it on his desk.

Dr. Green: Luke's nose isn't broken but the computers are missing. Also, it sounds like they lost track of the young man. We still don't have a visual of his face.

Mr. Blackbourne allowed himself to let out a soft sigh at the news. Two suspicious teenagers spending time at a run down motel, with completely different operations and possibly different agendas. He'd spent hours last night with North Taylor examining camera footage, only to be highly disappointed. The girl, who could be seen in the cameras clearly, seemed to always angle herself out of view when she stole wallets. There wasn't evidence that she had done so, except for North being on the ground when she'd done it.

And then the young man with computers doing who knew what, but it was enough that he'd hide the computers and make a run for it when confronted, even resorting to violence.

Were they even connected in any way? Maybe they had misunderstood the entire operation. A motel with teenagers living out of it would have been interesting to the Academy in general and would likely be put on a project list at minimum. One of them was of interest for potential recruitment perhaps. However, which teenager were they supposed to be looking at? And were there more?

This matter with the computer however, and as Luke had been physically attacked over it, made the possibility of the teenager with the computers an unlikely candidate. Resorting to violence right away when unprovoked was not good form.

It was very likely recruitment operations would cease for him. And possibly for the girl thief. Though they didn't even have proof she did it consistently. North was the only firm victim. So perhaps it was an anomaly. Though both would likely get looked at for a potential Academy project. Living in a run down motel wasn't ideal for anyone, but teenagers especially... It was an Academy mission to give young people a boost, giving them a good opportunity for the future to manage themselves.

However, it was looking like even that might be a challenge at this point. They'd have to get them off the criminal path, if that was possible.

What a day.

Mr. Blackbourne alerted Dr. Green and the others it was time to return to the school for registration day for the moment. As much as he wanted to go looking for the computers and figure out the puzzle that was going on at this motel, they had to be present here at Ashley Waters High School.

The letters to Kota and the others had been inconvenient. A cryptic, old way of asking members on teams to investigate. Paper trails were usually unwelcome in recent years. It was evidence, even if they were ambiguous letters.

And none were sent to Mr. Blackbourne. They had subverted the team lead from the start.

There was usually a reason for such things. It was unclear why. What bothered Mr. Blackbourne was that Dr. Roberts, who usually had his hand in everything, didn't even know about the letters until he had brought it to him. And even then, Dr.

Roberts insisted on being given little information. “They gave those letters specifically to Dakota Lee and the others, and not certain other members, including yourself. There had to be a reason.”

“Aren’t we supposed to help them if they ask?” Mr. Blackbourne had asked.

“I’m not sure you should,” Dr. Roberts had said.

It had been too late, of course. Mr. Blackbourne had already been to the motel and had helped North, who hadn’t gotten a letter either, to go to the mall and look at footage after North’s fake wallet had been stolen.

And now... it was all getting out of hand. And with little reason to go further unless someone told them what was going on.

Mr. Blackbourne took out a notebook, writing a few notes in a cryptic way that he understood but unlikely anyone else would understand. To others, it appeared to be a coded shopping list for groceries.

One, find the source for the letters. Two, go back to the motel as soon as they could and find out where the computers had gone, if possible.

And to get the boy they had chased earlier to run again. He wanted to know where he ran off to.

Where did a kid who worked at a computer doing suspicious things run to for safety?

And then they would back out. He had a few team members left that hadn’t been caught, so it was likely they had one or two more chances to wrap up the investigation. North, Luke and others were compromised. Unless there was some grand reason they should continue, they had a bigger job to focus on. Ashley Waters

High School had bigger problems than a girl thief and a boy...doing who knew what on a computer in a motel. If he had to be strict about their priorities and bring focus to the group, he would have to insist on the high school job first. The entire community was depending on their success.

He wasn't even sure they should return, however, he wanted to know what was on the computer that whoever it was resorted to violence to prevent anyone looking at it.

But should he? Dr. Roberts had suggested there was probably a reason Mr. Blackbourne wasn't recruited, and why Dr. Roberts insisted on knowing very little about what was really going on. They weren't supposed to know.

When there was another knock at the door, Mr. Blackbourne tensed. Another teacher? The installation of a camera just outside the door needed to be completed soon.

Kota Lee appeared with neatly combed brown hair, and astute, green eyes behind black-rimmed glasses. His eyes sparked with curiosity when he saw Mr. Blackbourne.

Speaking of more important things, Mr. Blackbourne thought to himself. He needed to get to the bottom of whatever had Kota so distracted lately.

"Mr. Lee," Mr. Blackbourne greeted. He kept his face and tone neutral for the moment.

Kota shifted his weight awkwardly as he entered the office.

"Hey," Mr. Lee said, trying to sound casual. "I just realized this morning I never got out to Dr. Green's place with overnight bags for everyone. I guess that's why you stopped by this morning? My mom said you'd been there."

Mr. Blackbourne raised an eyebrow. "We did stop by," he said. "It was quite the surprise to be at Dr. Green's condo and to find most everything is...exactly where we had left it days before. Almost as if no one had been there at all."

Kota winced, likely knowing there was no point trying to dance around it. "To be honest...I don't even know how we... How I forgot," he admitted. "But it won't happen again. Now that we're likely backing off of the...motel job."

Mr. Blackbourne studied him for a moment. "Right. The motel job. Actually, I need your help with that."

Kota's face tensed. "Do you need me to call Dr. Roberts? Or someone else? To let them know that we have to stop where we are and let someone else handle it?"

Very eager to drop the investigation? That wasn't like him. Usually Kota loved puzzles, and the motel job had been a very interesting one. "No, actually when we are not needed here, I'd like for you to go back with me to the motel. There are a few things I'd like to do before we alert anyone else."

Kota blinked and didn't speak for a moment, a tense, ongoing moment that Mr. Blackbourne found telling.

He was filing away every possible reason to turn him down.

Interesting.

Kota turned a little, touching the corner of his glasses. "Will it take long?"

Mr. Blackbourne suppressed a smile. If Kota wouldn't tell him why he wanted some extra time to work on something, Mr. Blackbourne would give him a few more tasks, forcing Kota to likely confess some clue. "Probably. And also, tomorrow we'll need

you and likely a couple of others to actually head to Dr. Green's condo and help him sort his life out. I expect he'll need the extra hand. And if you don't mind, I'd like for you personally to..."

Kota's face twitched, growing tighter at the eyes and the lips as Mr. Blackbourne rattled off more things. "Right," he said once Mr. Blackbourne had finished. "Well, let me look at the schedule and talk to the others. I might need to keep Victor and Gabriel on our side of town if we'll be this busy."

"I'm sure you can make arrangements," Mr. Blackbourne said with a confident sounding voice. However, what he was confident about was that at some point Kota would have to push back, asking to drop something. And then Mr. Blackbourne would ask why.

And Mr. Blackbourne expected an answer. A solid one.

However for now, Mr. Blackbourne went back to his notebook, indicating he was finished unless Kota had more to talk to him about.

Kota backed up a step and then turned toward the door.

"How is your mother doing, by the way?" Mr. Blackbourne asked. "I noticed she was baking this morning. She usually doesn't do that on a work day."

Kota paused with the door open. "I... I don't actually know," he said quietly. "Maybe for the other nurses? She's been sent to her old hospital for a few weeks. They've been needing help. So it's possible she's baking to make friends." With that, he closed the door behind himself. His footsteps could be heard fading down the hallway.

Mr. Blackbourne sat up then, focusing on the door. He held the pen he had been using between his fingers. Kota came up with his own conclusion on the spot, but it was

said with guesswork, not with having asked her, which he usually did. He'd always been very careful around his mother, especially after what happened with his father.

Interesting indeed.

When Mr. Blackbourne and Dr. Green had been at the Lee household that morning and had spotted the state of Kota's room, he'd known something was wrong.

There was only one reason Kota would use binoculars to look in on new neighbors, the only reason he'd have been up all night, forgetting tasks, wanting to get out of Academy jobs. There was something... likely someone else... that he felt needed most of his attention right now.

It was someone in the gray house across the street from Kota's. One of the two girls, or both of them perhaps.

Mr. Blackbourne could only hope Kota would be honest with him about what was happening. There was a good reason why Kota wasn't telling him, so Mr. Blackbourne was trying to trust him, but... it bothered him immensely that Kota wasn't even giving him a hint.

There was something Kota didn't want Mr. Blackbourne involved in, and he needed to figure out what that was.

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When Dr. Green and the others on his team finally arrived at Ashley Waters High School, it was time to focus.

As students started arriving, Mr. Blackbourne spent time organizing tables, arranging students into appropriate lines, and then retreated when everyone seemed to flow naturally to where they were supposed to go. He advised most teachers to do the same and only come out when needed.

A few didn't listen, but clustering the hallways with additional bodies led to confusion and chaos. It was better to keep it simple.

Dr. Green remained out there in the group, but at a distance from the cluster of students and parents. Mr. Blackbourne left him alone for the moment. He didn't mind he was on the ground, but it meant students would go up to him with their numerous questions. At some point he hoped Dr. Green would be smart enough to observe from the second-floor balcony above instead, out of range but still observant. But as it was, Dr. Green looked exhausted and likely wouldn't think at all.

The morning went on. Parents and students walked the halls, mostly the freshmen class trying to get the layout and curious parents walking the main corridor, upstairs and through the cafeteria of the main building. He positioned certain teachers in different hallways to ensure there wasn't any deliberate destruction of school property while registration was going on.

Mr. Blackbourne wanted to take the opportunity to watch how teachers and other staff operated. He felt he could observe how many staff members actually engaged with students and those that held back dispassionately and those who even hindered

things.

Inside the confines of his office, Mr. Blackbourne's gaze was glued to the monochrome windows on his computer that displayed a bird's eye view of the school corridors. Each monitor showed different areas, teachers and students flickering across them like shadows in a puppet show. He studied the scenes playing out before him with a discerning eye, his hand methodically jotting down coded observations in a notepad.

In the silence of his office, surrounded by flickering screens and the incessant scratching of his pen, Mr. Blackbourne was not about to let such an opportunity go by without figuring out a way to assist those teachers who were engaging, and to possibly replace the ones that were not. He might not be able to do anything about it this year, but next year... things would be different.

He kept a particular eye on the principal and vice principal, and anyone they talked to.

His ultimate suspects for the year. Anyone they engaged with regularly would be their focus.

Suddenly there was a knock. Another assistant at the front office? A teacher looking for more help?

"Come in," Mr. Blackbourne said, closing the security camera windows. Observation would be very difficult if he kept getting interrupted.

A young man appeared, wearing glasses, and he blinked a few more times than needed, a timid movement. He was tall, but thin, with a lopsided half smile, half unsure.

The other half, however, held some secret. This forced Mr. Blackbourne to study him a moment longer.

Two cell phones were in his pockets, the corner of one was sticking out his front right pocket, the corner with the camera lenses facing out. The other an obvious bulge in his back pocket, a bigger cell phone than his pocket allowed for. His other front pocket had a slim wallet.

Two cell phones. One pointing the camera out.

How odd. He intended to film this conversation. He clearly meant to do so in secret, but this was far too obvious for Mr. Blackbourne.

And why was he back here?

Mr. Blackbourne tilted his head. "Can I help you?" he said in an even tone.

"I was told you might be able to...fix my schedule?"

Mr. Blackbourne breathed in sharply, though he tried not to make it obvious to him. Dr. Green likely sent him. He was out on the floor helping people navigate. He navigated a student here.

He held back an eyeroll. It wasn't intended for this student, who likely only needed assistance.

The camera, however, gave him pause, needing to calculate how to handle this. Why would a student want to film this interaction?

Mr. Blackbourne held out his hand. "May I?" he said, indicating the paper in his hands.

The young man passed it over. Mr. Blackbourne noted the name: Wil Winchester.

He read the suggested marked classes. Advanced classes in general, except for two. A gym class and a health class.

Wil suddenly burst with explanation, "There's a special computer science class that I was supposed to take this year. And I already had gym and health class. But they claimed the computer class was full so they just threw me into whatever was available. The class being full is not the case. There's limited entry needing special permission. The teacher isn't here to correct the situation."

"I see," Mr. Blackbourne said, and then kept the page and turned to his computer. He needed to stall this young man for a moment. "Let me see what I can do."

These days, with how some teachers treated students, he didn't fault this student for being overly cautious. If there were issues, he could refer to a recording later. Maybe he simply had been at this school for too long not to take the extra step. If Mr. Blackbourne lied to him for some reason and he caught it on camera, then what would he do?

Mr. Blackbourne admired him for making the effort, but how he might follow through with the video is what he struggled with. He also wanted to know why he had two phones. That was unusual.

So Mr. Blackbourne utilized the computer. He accessed the upcoming class schedule. When he found computer science classes, he showed Mr. Winchester the options. "Which one are you requesting?"

The young man approached, seeming curious that he'd been allowed to select one.

Mr. Blackbourne wouldn't hold anyone back from classes they wished to have. Not in

this school. Every opportunity would be provided. Even if he had to drag in more teachers or equipment himself.

Mr. Winchester pointed to the one he wished to have. "Mr. Reynold."

Mr. Blackbourne checked the schedule again, noting the likely conflicts. "Are you looking to graduate—"

"Yesterday, if I can help it," he said.

Smart, and he knew it. A little arrogant about it as well. He probably didn't need to be here anymore. Age and unfortunate circumstances holding him back, most likely. Dressed clean, but the clothes were thin, and so were his shoes. He was thin himself, like he'd skipped meals frequently. There was a gauntness to his cheeks.

Mr. Blackbourne's gut feeling told him this Wil Winchester might have been Academy material at one point, but he was a bit bitter. Over cautious. Was he self-serving or outward serving? He'd need a little adjustment to be considered. However, he was a bit older than they usually liked to start training.

He made a mental note.

Mr. Blackbourne considered Mr. Winchester's schedule again. "Are you sure you want this class?" He pointed to the AP Chemistry class on his list.

"It's a requirement," Mr. Winchester said.

Mr. Blackbourne nodded. "If I handed you a test next week, the normal finals for the class, would you be able to pass it? I could then give you the credit, and you could take the class you want. There's a conflict in the schedule but this might be the best way to solve the problem."

This seemed to catch the young man by surprise. "You can do that?"

"You can do it for any of the classes here," he said. He motioned to the list. "Pass any class's final exams, your choice, and you can skip to get different ones. Or graduate early, if you prefer. I can create a special arrangement."

This put Mr. Blackbourne in a good position. He'd direct the tests himself. He'd request his cell phones to hold during his testing, as wouldn't be a surprise. He'd be able to get some details about the young man he wouldn't be able to otherwise.

"I don't know if I can skip the year at this point," he said. "I'm not...ready."

He assumed he meant it might be too late to register for college classes, among other excuses. "Use the extra time to get ready," Mr. Blackbourne said. "Get a part time job for extra income, take uncredited college classes, take some online courses here. It's your life, your choice."

Mr. Blackbourne felt himself pushing the boundaries a bit, turning school career counselor instead of just assisting with the schedule.

He couldn't help himself. He hated arbitrary rules.

Mr. Winchester breathed in sharply and expelled it through his lips, leaning forward to gaze at the class list again. He pointed to three, all advanced AP classes. "I'll take the stupid health test, too, if they need it. Just don't ask me to run a mile again for another gym credit."

"Noted," Mr. Blackbourne said. "But a little advice, learn to run a better mile, or do other exercise if you prefer, and you'll keep your brain working longer."

Mr. Winchester blinked a bit, his head tilting, clearly thinking of what he was saying.

It's something the smart ones, especially when they are young, often forgot about. One has to keep the body in tune to keep the brain functioning well on mental tasks, rather than expending effort on self-preservation.

With quick, decisive movements, Mr. Blackbourne edited the classes, accommodating Mr. Winchester's requests. As he did so, he couldn't help but wonder if he was overstepping his boundaries. Was he being too lenient, too eager to help this enigmatic student?

Once the changes were made, Mr. Winchester's expression shifted from uncertainty to a glimmer of excitement, his earlier apprehension evaporating. "Thanks," he said.

"Don't mention it," Mr. Blackbourne said. "Just be ready for those tests or we'll have to change it again."

"I'll pass them," he said, and he took his changed schedule and walked out of the office.

Mr. Blackbourne sat back, considering what just happened.

He then opened up Mr. Winchester's file in the student records.

Vaccination records, school photos, the occasional library fine that was quickly corrected. All ordinary.

The classes were always high level for his grade. Wil Winchester could have graduated early if the school hadn't forced him into following their class structures for four years of classes.

Butts in chairs. That's how schools earned money. The more students, the more funding there is everywhere.

Mr. Blackbourne leaned forward, noting the classes Mr. Winchester had taken, and other students included in them.

In fact, several students that were smart, that could have moved on to college early, were kept at Ashley Waters. No one was permitted to graduate without at least four years.

Some with five or six, if they didn't pass certain classes. And it seemed there was a high number of them that did that, too.

Mr. Blackbourne made several mental notes. Mr. Winchester had put him on track to perhaps the tip of the iceberg of what was wrong at Ashely Waters High School. Mr. Blackbourne had known the school was overpopulated. Graduating students and work study programs were good ways to control that population. And yet, there were school set rules above and beyond state regulations on class requirements to graduate that practically made it impossible to do so.

Purposefully overpopulated.

Purposefully out of control.

Mr. Blackbourne smirked to himself. He had an entire year to unravel the problems here. It was just starting to get interesting.

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After Wil Winchester left his office, Mr. Blackbourne was trying to focus on his observations like he was supposed to be, but his mind was working to reorganize his priority list. Now, even he was starting to consider the motel job too much for the team. Wil Winchester was likely not the only student who needed a little extra assistance circumventing school rules to graduate or getting out of trouble. This school was notorious for being...terrible.

And again, right when he was in the middle of everything, there was a knock at the door.

Mr. Blackbourne readied himself, sure it was either Ms. Walter again, or another office assistant with questions. Or perhaps another student with a conflicting schedule that Dr. Green sent his direction.

Instead, Dr. Green appeared, and the very first thing was mouth the word 'gentle' to him.

And he signed something in the air, but Mr. Blackbourne didn't catch it, because coming in behind him was a strikingly beautiful young woman.

Another assistant? It was the only thing that made sense in Mr. Blackbourne's mind. She was dressed like someone who worked here, rather than one of the students, who seemed to prefer to dress more casually. Her age was hard to determine, but she appeared his own age. That by no means meant he judged her.

He faced the same hurdle, people assuming he was inexperienced.

Dr. Green's reasoning for bringing her back here himself was yet to be determined. He had a feeling it was befriending, or perhaps a little more than that. Dr. Green was known to flirt. Mr. Blackbourne had hoped he'd resist for at least a few weeks to give them a chance to evaluate staff without some bias settling in.

Despite Dr. Green's warning to be gentle, he found himself a little irritated at yet another surprise. He could at least sent him a text of warning when he did such things. "Dr. Green," he said sharply. "You don't have to knock. This is your office, too, now." He was a bit tired of getting interrupted continually due to Dr. Green's shenanigans, of which he was sure this was one of.

"Sorry," Dr. Green said, smiling ridiculously and taking a seat at the second desk.

The office chair creaked, and Mr. Blackbourne felt his teeth clench. He made a mental note to ask North about oiling it. He didn't want to have to hear that sound again.

Dr. Green continued, "Old habit when I see a shut door. Never want to surprise anyone. Besides, the offices here are so small. If anyone were standing behind the door, I'd hit them."

It was frustrating dealing with Dr. Green. Often missing the point, usually on purpose, even if Dr. Green might have been correct on occasion.

Mr. Blackbourne frowned a little and then turned to the young woman, who was standing aside, appearing lost. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, this is Miss Sang Sorenson." Dr. Green raised a hand toward the young woman and then gestured casually to Mr. Blackbourne for her sake. "Miss Sang, this is Mr. Blackbourne."

“Hello,” she said softly, and dipped her head politely.

A polite introduction. This had to be some teacher or assistant and Dr. Green was already bringing them around for who knew what reason. A promised raise. A promotion. A date.

Mr. Blackbourne scanned her again, trying to discern Dr. Green’s reason for bringing her back here.

Pretty. Strikingly so. There was a certain spark to her green eyes, and the delicate curve of her jawline. She could get the attention of anyone. It was an effortless prettiness, without makeup and with modest clothes. Her hair being up away from her face... the color of her hair. How pretty it was.

She seemed polite, waiting quietly like she was.

She lowered her gaze demurely, and he hated that. He wanted to lift her chin, to get her to look up. To look into her eyes again.

A healing scrape on her arm. That was suspicious, but there could be a million reasons for injuries.

It was all he could determine of her.

Of course there was some look in her eyes. It was hard to determine what it was. Fear? It's possible given that she was with two people she didn't know at all. And among staff like the principal, or like Ms. Walter, it was wise of her to be cautious with new faces.

Mr. Blackbourne looked at Dr. Green. It was his face that told him more than just looking at her.

He was giddy. There was a bunching to his cheeks when he smiled, and there was a glint in his eyes.

He liked her. Smitten.

He'd seen this before.

Dr. Green would date her if he could.

Mr. Blackbourne held back a scolding look that he desperately wanted to direct at him. Dr. Green was supposed to be monitoring and now he was here being an interruption. "That's wonderful. Now why are you here?"

"I am assisting her with getting registered," Dr. Green said. He reached for the paper in her hands. "Shall I help you?"

This was a student? He wouldn't have thought her a student from...everything. From the way she was dressed to the way she behaved. Polite, patient... Besides the point. He'd already had Wil Winchester find his way back here, and he already had that one to deal with later. Now here was another one?

And he brought her back alone with two male teachers and closed the door.

Was he insane?

"She should be outside with the other students," warned Mr. Blackbourne. This was getting ridiculous. School hadn't even started yet and what classes students got wasn't really what they were there for. If they got too involved in the daily affairs of students, there was no way they'd be able to focus on the larger job at hand.

And he wasn't about to let Dr. Green go down for flirting with a student before

classes even started. He swung his eyes at her. “Couldn’t you wait in line?”

“She’s perfectly capable of doing so,” Dr. Green said, shaking his computer mouse to warm up the sleeping monitor. “But she had a run in with Mr. McCoy. I didn’t want a good student to be scared away because of him.”

“Hm,” Mr. Blackbourne chuffed. He had met Mr. McCoy of course. If Mr. Blackbourne wanted to be frank, he’d use the word ‘slimy’ to describe him. He agreed with the sentiment, so he didn’t have much to say.

“I hope I’m not disturbing you,” she said.

He wasn’t going to get involved if Dr. Green wanted to change her schedule or manage this situation out of the scrutiny of Mr. McCoy. If Dr. Green wanted to bring students back for schedule changes all day, that was his problem. Mr. Blackbourne said nothing but turned away, rifling through paperwork, but keeping the young woman in his peripheral view.

There was just something about her. He’d been so flustered with Dr. Green and this surprise of her arrival that he hadn’t quite noticed, but now it was bothering him. He couldn’t put his finger on it.

“What have we here?” Dr. Green looked over the paper in his hand. “Now, I can’t understand this. Why are all these classes crossed out?”

“Well,” she said, fiddling with one of the buttons on her blouse. “When I first filled it out, I picked classes that I didn’t realize were reserved for upperclassmen. And then the second set, some were crossed out because the counselor said I couldn’t have more than two AP classes.”

Dr. Green made a face, looking ridiculous. “How awful. Does she assume you

couldn't do it?"

There was a gentle shrug of her shoulders. "She just kept saying I wasn't allowed."

That was a flat out lie, Mr. Blackbourne thought. He'd just spoken with Wil Winchester, who had nearly all AP classes. Why was she being told she could only have two? Clearly there was some miscommunication.

Or different standards for different grade levels? Or for girls? Or... who knew the reasons. The rules were designed to keep students in school for longer, after all. And now he realized maybe some administrative teachers had different understanding of what was permitted. It was ridiculous.

"Why have the classes up if you aren't going to let students in them? I tell you, what's wrong with this school?" Dr. Green turned back to her, a look that Mr. Blackbourne recognized as Dr. Green getting riled up over triviality. "What were your original choices?"

She opened a notebook she had with her, removing the paper inside. "I couldn't take Japanese, so I switched to this."

From Mr. Blackbourne's position, he could see the writing clearly. The writing on her paper was very, very familiar to him.

Dr. Green sensitively asked, "Did you write this?" He pointed at the familiar handwriting.

She shook her head, seeming confused by the question.

He urged her, "Who did?"

She blushed, and hesitated a moment but then said, “Kota. A friend of mine.”

Dr. Green's eyebrows shot up.

Mr. Blackbourne picked his head up instantly, nearly uttering a gasp out loud but he contained himself.

All the pieces from the last week finally fell into place.

“Do you know Kota Lee?” Mr. Blackbourne asked, just to be absolutely sure, but he found it unlikely anyone else had that name.

She tilted her head gently one direction as she considered the question. “Dark brown hair? Glasses?”

It was enough. Mr. Blackbourne sucked in a breath and his gaze fell on Dr. Green.

Her. She was why Kota, and likely the others, were not completing tasks. This was why they were happy to let go of the other assignment, why Mr. Blackbourne had to basically force them to focus and do the best they could at other tasks. North had approached him to evaluate their assignments, something that usually Kota did as family lead for the team. It was unlike them. He had supposed that they weren't able to guesstimate how busy the school job would be so they turned to him for answers. Early job anxiety, double checking schedules.

Kota had seemed reluctant to add to his schedule, and the others as well. He only ever did that if he was trying to solve a puzzle of some sort that was more interesting. Or dire.

She was the puzzle. He was sure. But why?

Dr. Green answered him, silently. It was just a minor shift in the eyebrows but he knew.

Something was wrong here. Something they were familiar with. And the other members of their Academy team felt compelled to help.

It was the only answer.

But why had they not told them?

Because they didn't know what it was yet.

Dr. Green wrote something on the registration paper. “Do you think you could handle this?”

She looked over the options, and her mouth dropped open. “How do I bypass the restriction? And I’m not allowed in Japanese for at least another year.”

Mr. Blackbourne rolled his eyes slightly, though he tried not to show it. He knew this answer. If Dr. Green taught the class, he’d obviously agreed to allow her into it. The rule had been a school policy to only allow students serious in academics in, and not to treat it like a filler class that anyone could join. If students took French their first year for foreign language learning, they would likely stick with it and not swap out unless they really wanted to learn. Since the school had a four-year foreign language requirement, most students stuck with what they originally picked.

Dr. Green leaned in on the desk, propped his head up with his hand, smiling. “But is that what you want?”

She smiled, just slightly, seeming elated. “I want to try.”

Mr. Blackbourne groaned internally and threw Dr. Green a look. He was involving himself in something when he wasn't sure what it was yet, by putting her in his class. He hated this idea. He had no idea if they should. It could be she was downright trouble. Or maybe she was in trouble. A million possibilities could be true. No reason for Dr. Green to start bending backwards for her, breaking school policies and also being attracted to her... Maybe she had enough to deal with that causing trouble among teachers shouldn't also be on her plate. "Why are you causing trouble? You don't know anything about this girl."

"I have a good feeling." Dr. Green held out his hand for the paper to take from the girl and then put it on his desk, signing his name. "Besides, who is going to tell me no?"

Mr. Blackbourne glowered, displeased. He couldn't wait a single day for them to evaluate what was going on before changing her entire schedule around? Yes, he'd done it for Winchester, but this was acting on someone Kota Lee was involved with. He might have to change her schedule again anyway depending on what Kota said about the situation.

Dr. Green started typing and clicking at his computer. Mr. Blackbourne fumed a little, waiting for this to be over so he could spend time evaluating the situation with Dr. Green...and possibly hunting down Kota for answers.

Heaven help them all if this was just some crush Kota had on a girl, or just Kota helping out someone and Dr. Green was doing all this for nothing.

Well, maybe not totally nothing. Mr. Blackbourne didn't disapprove of helping students get good classes if they wanted, but the school year hadn't started yet and he was going to have to answer for two students breaking school policies just because they wanted to. They weren't technically supposed to be involved with actual class schedule registration at all.

Suddenly he heard a distinct tapping noise. The young woman was tapping her toe in rhythm with the music playing on the little radio Dr. Green had put up. Mr. Blackbourne had stopped listening to it but now heard the tune clearly.

There wasn't disgust or boredom. It was enjoyment on her face. She liked it.

Mr. Blackbourne adjusted his glasses just enough as he focused on her. "Do you know this song?"

She blinked in surprise and nodded. "It's the song about the swallow, isn't it?"

Mr. Blackbourne nodded slowly, raising an eyebrow. She recognized...

She continued, "But it's the version by Micarelli, isn't it?"

His heart stilled. She knew there were different versions. And who this violinist was. "How do you know it's her?"

"Well, she's got this style. She plays soft. It's hard to explain, but it's different than other violinists. I really like it."

It was a moment that froze for him. Her eyes. Her face. Wishing to learn Japanese. The enjoyment of classical music. Wanting more than two AP classes.

Kota. And the others. All involved.

The look in her eyes. It was her eyes that said the most. A haunted look that she had on when she first entered, that slowly eased as she got more comfortable with them. And what was behind the haunted look was perfection. Beautiful. She wanted to learn and experience. It was an incredible quality that didn't happen as often as Mr. Blackbourne thought it might.

“Do you like the violin?” he asked.

The haunted look returned and she fiddled with a button on her blouse. “I do. I like the piano, too. I think if I had to pick just one to learn, though, the violin would be my first choice.”

Someone had her caged, believing she couldn't do anything she wanted.

He bit his tongue before he got carried away asking her questions. He wanted to ask many more. He waited, hoping she would share more and he didn't dare interrupt the opportunity.

He asked himself what the best move was here. As he looked her in the eyes, he dared that part of her, the expression behind the haunted gaze, to reappear. Just once. For him.

When it didn't surface, he found himself mentally rearranging his priority list.

Even as the practical side of him nearly screamed at himself to not do this. It wasn't feasible.

There was no way.

He was too busy.

There was too much to do.

The moment he did this, it would be over for her. She would be associated with Mr. Blackbourne and the others from the Academy at this school. She had no idea what she would face. And there was no way for him to tell her.

Was it too late anyway? He suspected it was. He knew that look on Dr. Green's face. He was smitten.

If Kota had already befriended her, it was likely already over for her. In a way of speaking. She had every choice, of course, but something told him this was just the start.

“Would you kindly hand over Miss Sorenson’s registration paper, Dr. Green,” Mr. Blackbourne said before he could stop himself.

Sealing their fate.

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After Mr. Blackbourne finished rearranging her schedule.

Adding in a violin class.

A class that didn't even exist. There was a general band class of course, but it was full.

He forced the extra class into the school computer, one class for one person, and closed it immediately to anyone else. And he would be the one to teach it.

After, Miss Sorenson's grateful "thank you", a thank you just for him, echoed in Mr. Blackbourne's ears long after she'd left the room.

Dr. Green stood by the office door, leaning himself against it. "Heaven help me," he whispered to himself.

Mr. Blackbourne threw him a look. "Don't start."

Dr. Green shook his head, placing a hand over his heart. "I just had this feeling when I saw her in the hallway."

"It seems to be happening a lot," Mr. Blackbourne said. "Fortunately, you may have discovered exactly why the others are so distracted lately."

Dr. Green gazed around the room, and then became fixated on the discarded schedule registration, the one Miss Sorenson didn't need now that her classes were chosen. "Do you think Kota..." His lips twisted a bit.

Mr. Blackbourne considered the unspoken idea. "I won't put it out of the realm of possibilities." He didn't want to admit that Kota would be an absolute idiot not to try to date Miss Sorenson if she were at all interested.

He himself would have, under the right circumstances.

Then he narrowed his eyes. It wasn't just Kota though. The others were preoccupied as well. Unless they all happened to meet other people of interest at the same time, he had a suspicion it was Miss Sorenson alone who was dividing their attention.

But it was highly unlikely to be just romantic interest. The binoculars by the window they found in Kota's bedroom was not a romantic interest sort of thing. "There's something more there."

Dr. Green let out a "Hmm." It was half agreement, but also a question to mean, 'What could be wrong?'

Mr. Blackbourne didn't want to believe anything was wrong. But belief wasn't tangible.

That haunted look in her eyes.

The fact that despite Miss Sorenson being beautiful, well mannered, and seemingly intelligent, all these features alone didn't seem to be enough to have the other members of the team be completely preoccupied by her simultaneously.

What would keep them all interested and secretive would be either Miss Sorenson knew something she shouldn't but didn't know what it was yet, or she was in a situation which was delicate and they were working on what to do next.

Dr. Green turned, but Mr. Blackbourne could see the turmoil in his eyes. He wouldn't

be surprised if Dr. Green sought to find Miss Sorenson again before the day ended, just to confirm his theory.

"We don't have time," Mr. Blackbourne said.

And before Dr. Green could reply, his phone lit up, a phone call coming in.

"I don't know this number," Dr. Green said, and he hovered his thumb over the ignore button, but then suddenly took the call. "Dr. Sean Green," he said in a strong tone, suggesting if it were a scam call, he would not tolerate it one bit.

Odd. Their phone system usually caught any scam calls. And unknown numbers were highly unusual, as their systems showed the caller ID.

Mr. Blackbourne waited, anticipating for Dr. Green to say something that would indicate who it was. However within a second, Dr. Green pulled the phone away from his face and appeared puzzled. He hung up the call. "This... this isn't my phone."

Mr. Blackbourne raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean, it looks like my phone, because of the case, but..." He paused, seeming confused. "Hang on, I haven't gotten a lot of sleep. Dr. Roberts called me on this phone just earlier..." He blinked again and then looked at the surface of the phone. "Wait, no, this is my phone, but it isn't the phone I used earlier."

Mr. Blackbourne pressed a palm to his own cheek, rubbing with a slight annoyance. Dr. Green's lack of awareness due to improper rest was going to be the death of them all. "Explain," he said sharply.

"I had a sandy beach background this morning. This is a snowy mountain." He showed Mr. Blackbourne the image of the background. It was one of a handful of

generic images the phone's operating system came with. "I didn't notice because they were the same color scheme, grayscale, but I'm damn sure this was a sandy beach this morning."

Mr. Blackbourne's mind reeled with the possibilities. That Dr. Green dropped his phone, changing the background screen. That the phone operating system changed the background screen automatically on accident in an update. That Luke Taylor did it as a practical joke. Or...

Dr. Green suddenly gasped out loud. "That girl."

"Who? Miss Sorenson?"

"No, at the motel. I was waiting in the front office of the motel when a girl bumped into me." Dr. Green's mouth fell open. "She swapped my phone out. With a different one." He looked at his phone again. "What if the young man this morning..." He squinted suddenly, looking at his phone, holding it out between two fingers as if it were contaminated. "My brain is broken. I don't know what I'm talking about."

Mr. Blackbourne knew that tone. He did know what he was talking about. It was the phone that was the problem. Mr. Blackbourne instantly motioned for Dr. Green to put it back into his pocket and out of view for now.

When Dr. Green did, Mr. Blackbourne wrote down a question on his notebook and showed it to him. "Is the phone in your pocket yours?"

Dr. Green hesitated, but then nodded silently.

Mr. Blackbourne then wrote another question. "When was the last time you were sure?" He made hand signals, gesturing he should be saying something.

“Okay, well, we should get going,” Dr. Green said. “More students, after all.”

However, Dr. Green spelled out in the air using sign language, “Motel. When looking in on computer.”

Mr. Blackbourne tensed. That was a long time for his phone to have been in questionable hands. And he didn’t have a full understanding of what was going on, but it was critical they addressed this. Immediately.

He calculated the next move carefully. A possibly compromised phone, based on the hunch of Dr. Green’s lack of sleep and his own apparent confusion of backgrounds.

But it was enough. If Dr. Green was disturbed about it, they would have to address it. Their phones were critical. If it was out of their hands for even a moment, they could be immensely compromised.

They would have to get out of here. Go to the motel and try to make sense of what happened. At the same time, it would give them a chance to find that missing computer.

He'd have to bring the whole team, as more people would mean a better chance of finding it faster.

"Gather the others," Mr. Blackbourne said, and he stood. He started collecting his laptop, cell phone, and shutting down the desktop.

Dr. Green raised a brow but said nothing. "I'll bring the stragglers."

Dr. Green shuffled beside Mr. Blackbourne in the hallway, their footsteps echoing down the rear offices. They would have to temporarily block Dr. Green’s phone. Mr. Blackbourne’s car trunk should do the trick. It was lined carefully with material that

would block signal while keeping it with them.

Were the others' phones compromised? Or just Dr. Green?

"Where are you headed?" Ms. Walter's voice was brisk as she caught up with them as they were coming to the end of the hallway. She had come out of another door that was connected to the central office.

Dr. Green shifted his weight uncomfortably. "Oh, just a stroll around the grounds, you know... keeping an eye on things."

Mr. Blackbourne tensed his jaw. He wasn't sure playing shifty was the right thing to do when they had an objective. He should have been more direct.

Ms. Walter frowned. "Registration's turning into a zoo. Do you mind giving us a hand outside the office? They're swarming to get their schedules finalized."

A wave of student clamor spilled from the office and out into the main hallway of the high school. They had to wait in line to give their schedules to assistants manning the computers, but the line had gotten out of control, with kids in a cluster in the office waiting area and outside in the hallway.

Mr. Blackbourne stepped forward, his shoulders squaring. In a booming voice usually reserved for addressing assemblies, he said with command, "Single file. Now."

Students scrambled as Mr. Blackbourne effortlessly established order.

Dr. Green took his lead. He approached, motioning to anyone who seemed confused as to where to stand. He even redirected students into the line that were standing outside of it, positioning them between each other. "There's three computers inside, line up at each once you get in the door. Outside the door, stay along the wall."

The students rearranged themselves, slowly, but eventually figuring out a way to not block the halls and keep the line organized on their own.

Mr. Blackbourne, trying not to look irritated at this simple line management task he had been stopped to complete, turned to Ms. Walter, who appeared shocked at their ability to quickly arrange things. "Do you think you've got it from here?" Mr. Blackbourne asked.

Ms. Walter nodded, her voice still a little breathless. "Thank you, Mr. Blackbourne. I appreciate it."

Mr. Blackbourne simply nodded and left as quickly as possible before being asked to do anything else. He didn't have time to cater to Ms. Walter.

...

The warm leather of his BMW seat was temporarily uncomfortable for Mr. Blackbourne as he waited for the air conditioner to activate. He watched the school doors, waiting for the familiar form of Dr. Green to shepherd the rest of their team to the parking lot. Their task could not wait—locating that computer at the seedy motel was essential.

However, the sudden issue of Dr. Green's phone having possibly been compromised was critical. Any phone numbers, any information that was kept on his phone, even if Dr. Green was very careful, put them all at risk. Mr. Blackbourne willed the others silently to hurry along, because he had many questions for Dr. Green about what was going on.

Instead, a figure emerged that sent a jolt of surprise through him. Kota Lee. He moved without pausing to his own car, scrambling towards his beat-up sedan, eyes fixed straight ahead.

Alone.

And it was the look on his face that told him more.

Something was wrong. A tense beat pulsed in his temples. Mr. Blackbourne abandoned his car, striding purposefully across the asphalt. Time seemed to slow. Just as Kota reached for his car door handle, Blackbourne positioned himself directly in front of the vehicle, arms crossed over his chest.

Kota stumbled back, the surprise clear on his pale face. "M-Mr. Blackbourne? What are you—"

Mr. Blackbourne's voice held a steely edge. "I assume you're getting ready to transport the others to the motel?"

Kota's blinking reaction to Mr. Blackbourne told him he had no idea what he was talking about.

"You have a minute to tell me why you were leaving and if it outweighs heading to the motel right now," Mr. Blackbourne said.

Kota paused, and then he blurted out, "We said something stupid to...someone. And she left in a hurry. I have to catch up with her."

Mr. Blackbourne paused. Her. Miss Sorenson. "It sounds very dramatic, but the motel is critical."

Kota turned, squaring his shoulders at him, a stance that told Mr. Blackbourne he would not back down. "I can't lose this...this position that I am in now. If I do, it might be impossible to get back. I know I'm being cryptic. I know I can't explain things to you right now." He took a step around the car toward Mr. Blackbourne.

“I’m not asking for anyone else. I’ll do this part alone. Take the others.”

Mr. Blackbourne froze, taking a moment to assess this. He had called it drama to push him, and Kota had pushed back with more information than he’d anticipated. He was upset with someone else in the group, whoever had said something stupid. And he was determined to fix it.

“Wait,” Mr. Blackbourne said, although his voice was much more calm now. “You know that chasing someone running from you never really works out. Not when they’re angry.” He took his own step closer to Kota, and his voice softened. “Unless there’s some reason...”

Kota practically hissed as he spoke. “I’ve every reason to not back down. Not from this. I might let her calm down, but I’m going to be there and available when she emerges. And I can’t go to the motel and do this at the same time.” This time he backed up, his hands raised in a placating gesture. “I’m sorry.”

Mr. Blackbourne’s mind whirled, trying to put together what happened. Someone on their team said something utterly stupid, which put Kota in an awkward position to repair the damage, and he felt it more important than the motel and whatever was going on there. Kota was often very good with prioritizing, so if this...he suspected it was Miss Sorenson... was more important...

It was the dark circles under Kota’s eyes. The determined expression on his face. The stance. The defiance. He wouldn’t go to the motel. Not for all the Academy favor points they could offer.

Mr. Blackbourne's stern features softened slightly, caught between the Academy's needs and Kota's concern for Miss Sorenson. Finally, he relented. “Don’t go alone. Take Mr. Griffin with you,” he suggested.

Mr. Blackbourne trusted him, and cared enough about Kota's now obvious priority to give up another member of the team even when they needed everyone on board.

Kota's eyes at first seemed to register Mr. Blackbourne's consideration with relief, but at the mention of Nathan Griffin, he darkened. "Not him."

Mr. Blackbourne was surprised at the resistance. Nathan must have been the one to say the stupid thing that sent Miss Sorenson running. "From the sound of it, Mr. Griffin is exactly who you need right now."

Kota pursed his lips and then slowly, he nodded. "You're right. I do need him. If you can spare him."

Mr. Blackbourne sighed. "I don't know, but this isn't a life or death situation as far as I know." He hoped he wasn't wrong about that.

Kota turned to his car, opening the door. "I'll wait for Nathan, but I also can't do all those other tasks—"

Mr. Blackbourne raised a hand. "I'll be by your home later, after this is done, to discuss this in depth."

"You know I can't," Kota said.

"As much as you can," Mr. Blackbourne said with a determined look.

Kota blinked a few times, but he didn't answer. He got into his car, turning the engine, and used his phone, possibly to contact Nathan.

Mr. Blackbourne went to his own vehicle to wait.

He desperately wanted to know what was going on. Miss Sorenson. A delicate connection with Kota Lee that was at the moment threatened to break and Kota was on his way to fix it. Something Nathan said. He didn't think Nathan would be rude or crass to anyone to cause anyone to be angry, but... If he was misunderstood somehow, and likely given they were still teenagers and occasionally said stupid things.

Mr. Blackbourne pressed a palm to his forehead, rubbing as if that would smooth out the endless questions floating around in his mind. Within a matter of an hour, this Miss Sorenson was already upending their entire team, including himself.

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Mr. Blackbourne's hands were against the steering wheel, eyes still fixated on the road in the late afternoon sun. Dr. Green was in the passenger seat, and Victor sat in the back seat alone.

They were all distracted, absorbed in their own thoughts.

Dr. Green's phone had been placed into the trunk, the signal blocked, the phone turned off. It was an important precaution. It would be replaced, the number changed, and a few other things done to it. They didn't want to take any risks at this point.

And it was highly possible Dr. Green was very confused. The last 24 hours at least had been all over the place, and Dr. Green's lack of sleep did little to help the situation.

Besides that, there was Kota... now on his way with Nathan back to Sunnyvale Court.

As much as he wanted to not think about it, Miss Sorenson kept appearing in his mind.

The clothes? They seemed to be in good condition.

Shoes suggested plenty of walking.

No gauntness in her face. No indications of extended malnutrition or ongoing stress.

There was the scraped up arm... A concern, but that could have been a number of things and he didn't want to draw a conclusion from it.

There was little about her outward appearance, as far as he could tell, that indicated she was in some sort of trouble. Everything was in the look, the expression she carried, the way she tensed at times. It was the only thing that seemed to suggest something was wrong.

Was it just the way she looked? Like resting haunted face?

But Kota was suggesting there was more.

A surge of annoyance pulsed through him for the foibles of today. And then on top of it all, finishing up this motel job at the last minute during a time they could have...

No. Don't think like that. Of course they needed to look for the computer. Hopefully he was correct in bringing the whole team to search for it, and have Dr. Green to retrace his steps and figure out what happened with his phone exactly.

Although he'd have to break it to Dr. Roberts or someone within the Academy eventually about bowing out of the project. Whatever was going on at the motel, it was bigger than a side project for a team like theirs.

Somehow he didn't like letting go of the project. He didn't like admitting it was too much for them. Was there enough time to let things cool off at the motel and return later? Surveillance only?

However, the school project had to come first. Smaller projects would have to go to other teams for now. They couldn't risk being away from the school too long at crucial moments. With so many moving parts, the school project had to take priority.

"Do you think she'll be going to the school sport events?" Dr. Green asked, dragging Mr. Blackbourne out of his own thoughts. "She didn't ask about sports. Do you think she'll join one? Does the girls' tennis team need a coach?"

Victor looked at the spare phone he was fixing up for Dr. Green and piped in. "Tennis?" he asked. "Do you even know how to play?"

"I've played... once," Dr. Green said. "I can learn."

Mr. Blackbourne's gaze on the road intensified. He didn't appreciate the inflection in the doctor's voice. "Dr. Green," he said stiffly. "Behave yourself."

Victor's stifled laughter drew his attention to the rearview mirror. Victor turned his head and culled it quickly, pretending to concentrate on the phone in his hands, but Mr. Blackbourne had caught the hint of amusement in time. Were they all turning on him?

"I'm not in the mood, Mr. Morgan."

Just as quickly, Mr. Blackbourne's conscience stabbed at him. Dr. Green was making light of things, and Victor was clearly not allowing the current situation to smother his sense of humor. Turning to look at the rearview mirror once more, Mr. Blackbourne tried again at a civil-enough tone. "I'm sorry. It's been a long day."

Victor swallowed. "Right," he said, the corner of his lips twitching upward in a moment of wry understanding.

As though the moment of levity had brokered peace, Dr. Green finally relaxed. "Let's just fix this situation," he said. "This job has taken much more time than it should since we've gotten caught a couple of times now. We weren't going to have much time anyway. Football season technically already started without us through the summer. After-school activity programs, what few there are, will need observation. We'll be lucky if we aren't glued to the school. Driving out here to a motel during the school year..."

"I didn't think it'd take us this long, honestly," Victor said. "At first, we were looking for information, and it spread into looking for two people, and possibly your phone swapped out, and then getting caught...I should have known better than to use a simple keylogger USB. I'd thought the simplest solution would go unnoticed."

"Let's just find that computer," Mr. Blackbourne said.

"What if he broke it?" Victor asked.

"Not as good, but it's better to confirm it's destroyed than to not know." He sighed to himself. It was unlikely a paranoid kid would leave too much on an old computer if it might incriminate himself. But there was a chance he simply hid it somewhere until he could come back for it. But were they too late?

Victor nodded and then seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, frowning.

"Don't feel bad," Dr. Green said. "We can't predict how things turn out."

"No, I wasn't thinking of that any more," Victor said quietly. "Don't mind me."

Mr. Blackbourne glanced behind him to check the traffic, and out of habit, reviewed the movements of the Jeep that was following the BMW. North and Silas appeared to be arguing with each other while North drove. Luke and Gabriel in the rear seat, from what Mr. Blackbourne could tell, looked as downtrodden as Victor appeared in the moment. For a brief second, while North was distracted, he turned the steering wheel as he was looking at Silas. The Jeep veered a little, heading onto the shoulder and bumping along, until he looked back and readjusted.

The Jeep straightened out.

Mr. Blackbourne exhaled and shook his head.

Offhand, he glanced at his phone he placed so he could view the screen while driving. Blank. Somehow he hoped to hear from Kota, or Nathan, by now. He had no idea what happened, but it appeared the rest of the team was at least a little concerned. Or perhaps something else was going on.

What was wrong with them lately? How long had they been so distracted? A few days and the whole team was falling apart.

As the vehicle neared their destination, Mr. Blackbourne himself became lost in thought. They'd been in worse situations than this. He remembered a time when they'd been stretched thin. When he'd had to send them home to abusive parents, some on opposite sides of Charleston, and having to make dire decisions to be observant and on hand in case he had to interfere. North and Silas had been too young to drive, but slept in a tent just behind Nathan's house, observing cameras on their phones of Nathan's dad when he was home. Kota occasionally watching his sister when his mother had to attend court appearances over his father until sentencing could be reached, and protecting them from his father when out on bail. Then Luke watching Gabriel's house and spending the night there often for him, and Dr. Green just starting his hospital work. And Mr. Blackbourne on hand for Victor's social events and then driving between the others as needed as back up.

So much had changed since those days. Was it only a couple of years ago? Time was moving fast, but they'd been slowly crawling their way into normalcy.

They'd been through so much together. The high school job had to be a priority. The motel was another matter. What started as a simple observation to determine recruitment had led to one disaster after another. However, so far all they had run into was criminal activity. Theft. Violence. Phones swapped. Whatever was going on, this was outside the realm of usual Academy interests.

No. They had to pass this on. It wasn't a simple job for a team like theirs, already

neck deep. They had to reprioritize.

And the girl? Well, they could handle one girl.

She couldn't be too much trouble.

Mr. Blackbourne cleared his throat for a moment. "About your phone," he said to Dr. Green.

Dr. Green pursed his lips. "I know I sound like a lunatic," he said. "And honestly, I'm questioning everything I'm remembering. But you know how when you've had too many coincidences in one day around something and it's only way later you realize what was connected?" He waved toward the rear trunk of the car. "Somehow today, my phone was swapped out."

"It was," Victor said, looking at his own phone. "Our encrypted tracking system shows the phone was at the motel for a while before it traveled back to the school, where it was given back to him."

"I'm not crazy," Dr. Green said. "Well, maybe I am about some things, but not about this."

The car was quiet for a moment. Whether they liked it or not, they needed a couple more answers at this motel. Was it a simple accident? But it couldn't be. Not when his phone was returned to him without Dr. Green being fully aware until later.

Mr. Blackbourne parked the BMW at the far end of the motel, a strategic choice allowing a swift exit if needed. He glanced over to where North had maneuvered the Jeep to the opposite side of the building, effectively bracketing their target area.

Being here during the day, exposing the group like this, it was very unlikely they'd be

able to return again to the motel after today, at least not for a very long time. If they could have only gotten visible confirmation of the face of the young man... At least they had a visual of the girl.

This had to be strategic. Mr. Blackbourne scanned the area: the worn facade of the motel, doors shut tight against the day's heat, windows covered with drab curtains. For the moment, there was no activity in the lot, few other vehicles. Any long term guests were at work.

Mr. Blackbourne stepped out, shutting his door. He straightened his suit jacket and adjusted his glasses, eyes scanning for likely hiding spots for a computer, though he doubted it was simply hiding in a bush just outside.

"Let's do this quickly," he said quietly as Victor and Dr. Green joined him at the rear of his vehicle. "We need eyes on that computer without turning heads. And we need a visual of everyone who passes through this motel today, to see who could have swapped things out."

"I have my suspicions," Dr. Green said. "I will point them out. But don't let anyone get close to you. Just in case more people are involved than we thought."

Victor passed Dr. Green the spare phone, set up with contact information from the others, but a new number for now and other things he would need. "A couple of us can get to work looking for the computer. It was in the office for guests."

Dr. Green crossed his arms, his gaze darting around as if he could physically see the solution in the air around them. "If someone took it this morning, they didn't have time to get far or be discreet about it. And likely it'll be soon that the manager notices it's missing as well. So we shouldn't get caught carrying it."

Mr. Blackbourne nodded. "We may need a distraction—a way to canvas without too

much suspicion." His mind raced through possibilities.

Gabriel emerged from behind another parked car, frowning slightly as he caught up with their conversation. "You two should head to the front office," he said. "North says we'll check the nearby bushes and any outer buildings out here. We just hope he didn't take it back to his motel room."

"Didn't you have cameras positioned?" Mr. Blackbourne said.

"They've been spray painted," Gabriel said. He pointed to one above their heads.

Sure enough, now instead of having been removed like before, they'd been covered over in bright neon paint.

No one here wanted to be monitored.

"It was some shithead drug dealer," Gabriel said.

Victor nodded in confirmation. "We've been too obvious setting them up. Anyone doing anything to the motel, people are watching. We've some footage before they were painted, but not a lot. We probably don't want to waste the supplies to redo them again. We don't want to look like FBI setting up here. We probably already do."

Gabriel scoffed. "Then let's pretend to be FBI today. We're losing the job anyway, might as well..."

A flicker of approval crossed Mr. Blackbourne's face at Gabriel's suggestion; it was simple and effective.

"Good idea," Mr. Blackbourne said with a nod toward Gabriel, then turned his attention to Victor. "You all still check the bushes, but get to work removing any of

our equipment. Make it look like we're packing it in." Whoever came in after them would have to do things differently.

Victor smirked lightly. "Undercover team giving up and backing off. Got it."

Dr. Green chuckled softly but kept his eyes fixed on their surroundings, always vigilant.

Gabriel and Victor headed off to where North and the others were standing to relay the message.

"What about us?" Dr. Green asked. "Do we play FBI retreat or something else?"

"Final FBI sweep," Mr. Blackbourne stated calmly, adjusting his tie with an air of confidence that seemed almost innate. He reached for his wallet, pulling out a select official looking ID and inserting it in the slot with a clear-facing window. It wasn't likely the office manager would bother them but just in case he tried to stop them from removing the computer if they came across it...

He strode toward the manager's office with an assured step that left no room for questioning his right to be there—his demeanor one of official business or perhaps even ownership.

Out of his peripheral vision, he could sense the others behind them splitting up, looking for hidden spots around them. Luke went into a nearby closed-up restaurant. North followed, and Mr. Blackbourne could almost hear North chiding Luke for not being careful as he rushed in.

Mr. Blackbourne entered the office. The interior was cool, the lights were only half on, as the sun was directly beaming in through the large windows, giving an uncomfortable stiffness to the space, and tinged with scents ranging from strong

disinfectant to underlying mildew, years of fleeting occupants and half-hearted cleanings etched into the walls.

The clerk behind the counter glanced up from her cell phone—a flicker of irritation at being disturbed turning into cautious respect when she spotted Mr. Blackbourne.

"I'm looking for an individual who might have checked in this morning," Mr. Blackbourne began smoothly, projecting authority while keeping his tone conversational. He flipped open his wallet to half flash the card that made him look like someone official. He did not want to waste time. He wanted an excuse to look at the list of names.

He wasn't going to lie about who he was, but if she came to an incorrect assumption on her own, well... he was counting on that.

The clerk hesitated before reaching under the counter for her logbook, flipping through pages filled with names.

Mr. Blackbourne leaned in slightly while keeping an eye on her movements, and took out his phone. "Just pause on each page, I'd like to get a good picture if you don't mind." He was sure the others had already done this, but he wanted an updated copy, and this was an excuse to distract her while Dr. Green was busy giving the back rooms another look for the computer.

"Should I...scan it?" She motioned to a nearby copy machine.

Mr. Blackbourne held back a smirk. Very compliant. She wasn't about to get in the way of what she thought was an investigation. Like she had been through this before and knew better. "No, I'll just take a picture. Thank you."

He had her hold open the logbook. While they had a computer, apparently the old

motel did things with paper and pen first, and then entered credit card and room numbers into the computer by hand on an old system. “I just enter what they give me,” she said. “I don’t ask questions.”

“Even if the name doesn’t match the card on file?” Mr. Blackbourne asked.

She tilted her head. “They don’t often use cards,” she said. “Cash usually. And any card used might not have an actual name on them. They use a gift card they picked up at a boxed store for cash.” She scanned her check ins for today. “Only one used a card with a name, and it’s a single overnight guest from out of town. Not our usual sort.”

Regrettable. He should have known, however, that it was unlikely teenagers pickpocketing at the mall would use their own names when signing in.

When Dr. Green didn’t emerge like Mr. Blackbourne had expected, he nodded toward the clerk. “I need to take a look around. Don’t mind me.” He went further into the front office.

The clerk tensed but sat down where she had been before he entered, holding her cell phone in hand as if she were debating utilizing it.

To send a warning to others perhaps. They didn’t have much time before there might be trouble.

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Mr. Blackbourne's gaze drifted over the now barren business center, the void where a computer used to rest jarringly unsettling, as the cords were still in place, including the power cable. Out of habit, Mr. Blackbourne pulled a cloth from his pocket, using it to mask his fingerprints while tugging the power cords out of the wall socket and examined it. The monitors had been left behind. Two monitors, one computer? The teenager operating in here hadn't been afraid to set it up how he wanted, as if he expected it all to be left undisturbed, at least until Mr. Blackbourne and his team had arrived.

Strange how this...boy used a computer here instead of perhaps stealing it for himself. Especially given he was likely using it for nefarious purposes. Wouldn't it have made more sense to utilize one of the motel rooms?

He was surprised any of this was still here, given the clientele, however the two monitors were much older models, and from what he understood from Victor, so was the appearance of the computer they were looking for. However, the contents of the computer had been updated, so only the old case looked leftover from the 1990s.

Suddenly, Dr. Green appeared beside him. "General manager is tight lipped," he said. "I don't see another computer around."

Mr. Blackbourne was surprised to hear Dr. Green had gone on to talk to the manager. But then, they needed to cover all bases.

"Storage room," Mr. Blackbourne said.

They found the storage room, a locked door, but it was a simple lock and Dr. Green

utilized a card in his wallet to open it. The storage room itself mostly held shiny metal shelves with printer paper and other office supplies, coffee, cups and other supplies for the offered breakfast, but no computer in sight.

The housekeeping office had a desk, schedules on a notebook, and a computer but it was clear it wasn't the one they were looking for.

Mr. Blackbourne and Dr. Green reluctantly left the laundry room that also didn't contain a computer. "I was hoping it never left this front office," Dr. Green said. "But maybe we were too late getting back. Maybe I should have stayed to look for it instead of going to registration..."

"No point in playing 'what if'," Mr. Blackbourne said darkly, although he agreed. "We need to focus. If it was a bulky 90s computer box, it should have been obvious if it left the building. Are we sure it didn't leave via a vehicle?"

"The kid took a bus to escape us," Dr. Green said. They stepped outside once more, looking over the motel parking lot. "I don't think he has a vehicle."

Mr. Blackbourne pressed his lips together tightly. It was looking less and less likely they might find this computer after all.

Dr. Green put his hands in his pocket, gazing out at the lot. "What's worse is that I can't say for sure what happened with my phone."

Mr. Blackbourne gazed at him a moment. "Be sure. What's your timeline today?"

Dr. Green seemed to give the question considerable thought. "Mostly being here, actually. Luke collected me from the hospital, as you know. We arrived here. I hung him from the roof..." He lowered his voice a little as he spoke, even if no one seemed to be around at the moment. "He cut the line. I helped a woman who tripped..."

Mr. Blackbourne raised an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you fell for that.”

Dr. Green shook his head. “I was falling asleep on my feet, but no, that morning when we were back at my condo, I had my phone. My actual phone. And then we went to Kota’s, the school, and then I was back here to fix Luke’s nose and...” His eyes narrowed. “I messaged you.”

“You did,” Mr. Blackbourne confirmed.

“I know,” Dr. Green said. “That’s how I saw the background changed. But so much was going on, I don’t think it registered fully because it was the right color, wrong image. It was only when I looked at my phone at the school that I realized what was bothering me about it.”

This wasn’t good at all. So Dr. Green had clearly utilized the phone while in possession of the wrong phone. Somehow it had access to Dr. Green’s phone numbers and messages, or he would have noticed a swap much sooner. It could have been done easily remotely. His stolen phone echoing to a fake phone. “Think clearly,” Mr. Blackbourne said. “At what point did you see the wrong background? And what happened right before then?”

Suddenly Dr. Green snapped his fingers. “There was a girl here this morning. She brushed into me way too close. Far too close for no reason at all. After we had talked about the missing computer and her brother that she was looking for.”

The thief? Could she have picked his pocket and made a swap?

This problem with Dr. Green’s phone being compromised so quickly left them in a rather strange predicament. They were usually pretty good at being cryptic when calling and messaging each other. The most that anyone on the outside would notice was their team and how frequently they spoke, who their families were, and so forth.

Normal, average things. But there were more things to be wary about when it came to someone having physical access to your cell phone. Being able to track you easier, decrypting passwords from afar and so on. Would these teenagers know how to do that?

Maybe they were of great interest to the Academy after all, although not for a good reason.

There was no visual of the others at the moment. What nearby buildings had once been around were mostly demolished and cleared save for the boarded up fast food place that North and Luke were likely still looking in. There was a small, wooded strip before the start of the next business next door, which Mr. Blackbourne guessed was where Victor and Gabriel were looking now.

Less than a block away, a city bus was coming. The stop was between the rundown fast food building and the motel.

Mr. Blackbourne frowned and tugged Dr. Green into the outside corridor between the front office building and the motel rooms. He positioned himself practically on top of Dr. Green so they could both observe but be mostly obscured from view. They watched as a couple of people exited the bus.

One in particular headed toward the motel.

A familiar face. The girl. The thief.

And she was heading toward the office.

Dr. Green seemed oblivious. Of course he would be. He hadn't watched hours of video looking for her like Mr. Blackbourne had just the night before.

Mr. Blackbourne slid Dr. Green further out of view, his lips hovering inches from his as he listened.

Dr. Green grinned. "If we have to make out again to avoid getting caught..."

Mr. Blackbourne scowled, suppressing the memory. "Don't start." He listened to the girl's footsteps as she entered the front office. Then he released Dr. Green, signaling he was going to go in through the back door. "If she leaves the office, follow her."

Mr. Blackbourne hurried, entering a door in the back marked for housekeeping. He passed by laundry machines that were running. He got a suspicious look from the maid that had come in and was sitting at the housekeeping office desk, but he moved quickly down the hallway.

He lingered in the shadow of the hall, pretending to be looking at the room with the ice machine and the vending machines inside.

The girl was signing the logbook. "Why do I have to do this every week?" she asked.

"Just in case you miss a payment," the clerk said. "Happens a lot. We can't fill you in for an extra week unless you pay ahead for it."

The girl made a face, but she pulled out cash and passed it to the lady. "Thanks for the extra day at least," she said.

"Try not to do it again. I get my ass chewed out for it." The clerk counted the cash and put it into a drawer that she promptly locked. "You only get away with it because you've been here for so long."

The girl's face tightened and she turned, heading in Mr. Blackbourne's direction.

Mr. Blackbourne pulled back, forced to head into the vending machine room. He observed as the girl checked the office space where the computer had been. She at first looked in quickly, and then turned to leave but then tilted her head in, looking at the room again. “Hey,” she called to the clerk at the counter. “Where’d your PC go?”

The clerk looked up, seeming puzzled. “What?”

The girl motioned to the office space. “There was a computer my brother worked at. Now it’s gone?”

Brother.

Mr. Blackbourne held his breath as the clerk came around, looking into the room, a curious expression on her face. “Wow. I haven’t looked in here in a while. Forgot it was even here.”

“Someone took the computer?” the girl asked.

“Honestly, not surprised,” the clerk said. “Though I feel like we would have noticed it leaving...” She looked around and then down the hall toward the housekeeping office. Mr. Blackbourne shrunk back as the clerk passed the ice machine room and headed toward the housekeeping office. “Did you all take the PC out of the office?”

The housekeeping woman said something, although it was too low for Mr. Blackbourne to hear, and then both the housekeeping woman and the clerk went to go look inside the office once again.

Mr. Blackbourne was going to get caught if he stayed here a moment longer. He took the opportunity while the women were standing in the office to head to the rear exit again. He went back to the corridor behind the office building.

Dr. Green was still there, although he turned when he heard footsteps. “She hasn’t come out.”

“It’s his sister,” Mr. Blackbourne whispered as he came close. “The girl...”

Dr. Green’s brows shot up in surprise. “No, it isn’t.”

Mr. Blackbourne stared at him. “She just said it.”

Dr. Green slowly shook his head. “I met his sister. She has short hair. Taller. That girl has long hair and doesn’t look like her. When I was here this morning, she caught me in the office, asking about where he was.”

Mr. Blackbourne froze, trying to puzzle this out. “This girl inside now is asking about the missing computer like she didn’t notice it before.”

“The girl I spoke to saw it was missing this morning,” Dr. Green said. “We’re talking about two different girls. Does he have two sisters?”

Mr. Blackbourne inhaled sharply. Three people now? A whole string of teenagers working here at the motel?

When the front door of the motel opened again, Mr. Blackbourne was forced to pull Dr. Green further back into the corridor, however, it was way too obvious they were lingering.

So Mr. Blackbourne faced Dr. Green, instantly starting mid-sentence in a practiced way to indicate they’d been in the middle of a conversation. “...have only a couple of hours before we have to be at the restaurant. It won’t run itself.”

Dr. Green followed up quickly, reciting from memory. “Listen, it isn’t my fault he

quit...”

The girl, while she had slowed and looked their way, continued on past the hallway. Dr. Green continued his monologue still, just in case she was listening.

Mr. Blackbourne indicated Dr. Green should go into the office, and that Mr. Blackbourne would follow the girl. “Logbook. Take a picture of the last entry,” he whispered to Dr. Green before he took off.

Mr. Blackbourne exited the corridor, putting a hand into his pocket as if looking for a room key. He moved with purpose, like he knew where he was going, and it just happened to be the same direction as the girl was going.

She walked quickly, likely sensing someone following her. He noted her clothes, plain jeans, white tank shirt, a black flannel shirt tied at the waist to hide her pockets. For a thief who pickpocketed, she seemed careful to hide her own pockets.

She headed to the second building, and up the stairs.

Mr. Blackbourne was just in time to get to the second floor when he noticed the girl entering a room. 221B.

Mr. Blackbourne slowed when he passed the room, although he only had a few seconds to do so. It was a standard motel room, the window’s curtains drawn tightly...mostly.

He took out his phone and one small listening device, paused where there was a split in the curtain, using his shadow to block the light behind him and snapped one photo, and placed the listening device against the glass in the corner, not even daring to look at it before continuing on.

He went to the stairwell at the rear of the second building and went down. He used the turn within the stairwell as cover to block view of himself before looking at the photo. He put an earbud for his phone into his ear, readying himself to listen to the device he planted.

For the moment, it was just shuffling, some grumbling, someone closed an interior door.

The photo was just a straight shot into the motel room. There was a door to the right, likely the bathroom, a folding closet door on the left and a section behind the bathroom where he couldn't see, and then beyond that two standard motel beds against the wall, an awkward position given most motels wanted those beds on the opposite wall behind the bathroom, which would have allowed for more privacy. Likely the owner of the motel wasn't concerned with practical bed arrangements.

The photo caught the back of the girl entering, but also a figure on the bed. An older man, wearing sweatpants and looking as if he'd just woken up.

Three teenagers and an older man? This was out of control. Too many people.

For a while, there was only silence. Then there was shuffling through the device, and that interior door opened. "Get this place cleaned up before I come back tonight." It was the older man speaking, as far as Mr. Blackbourne could tell.

There was a soft grunt, almost too soft to hear.

The door closed. Mr. Blackbourne was just in time to get to the second floor again to spot the older gentleman exit through the opposite stairwell. He watched from his position as the older man took off on foot, heading in the direction of some buildings in the distance.

Mr. Blackbourne spotted Dr. Green on the ground and he signaled for Dr. Green to follow the man. Dr. Green nodded and headed in the same direction.

Just then North and Luke emerged from the dilapidated building next door. Mr. Blackbourne signaled for one of them to join Dr. Green. North did, taking off to walk beside Dr. Green and follow the older man.

Luke spotted Mr. Blackbourne and headed his direction, but as he did, he pointed up, silently telling Mr. Blackbourne something was above his head.

A camera, not painted...at least not yet.

Good. He could only hope there was some information that had been recorded in the last few hours.

They were quickly getting overwhelmed, and they couldn't take too much more time on this job.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 7:44 am

Mr. Blackbourne slightly loosened the tie around his neck as he sat in the driver's seat of his BMW, the late afternoon sun beating down on the vehicle despite the air conditioning's valiant efforts. The leather seats, usually a mark of luxury, now felt sticky and constraining as he and Luke reviewed the security footage from the stairwell camera on his laptop.

"There," Luke said, pointing to movement on the screen. A figure darted past, head down, with a backpack flung over his back. The pack appeared empty.

Mr. Blackbourne leaned forward, squinting at the pixelated image. The quality was poor, but the build matched their target. More importantly, the backpack was large enough to carry the computer tower if he had wanted to. He made a mental note of the timing – less than an hour before Luke's confrontation with the boy.

"Can you enhance it?" Luke asked, though his tone suggested he already knew the answer.

"This isn't television, Mr. Taylor," Mr. Blackbourne replied dryly. "The resolution is what it is." He tapped a few keys, saving the relevant segment. He continued his observation. "Keep your eyes out for him. We're still waiting for word from the others, so we might as well do surveillance."

His eyes flicked to his phone temporarily, as if he could summon updates at will just by looking at it. No word often meant they were doing their work, busy, so he never interrupted with questions.

Luke fidgeted. Immensely. Twisting in his seat. His hand slipping in and out of his

back pocket as if testing his thieving skills on himself. This caused lots of noise as the clothes he wore slipped against the car's leather.

After a few moments, Mr. Blackbourne pulled a pen from his pocket. Without saying a word, he put it in the cup holder in the console between them.

Luke picked it up, clicked it, took it apart, put it back together, did pen tricks between his fingers. He repeated this, although not always in the same order. However, he did this quieter, as if he knew Mr. Blackbourne meant to feed his inclination to move and was telling him to please do so in a quieter way.

The arrival of a more modern white sedan caught their attention, its presence notable in a lot primarily populated by older vehicles. Luke immediately began cataloging details – make, model, condition – while Mr. Blackbourne focused on the occupants. The driver remained partially obscured, but he could make out feminine features, dark hair pulled back severely.

No. Not pulled back. Short hair. A pixie-style haircut. And she was younger, about the same age as the young man. Was that the 'sister' Dr. Green had run into before?

More interesting was the passenger, Wil Winchester, emerging from the vehicle with casualness. The car pulled away before he'd fully cleared the door, as if the driver was eager to avoid lingering. Wil moved quickly to the stairs heading to the second story of the second building of the motel. Through the receiver, he heard the door open for 221B.

Mr. Blackbourne reflexively swallowed, for once caught off guard, the unexpected arrival of the student making things much more complicated.

"I... I think that's him," Luke said, already reaching for the door handle.

Mr. Blackbourne raised a hand, stilling him. "No. Let's see where this goes." He reached for the small receiver connected to the listening device he'd placed earlier.

A feminine voice – the sister they'd observed earlier, could be heard through the receiver. "Where's the computer?"

"What computer?" Wil's response came too quickly, too casually.

"Don't play dumb. The one from the office. They're saying it's missing. The one we pieced together because you said you needed it for school."

"Oh, that old thing?" A shuffle of movement. "It was just a matter of time before someone stole it."

"We should have put it in here," the girl said.

Wil laughed shortly. "Then Jack would have stolen it to sell. You know that."

Mr. Blackbourne's jaw tightened. Wil's dismissive statements to his sister's concern was troubling. He was willing to lie to her face, and cover it up. Was it Jack... the older man... would he have stolen the computer? Or was he using the office as a way to mask what he was up to?

"You need that computer," the girl's voice dropped lower, urgent. "The school year just started. How are you supposed to—"

"I'll go to that thrift shop on Henderson," Wil cut her off. "They usually have decent computers. Most of the time the store owner doesn't know what he has and I can get one for cheap."

"With what money?"

"I'll figure it out." More shuffling, the sound of a bag being zipped. "Don't wait up. But I'll be back before Jack gets here."

Mr. Blackbourne glanced at Luke, who was already reaching for his phone, likely to alert the others. "Tell Victor and Gabriel to take North's Jeep and be ready to go fetch him and Dr. Green," Mr. Blackbourne said softly. "We'll handle this ourselves."

Mr. Blackbourne started the engine, waiting until Wil emerged from the room and headed toward the bus stop before pulling out of their parking spot.

"You think he's actually going to a thrift shop?" Luke asked as they maintained a careful distance behind their target.

Mr. Blackbourne's lips pressed into a thin line. "We'll find out."

The bus lumbered forward, and they followed, keeping two vehicles between them and their quarry. Mr. Blackbourne's mind raced ahead, calculating possibilities. The missing computer, the white car, Dr. Green's missing phone, the lies about theft – it all pointed to something larger, something that would need to be handed off to a more specialized team. He pressed his lips together tightly as he considered.

A teen boy did something on a computer that alerted someone in the Academy that he was up to something. As Wil appeared clever with computers, this Academy member who sent the letters did so to avoid getting caught sending messages about him. And this Academy member sent in a team they assumed was similar age and had nothing to do with him.

But why? The letter had been about recruitment. Not about suspicious criminal activity. These teenagers wouldn't be on their radar at all at this point for recruitment. Down on their luck teenagers in a motel fending for themselves, sure, that would be of interest to the Academy. To help if they could.

But not to recruit.

It was like the person who sent the letter didn't know how the recruitment process worked at all.

Did whoever sent the letter know they would go to the same school? A chance they could connect and be friends to do observation perhaps?

That was likely why Mr. Blackbourne wasn't sent a message. So he wouldn't know anything about it. They were supposed to be observing and getting close, but they had gotten it muddled by leaving observation equipment and keyloggers around, leading Wil Winchester to find them and to become suspicious.

Not to mention the thief sister being a surprise. That was an entirely other issue. The thief had been concerned with money, making the payment for the motel room herself. The older man was at the bar. He could put two and two together about him at least, although he'd try to hold off judgement. Two teens with an older man, possibly a third teen, staying at a motel. The girl in the white sedan who had dropped off Wil... Who was that?

Survival made anyone do things they wouldn't normally resort to. Doing strange stuff with computers. The older man going to a bar on a weekday evening alone on foot. The two teenagers worried he'd steal their own possessions if they had anything valuable in the room worth selling.

How terrible were their lives if they resorted to such things? Only to live in a motel in a miserable part of town?

Luke's phone buzzed in his hands. "Victor got back to me on the plate number." He blinked at the screen. "Not good."

“What is it?”

“A student at the school.” He sat back, and blew out a breath from between his lips.

“Which makes sense. A friend dropping him off after registration today.”

Mr. Blackbourne suddenly pressed his lips together. “If there is a photo associated with her, send it to Dr. Green for confirmation.” He had a feeling.

And it was confirmed several moments later as Luke got in a reply message after.

“He says it’s her. The other sister.” Luke blinked and looked up at Mr. Blackbourne.

“What other sister? They don’t have the same last name.”

Mr. Blackbourne’s lips tightened immensely. “This is becoming too close.” He waved his hand at Luke. “Don’t show me her name or anything else. And keep this information to yourself. We really need to stop here.”

Luke nodded, trying to consider what he was saying. “Dropping the case?”

“Yes. Our group is at least. There’s something much deeper going on here and we’re far too busy and too close. It would be worse if a school employee started tracking teenagers in his own school.”

“Then... why are we still following him?” Luke asked.

Mr. Blackbourne considered the question carefully. “I want to see where he goes. Just to finish this up.” And then he really needed to figure out who sent the letter, and what this was all about, because none of it made any sense at all.

Mr. Blackbourne refocused on the city bus. It turned into a block of medical buildings, and Mr. Blackbourne's suspicions deepened. No thrift shops in this direction – only hospitals, clinics, and medical offices.

And Wil got off the bus along with a few others, heading toward one of the hospitals.

How odd.

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The risks for following Wil Winchester was immense, yet Mr. Blackbourne couldn't seem to pull away from the chase. They were already too close to this. A school employee caught following around a young man from the same school off campus would have dire consequences. He had to appear as if he wasn't there for Wil at all, didn't even realize he was here.

The stark fluorescent lighting of North Charleston Medical Center cast harsh shadows as Mr. Blackbourne followed Wil Winchester's path through the main entrance. He kept his distance, allowing a group of nurses to pass between them as the boy turned down a corridor marked "Oncology Department."

Mr. Blackbourne paused at the intersection, considering his options. Luke waited in the BMW, positioned to observe likely exits.

Why this hospital? Why would he come here of all places? Was he visiting a family member? Was he here for outpatient treatment, perhaps?

He adjusted his tie, adopting the purposeful stride of someone who belonged there, who had every right to be walking these halls. The occasional staff member barely glanced his way – in a hospital this size, unfamiliar faces were common enough.

Winchester disappeared through a set of double doors. Mr. Blackbourne reached for his phone, prepared to alert Luke to reposition, when a familiar voice stopped him cold.

"Owen? What are you doing here?"

He turned slowly, maintaining his composure despite the unexpected interruption. Erica Lee stood in the doorway of a break room, still in her scrubs, a coffee cup held loosely in one hand. Her dark hair was pulled back, kept out of her eyes with a hair band. They had spoken just this morning, so the surprise on her face at seeing him here, now, was evident.

"Mrs. Lee," he greeted her smoothly. "I was actually hoping to speak with you about Kota."

It wasn't entirely a lie – Kota's recent behavior had raised concerns, but he couldn't come up with any other excuse to be here now, at the hospital where she was working. But the way Erica's eyes narrowed told him she wasn't buying it, not completely.

"Really?" She took a sip of her coffee, studying him over the rim. "Because you usually call first. Or send Sean." She gestured to an empty chair in the break room. "But since you're here..."

It wasn't a request. Erica was the one person Owen Blackbourne could not fool, not for one moment. She had such a sixth sense, even if she never exposed half of what she knew to Kota or the others.

But Mr. Blackbourne knew. This wasn't the first time they had scuffled about matters regarding the team, especially Kota's involvement. It had taken monumental effort on Mr. Blackbourne's part to allow them to get involved in her life, in Kota's life, when her husband was still around.

She distrusted anyone whom she didn't know to be family. She was kind, but she was guarded. Immensely.

But as far as Mr. Blackbourne knew, she was aware Kota was involved in a

specialized academy for the gifted. And Mr. Blackbourne was...like a group study leader. Because he and Dr. Green were a couple of years older, so their interests in the younger members of the team would have been strange without establishing some sort of reason. They needed an official reason to be hanging around them so much.

He was a friend as well, but he was still supposed to lead and guide the group, including in extracurricular activities. Being purely friends, on the same level as say Nathan or Gabriel, would have been...suspicious. So he and Dr. Green often only showed up for “school” reasons.

But sometimes he wondered how much Erica knew that she wasn’t saying out loud. About himself. About what Kota was often up to. About the Academy. But he kept his suspicions to himself.

Mr. Blackbourne followed her into the room, noting how she positioned herself between him and the door. A protective stance. He hadn’t seen her behave like that except toward her ex husband when she positioned herself between her ex and her children.

This unsettled Mr. Blackbourne.

"Kota's been distracted lately," he began, choosing his words carefully. "We've noticed some changes in his focus, his dedication to certain tasks." He had to share with her the truth as much as possible, because this could all fall apart if he wasn’t careful.

"Have you considered that might be a good thing?" Erica's voice was gentle, but there was steel underneath. "He's sixteen, Owen. Sometimes I wonder if you and Sean forget that."

Mr. Blackbourne kept his expression neutral, though internally he was reassessing the

situation rapidly. This wasn't just about today's surprise visit. "We're only trying to help him reach his potential."

"By keeping him up all hours? Having him run around town on your errands?" She set her coffee down with deliberate care. "I've seen his room, Owen. This is just like when Nathan's father is around..." She paused. "But Mr. Griffin is not here. So something else has him up all night. And right when you have him on a special local program keeping him at a dangerous school. Whatever you have him doing... it's too much."

"Mrs. Lee—"

"No." She held up a hand. "I've been patient. I've trusted you and Sean because Kota trusts you. And... you have done a lot for us. You saw Kota's potential for a special school and I've allowed you to pull him out into your Academy. And then you go right back around and tell him to go to a known dangerous school for a year?"

Mr. Blackbourne pursed his lips. They had been over this, but with Kota's strange behavior, it was likely triggering her response now.

"It's an opportunity," Mr. Blackbourne said.

"You said he'd get into college this year," she said. "And then suddenly change your mind."

"I didn't," Mr. Blackbourne said. "He did. The others wanted in on this particular program and he wanted to join them. He had every opportunity to go to college. In fact, the classes he is taking this year are for concurrent college credit. It's essentially the same, but he's going to get to stay in an environment with kids his own age."

She pressed a fingertip to a spot between her eyebrows and pressed like she had a

headache. "I get it. I do. I usually don't mind these crazy volunteer projects. An exchange program to help build a new curriculum system for next year. You've said as much. But lately..." She paused, choosing her words. "Lately, I'm wondering if maybe these projects aren't holding Kota back from whatever it is he wants to do with his life. And it is clearly getting to be too much."

The implications hung heavy in the air between them. Mr. Blackbourne recognized the precipice they were approaching – one wrong step, and years of careful work could unravel. Erica Lee had been through a lot, and trust was not easily earned, or kept, with her. After the twisted betrayal and abuse by her husband, and everything she had been through, she was getting more protective of her son and daughter.

"I understand your concerns," he said finally. "And I assure you, Kota's well-being is our primary—"

"Save it." Her tone was tired rather than angry. "Just... ease up on him. Please. Let him have some time to be young." She picked up her coffee again, a clear dismissal. "I have patients to check on."

Mr. Blackbourne stood, recognizing when a strategic retreat was necessary. "Of course. Thank you for your time."

He left the break room, Winchester momentarily forgotten as he processed the implications of this conversation. Erica's warning had been clear – back off, or risk losing access entirely. And her timing... was it a coincidence she'd intercepted him here? Or had she been watching, waiting?

He paused for one moment, blinking as he registered what had just happened. She was on break, had come out of the break room to find him. She could have been coming out for a number of reasons, but the likelihood she just randomly popped out and spotted him...

Sometimes too many coincidences pointed at something important.

His phone buzzed. Luke had sent a message. He could see Winchester upstairs in a window, looking out, right at the BMW. They were compromised.

Too close. Winchester came here to escape them, had known he was being followed. And if Kota's mother worked here, that was yet another reason to not continue pursuit of Winchester.

As he walked back to the BMW, Mr. Blackbourne's mind was already shifting gears. They needed to end this investigation, clean up loose ends, pull the team back. But more concerning was Erica's behavior. Her mistrust of the Academy wasn't new, but this level of active intervention was atypical.

He'd have to handle the Lee household carefully going forward. Very carefully indeed.

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North and Dr. Green eventually called in and said that Jack Winchester was an obvious drunkard and there wasn't much else to do with him. They asked about leaving a tracker on him.

Mr. Blackborne had to decline the idea.

Victor and Gabriel were still searching for the computer. However, with Erica's hospital being Wil Winchester's obvious chosen safe hideout, and the driver of the white sedan being a student as well, there were too many variables to continue. Too close to home. Also too many likely people who could have carried the computer out, and likely had already done so. That computer could be anywhere by now. Another loss.

Mr. Blackbourne had Luke come with him away from the hospital before they could ruin things any further. Wil perhaps knew Luke's face, because he had punched it, this was all likely too close, too personal, for either of them to continue.

Mr. Blackbourne kept his exchange with Mrs. Lee to himself. He didn't want the others reacting to what she had said, maybe trying to talk her into it more. Erica's cleverness would see right through it, and she would think Mr. Blackbourne had sent them to say something to her.

Mr. Blackbourne, however, returned to Sunnyvale Court. He parked his car in the parking lot of the church. He had Luke remain in the car, to keep an eye out for Dr. Green and North, who would be there shortly for an exchange after Victor and Gabriel had picked them up. They all needed to reorganize themselves to go to their appropriate destinations.

However, he left Luke alone for a moment, and Mr. Blackbourne walked alone through the woods behind Nathan's house. Through the back gate, he crept quietly. Out of habit, he checked just in case Mr. Griffin was around. When it was evident he wasn't there, Mr. Blackbourne approached the rear sliding door of the house and knocked quietly on the glass.

Nathan answered, looking rather pale. "We gave it up, huh?" he said. "I heard from Luke."

Mr. Blackbourne nodded and spoke quietly. "Yes. We're quite finished with the motel." He paused. "Why are you here?"

Nathan retreated further into his house, walking barefoot across the wooden floor. "Kota has me keeping watch from a different angle, and to stay here in case she came here for some reason."

Right. Miss Sorenson. "She would come here?"

Nathan shrugged. "Maybe. I mean, maybe to yell at me."

"What did you say, exactly?"

Nathan entered his kitchen, where he had set up a chair. There was an empty soda can beside it, and binoculars, just like Kota had done. "I was saying something you said about picking up stray dogs. I think she thought I was referencing her as a stray dog. You know, in a negative way."

Mr. Blackbourne blinked. "I said that about someone else."

"Right," Nathan said. He sighed and he sat down heavily on the chair. It creaked under his frame but he settled, gazing out the window without the binoculars into the

night. “Look, it’s a long story. I don’t even know why I brought it up at the time. She was coming up behind us while I was talking and she ran off before I even had any sort of chance to explain it.”

Mr. Blackbourne looked out the window, across the street to the Lee residence. “Are you okay?” he asked with some concern.

Nathan was quiet for a long moment. “I know I mess up sometimes, but this time, it feels even worse. Because I can’t even fix it. At least not until she lets me.”

“We all mess up,” Mr. Blackbourne said, trying to be reassuring. “We do since birth.” He looked at Nathan. “Do you remember learning to walk?”

Nathan sighed. “No.”

“You probably fell down a few times. Maybe dozens of times. But children don’t think they messed up and quit, and mope about it. They get up and do it again until they are successful. Because they don’t know how to quit yet.”

Nathan threw him a look, those serious blue eyes studying him skeptically. “You don’t mess up.”

“I do,” he said. “More than you know.” He suddenly moved away from the window. “I’m going to go check on Mr. Lee.”

Mr. Blackbourne crossed the street carefully, keeping to the shadows. He entered through the front door this time. Mrs. Lee was likely still at work. He wondered where Kota’s sister was briefly, but her light was off at the moment and she wasn’t in the living room. At a friend’s house perhaps?

The dim light from the outside lamppost flickered across Kota Lee's bedroom as Mr.

Blackbourne observed his family leader from the top of the stairs. Kota remained at his post by the window, binoculars set aside but within easy reach, his posture suggesting both exhaustion and determination. The room itself told a story – papers scattered across the desk, surveillance equipment carefully arranged, the detritus of sleepless nights spent watching and waiting.

"We're too compromised to continue the case," Mr. Blackbourne reported, his voice measured. "We need to back off."

Kota didn't turn from the window. "Did you find the computer?"

"No. And we won't be pursuing that lead any further." Mr. Blackbourne stepped into the room, careful to avoid the creaking floor under the carpet of the center of the room he was aware of. "I will probably contact Dr. Roberts, who will be assigning another team to handle the situation."

This drew a slight reaction – a tensing of Kota's shoulders, though his gaze remained fixed on the house across the street. "Will he be disappointed?"

"Potentially." Mr. Blackbourne moved to stand beside him, following his line of sight to the gray house where Miss Sorenson resided. He knew this now. The Sorenson household. However, he refrained from asking questions. For now. "Though I suspect we would have reached this conclusion regardless. The situation at the motel has too many variables, too many unknown players. I believe you and those who got letters were meant to make friends slowly. Naturally. We went about it the wrong way with observation tactics. He is too wary, too careful. It might even be impossible to win his trust now."

He didn't tell him about a growing suspicion about the letters, but he wanted to talk to Dr. Roberts first about it. It was concerning enough to think of it.

Mr. Blackbourne had a thought. The girl. The thief. There was something different about her. Perhaps not their team, but another one, could work their way to Wil through her. Wil still lied to her, so there was a chance even that wouldn't work, but there was still a chance.

But not for their group.

Kota nodded absently, then suddenly straightened. Mr. Blackbourne noted the change in his posture, the sharp intake of breath. Across the street, a slight figure had emerged from the house – Miss Sorenson, carrying what appeared to be a bundle of clothes and other items. She paused at her driveway, glancing up and down the street before moving purposefully toward the Lee residence.

Mr. Blackbourne watched as Kota's hands gripped the windowsill, his knuckles white with tension. He seemed frozen between observation and action, duty and desire.

There was something complicated going on here. But this past mission with Winchester made it more clear to Mr. Blackbourne now. They couldn't always get familiar with people from a distance, with observation and spy equipment. Sometimes intervention was required right from the start.

And maybe that was the better way.

"You should go to her," Mr. Blackbourne said quietly.

Kota turned then, surprise evident in his expression. "Sir?"

"Whatever Mr. Griffin said, whatever damage has been done, it needs to be addressed. Repair the friendship. And figure out what you are wanting to find out directly." Mr. Blackbourne adjusted his glasses, choosing his next words carefully. "Some missions require a different kind of vigilance, Mr. Lee."

Understanding flickered across Kota's features, followed by something that might have been relief. He stepped back from the window, hesitated for just a moment, then moved toward the stairs.

Mr. Blackbourne took his place at the window, watching as Kota emerged from the house below. Miss Sorenson had nearly reached the road between Kota's house and Nathan's. Even from this distance, Mr. Blackbourne could read the wariness in her posture, the way she seemed on the verge of retreat, the blush, the look of fear.

But she didn't run when Kota spoke to her. And Kota, displaying the patience that had made him such an effective leader, spoke and encouraged her to stay.

As Mr. Blackbourne observed their careful dance below, he thought of his earlier encounter with Erica Lee. Her warnings echoed in his mind, her concerns about the Academy's influence over her son. It was confirmation he'd made the right decision to keep that conversation private, at least for now. The situation was delicate enough without adding maternal disapproval to the mix.

Erica had been wrong. But maybe she'd learn on her own if Miss Sorenson remained around. It wasn't the Academy causing Kota to become neglectful and stay up late. On the contrary, it was Kota's own decision. His choice to focus on this Sang Sorenson.

Mr. Blackbourne couldn't blame him. Where Winchester had eluded and even attacked their team when caught snooping, Sorenson seemed wary, but intrigued, gentle and kind. The type of soul the Academy loved to help, if help was needed.

You could only ever help the willing.

The sudden embrace of Kota to Miss Sorenson surprised him and drew him out of his thoughts. Though Mr. Blackbourne couldn't hear their conversation, he could see the

gradual relaxation of her shoulders.

Mr. Blackbourne stepped back from the window, allowing them their privacy. He would need to be more careful about his visits to the Lee household when Erica was present, would need to navigate her growing suspicions with exceptional care. But watching Kota and Miss Sorenson below, he couldn't help but feel that perhaps Erica's fears were misplaced.

Kota was doing what he was taught to do, yes, but he was doing what he wanted, and if Erica only knew what was going on, maybe she would understand. He'd have to give it time. Let her see it with her own eyes.

Mr. Blackbourne adjusted his coat, preparing to leave. He had a meeting with Dr. Roberts to prepare for, a case to officially close. But as he descended the stairs, he found himself hoping that whatever was beginning here – between Kota and Miss Sorenson, between this strange girl and his team – would prove worth the complications it would inevitably bring.

After all, the most important missions rarely announced themselves as such. They simply appeared one day, carrying a bundle of clothes, looking for someone to trust.

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The diner's booth felt unusually confining as Mr. Blackbourne presented his case to Dr. Roberts. He had to be strategic, he knew. He needed to not give him any information that would be detrimental to whatever he decided to do.

After the waitress brought them both sandwiches and soup bowls, they pretended to eat, but kept talking to each other.

"First, before I start, I need to know something," Mr. Blackbourne said. "Who sent the letter?"

The older man sat quietly, fingers steepled beneath his chin, his expression revealing nothing. "I asked around after you called me in for this meeting. And I haven't found out who yet. I had my suspicions but..." He paused. "No, I don't want to think like that."

Mr. Blackbourne nodded. He spooned some soup, and sipped it absently before speaking again. "I've been considering a particular idea about it. Which is very concerning." He didn't dare think it out loud. It was unfathomable.

That the letter had come outside the cademy completely. Because anyone trained within the cademy would not send a team to such a location to recruit someone without having done some background first, and none of the ones they'd seen would likely qualify, not a thief or someone so reactionary as Wil had been. The letter had been unclear who exactly they were recommending.

"I'll figure it out," Dr. Roberts said. "Because I think I know what you are suggesting and I don't like it. And we're guessing at best." His gaze darkened and he picked apart

the bread of his sandwich. "But I need to come at this from a different angle."

Mr. Blackbourne continued to eat quietly, giving Dr. Roberts time to consider before giving him any further information. Sometimes going in blind on a job was critical. No prejudice meant an open mind, seeing things anew. To look genuinely surprised when bumping into suspects. In this case, it was needed.

At the very least, this was a potential project for the academy to address. It wasn't ideal for anyone to live in a shady motel with drug dealers around, but teenagers especially. They would at the very least try to correct that.

He looked up at Mr. Blackbourne. "I need you to tell me very little, but give me one place to start from. Your best bet."

Mr. Blackbourne considered his words carefully. He didn't want to send him to the motel. Not yet. He also didn't want to identify the ones they were looking for. "Citadel Mall has been getting some unusual activity..." That should be enough. The girl thief would likely return. She had been there quite often.

Dr. Roberts cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Stop there. location is good. I may be handling this personally. At least initially."

Mr. Blackbourne nodded approvingly. If he got stuck, he'd come back with questions, but it was unlikely he would get stuck. Mr. Blackbourne and his team rarely gave up jobs, so their retreat meant they needed a quality team up for the task. Dr. Roberts was one of the best among the academy, and highly respected.

Dr. Roberts nodded slowly, then pressed a button on his phone sitting on the table. "If you're quite finished securing things, would you come over?"

The door of the diner opened within a few moments, and a young man, tall, with blue eyes and wearing a T-shirt with a video game controller emblem, stepped deliberately

toward their booth in the back. His presence wasn't entirely unexpected – Mr. Blackbourne had suspected another team would be taking over – but something in his demeanor suggested this wasn't a simple case transfer.

"Mr. Blackbourne," he greeted him with a slight nod.

Dr. Roberts motioned to him. "This is Corey. Though I suspect you might not meet again for a while. If you see him around, you should be cautious," he told Mr. Blackbourne.

"Do feel free to come to me if you have any questions," Mr. Blackbourne said.

Corey took a seat, his casual posture relaying he wasn't at all worried about the situation. "When Dr. Roberts said you had something for us, I wasn't even sure we should meet." His hand lifted in the air, drawing something with a finger on an invisible chalkboard only he could see. "I might have to work you out of the equation."

Mr. Blackbourne had seen such behavior from other cademy members. Most were brilliant within their own right, with a few quirks. He was sure even he had his own others might find strange. "I won't talk about it anymore."

Corey's lips lifted into a friendly smile. "Thanks. It sucks, I know. It looks like you're dying to say something."

"No," Mr. Blackbourne said. They had gone in with little information, and if it wasn't for their team being distracted, and far too connected, they would have kept at it until it was solved. "This is perfect. The less you know at the start, the better." It would take time to figure out the girl thief and track her. That would ensure Wil Winchester had time to cool off, and approaching the sister might have been the smarter move overall.

The cademy did not know failure. They only tried again in different ways. new team. new angle. He didn't even say recruit like the letters had suggested. Dr. Roberts could figure out who sent the letter on his own. Corey and whatever team he was on, they could figure out the girl and go from there. Perhaps not for recruitment, but certainly to extend an olive branch and possibly change their lives. They may even decide to do so without them ever knowing who did it.

Mr. Blackbourne continued. "This is the right decision. Go in blind. nd good luck."

"Your team's involvement ends here," Dr. Roberts stated. "The situation at shley Waters requires your full attention."

"Understood." Mr. Blackbourne stood, recognizing the dismissal. "We've extracted ourselves entirely." Mr. Blackbourne gathered his cell phone sitting on the table, mind already shifting to the challenges awaiting at shley Waters. Principal Hendrick's financial discrepancies, the overcrowding issues, the systematic suppression of student advancement – all problems requiring careful investigation and delicate handling.

He'd have to face Wil again, of course, as he had promised to test him to advance him in school. But he'd have to keep tight-lipped about what he knew. Everything before had been incidental, and he had to show no special attention to Wil. He might have to look up other smart students and test them out of classes to give Wil a sense that he did this for everyone. That Wil was treated no different than anyone else. He had to pretend he was just a school employee and nothing more.

He might even send Ms. Walter to conduct the tests and manage Wil from here on out to be even less involved.

Dr. Roberts spoke again. "Owen." The use of his first name made Mr. Blackbourne pause. "bout the Lee situation..."

Mr. Blackbourne pursed his lips. After all, Kota was supposed to be handling this entire operation, not Mr. Blackbourne. The changes in use of different members of the team was unusual and likely Dr. Roberts wanted to know why.

And Mr. Blackbourne already had a favor to ask of Dr. Roberts. He wanted to know everything he could about Sang Sorenson. "I... have something to ask you about with that. But another time," Mr. Blackbourne said firmly. "I'll send word about it soon." He needed time to consider what to tell the academy about Miss Sorenson, if there was anything to reveal.

He had a feeling there was. Within a matter of days, she had already unwittingly meddled in an academy project, and with being a student at Shley Waters, would likely be thrust into another, without even knowing it. Especially as Kota and the others seemed very concerned with her.

But he didn't know anything really. Nothing tangible to tell Dr. Roberts. Was that why Kota wasn't telling him? Because Mr. Blackbourne reported most things to others within the academy? Likely so.

Dr. Roberts didn't appear at all pleased, but he respected his answer.

Mr. Blackbourne left the diner, heading to his BMW in the lot. Dr. Green sat in the passenger seat, half asleep already. He sat up as Mr. Blackbourne opened the car door, a half snore cut short. He wiped at his face. "How did it go?"

Mr. Blackbourne sat in the driver's seat. "I didn't tell him about your phone."

Dr. Green's eyes widened. "What? Why? You usually tell him everything."

"We were passing it on blindly. So I couldn't. Telling him would have informed them of the pickpocketing, which meant knowing something."

Dr. Green sat back in the leather seat, pressing a palm to his face. “Victor said my old phone was copied to the new one I got, before I got my old one back. That kid, whoever did it, is a flat out genius. If it was Wil or the other ones...”

“They’ll figure it out,” Mr. Blackbourne said. “But we have to stop here. Not if we’re at the school and Wil is there. We have to pretend we know nothing.”

“So I have to turn the phone back on?”

Mr. Blackbourne questioned the decision for a moment. “Keep it on for a couple of weeks, doing your normal, every day routine. and then we’ll have it reported stolen officially later and you can swap. Maybe. We might just let this play out and see if anything happens. Just be careful.”

“It’s still in the trunk,” Dr. Green said. He ran a hand over his messy sandy blonde hair. “One more thing on the to do list.”

“Iways,” Mr. Blackbourne said.

The drive back into Charleston gave Mr. Blackbourne time to process the day's revelations. The Winchester case may have been over, but they would deal with the aftermath. Blackbourne’s team, however, was already shifting, new alliances and priorities emerging that would require careful management. They would have to be completely hands off of Wil for the foreseeable future. Not unkind, but they couldn’t get close or press to become friends. They had gotten too close, and they had to play it off as best as they could that they were not interested in Wil. That the entire thing was somehow a coincidence. Only time and feigned disinterest would allow for that to happen.

The upcoming school year at shley Waters loomed ahead. From that point on, he would be very critical about any potential cademy side projects that might distract them.

If he wanted to graduate his entire team in one go, he had to.

The only team to successfully graduate in such a way.

But as he reviewed his mental notes, Mr. Blackbourne found his thoughts returning to Miss Sorenson. Her presence had already catalyzed significant changes within his team, and he suspected they had only begun to see the ripple effects of her arrival.

Her face.

Those eyes.

He thought of her in Kota's arms. He thought of her when she first came into the back office at the school.

He thought of her voice, the 'thank you.' The one just for him, after changing her class schedule.

What was happening? He should be focused. Still, he knew what he wanted to do, before he did any other cademy work or whatever else tonight.

He had violin lessons to prepare for.

Thank you for reading this series. If you enjoyed this Meeting Sang Series, you might also enjoy my other books available.