

8

CHRISTA SCHNICK

His breath smelled. Onions, garlic, pepper--maybe a hint of coffee mixed with cream cheese. Remnants of an Everything Bagel, she assumed. Every time he opened up his mouth the smell wafted over, and all she could do to keep herself from making a face was bite the inside of her cheek. It was just another something on the list of things that were beginning to make her uncomfortable, right behind the plastic chair that made her back ache and the chill that the air vent was continuously pumping into the small room. She had long since lost track of the time. Minutes dragged on and began to feel like hours, especially since the man in front of her kept asking the same three questions and trying to get her to speak about something that she very clearly did not want to talk about.

On the table in front of her, laid out in a pattern that brought her to tears every time she looked down, were a series of photographs of a mangled Jeep. Cherry red with Washington plates and a baseball sticker in the back window. The entire car had flipped over onto its top, the windshield busted and blood staining the fabric of the grey interior. Crime scene tape was visible in some of the photos, and a body bag visible in others.

Underneath that yellow plastic sheet was her boyfriend of nearly a year, Matthew Gable. They had been on their way home from his parent's house, having spent the night, when Matt lost control of the car while going around the curve of Beddingham Lane, and through the guardrails they went. He had hit his head on the steering wheel long before the airbag deployed, and once it did it only damaged his head further. He was dead before the car stopped rolling down the hill, and she considered herself lucky to be alive.

"Laura, I just want to know what happened." The detective was calm, the calmest that he had been the entire time they had been in this room together. She didn't like it. He had started the interview by grilling her time and time again about alcohol or medications that he may have been on--searching desperately for any reason why Matthew may have lost control of the vehicle. She didn't have an answer for him besides the fact that he simply lost control of the car. That was it. That's all she knew.

The day that she had met Matt was a day unlike any other. It was the first day of spring classes, and she had just transferred to the college from

its community counterpart some twenty miles down the road. It was a bigger campus than she was used to, and she wasn't exactly sure how to navigate, but Matt had spotted her and recognized her need and helped her find her classes. It was a cliché sort of way of meeting someone, sure, but it worked, and within weeks they were inseparable. Within a few months, they were together.

From the moment she had met him, Laura had been drawn to Matt's eyes. They were as brown as brown could be, but they never failed to brighten when he was telling a really dumb joke or sparkle when the sun hit them just right. He was, for all intents and purposes, a pretty average guy to most of the world, with an average style of dress and brown hair that he could never quite style correctly, but to Laura he was anything but. His lanky frame and the lack of athleticism were unapologetically her type, and she adored his quirky sense of dress, right down to his checkered socks that he insisted on wearing every time he had an exam, believing that they had some sort of magical qualities that would help him pass the test. She always told him he was insane, and yet he never failed a single test.

He'd bought her a pair. Ones that were checkered with pink and blue, and that rose to her mid-shin. She wore them almost all the time, even if she didn't like admitting it.

Laura took a deep breath and wiped at her eyes, where fresh tears were beginning to form and spill over. "Look, I've told you absolutely everything that I can. I don't know what else to tell you--it was a car crash. We-we were going around the bend, he lost control, and we went over." Her own arms were covered in abrasions, ranging from deep cuts to bruises that were turning into a severe purple that ached when touched. Around her right eye, there was a slight bruise forming, something she told the Detective happened when she hit the dashboard before the airbag deployed. "We had woken up maybe twenty minutes prior...didn't even grab breakfast, and we left his parent's place. No alcohol, no medications. It was just an accident. Alright?" She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, wrapping an arm up and around her neck to rub at a sore spot, "Just an accident."

It had been a bright day. Warm, sunny. The perfect day to ride with the top down on the Jeep. Laura always found herself looking forward to those moments, those moments when time just slowed down and all she

had to worry about was being there with Matt. There was nothing else that she needed to do, nowhere else she needed to be. She had reached over to grab his hand when it happened. One minute, they were swiftly cruising around the bend, the next, hurtling over the guardrail and rolling as the car tumbled down the hill.

Laura's voice was still hoarse from screaming.

"I lost the boy that I loved. And I don't want to answer any more questions because I don't have any more answers. You're asking me the same things over and over again and I don't understand. I loved Matt with everything that I had, with every fiber of my being, and you sitting here, showing me these pictures is only making the loss greater. I haven't even had time to process this."

Laura prepared to bite the inside of her cheek as the Detective opened his mouth to say something, but found that she never had to, as the interview was interrupted. The door opened and there stood another man, whom she assumed was a detective in his own right, and he held a thick stack of manila envelopes in his hands. Each folder was filled to the brim, to the point where they barely stayed closed, and she paused, feeling her heart rate silently pick up speed at the sight--everything having to do with the car crash was already right in front of her. What was in those envelopes?

The overflowing files transferred hands, and before the Detective sat back down, he opened the file and began to flick through the pages, every once in awhile flicking his eyes over the brim of a page to look at Laura. "Had you and Matt had any problems?"

Laura was exhausted, upset, and drained. All she wanted was to go home so she could be alone and grieve in peace. Watching from the back of the ambulance as they wheeled the body bag away was one of the hardest things that Laura had ever had to do, and her lower lip trembled immensely at the mere thought of it.

The question caught her completely off guard, leading to a stammering, "What?"

"Problems. You know, outside the usual couple stuff?"

She bit down on the inside of her lip, resolving to tap on the desk with her fingers. She knew that there hadn't been any problems between the two of them besides the 'usual couple stuff' like petty arguments. Yet the Detective was prying into a life he was sure that Laura had, and so she humored him by sorting through her thoughts for a few more moments.

"No, can't say that we did."

The Detective sat back down in his chair, sending a loud screech echoing through the room as he scoot closer to the table so that he could lean his arms against its surface. "See, I don't think you're telling me the truth. I don't think Matt had any problems with you, I think you had problems with him." Before she could even open her mouth to ask him what he was talking about, he continued, "I've got this feeling in my gut,

you know? Something isn't right here, so we're going to sit here until you tell me exactly what happened."

She didn't know what to say, so she just stared at the Detective, her lips pressed in a firm line. No longer was her body language that of a trembling woman, instead she had taken on the defensive, crossing her arms over her chest and sucking harshly on the inside of her lip. Laura was beginning to get agitated with the consistent proding into her life.

"Just like John's case, and Sam's, and Paul's," with every name came a new picture, a new stack of paper, laid out in front of her just like the accident pictures. Laura merely glanced at the photos of the young men--all of them nearly carbon copies of one another--before looking back at the Detective, her expression unflinching. "And David's, and Nick's, and Max's, and Carter's." Four more photos were added to the pile. "Baseball accident, car crash, hiking incident," The Detective kept his eyes locked on Laura's face as he tapped on each of the photos in front of her, "Car crash again, stairs, skiing, the common concussion." He sat back in the chair, folding his arms across his chest, "All seven of them died because of complications from some sort of head trauma. And, usually, head trauma isn't investigated--it happens, it sucks, but it happens."

Laura cinched her eyes shut, clenching her fists in her lap and shaking her head at the Detective's claims, "I don't know what you're trying to imply--"

"Who's to say I'm implying anything, Laura?"

She opened her eyes to see the Detective staring her down from across the table, his gaze unwavering. If his breath hadn't been doing a good job at making her uneasy, his stare would've done just fine. "You're very clearly trying to accuse me of something."

He shrugged, "No, I haven't accused you of anything."

He wasn't giving her anything to work with, and it was driving her nuts. Within a span of fifteen minutes her demeanor had gone from devastated, to agitated, and now to fidgety. She went quiet for a few moments, taking her time and looking at all the pictures laid out in front of her, all the while bouncing her leg up and down and rubbing her thumb against her middle finger. They all had the same eyes, the same smile. They did have promising futures, she'd give them that. Some of them she had dated for years, some of them for a few months. Yet all of them had the common quality of being a nobody, of being someone that nobody would truly miss if they were to suddenly drop off the map.

Her eye throbbed to the point where it felt like her heart had leaped into her cheekbone, and she bit harshly on her lower lip. It was the first time that she had actually gotten hurt--the other times she had been more careful. More calculated. But she had gotten antsy this time. Things were beginning to take too long, and she wanted to move on, to get the hell out of dodge before things went south.

The longer she sat in silence, though, the more Laura came to realize that it wouldn't have mattered if she had gotten out of town. Somewhere along the line, she had messed up, she had messed up badly. And because she had messed up, they were going to find her eventually. It was only a matter of time, and there was never enough time in the world to try and get out of the country, to go dark and disappear.

Laura puffed out a sigh and leaned forward against the table, "You're not a detective, are you?"

The man across from her slowly shook his head. "Feds?"

A nod.

She sighed once more, the breath rushing from her lungs and leaving her lightheaded. The pictures that remained in front of her were no more than mere decorations to anoint the table with. She knew their faces, she knew their names. And, after years of seemingly flying under the radar, Laura knew she was done for.

So, with a radiant smile, Laura blinked at the Agent across from her and said in her softest voice, "I want a lawyer."