

Ster tapped his pen against his teeth. Nothing.

There was a reason a bunch of cops brainstormed during this part of the investigation. Somebody would have a different perspective, a piece of information no one else had picked up on, or a crazy wild **hair** that led them in the right direction, like the time Rich realized a zealous vegan had lied about shopping at her friend's upscale shoe shop—that sold only leather shoes. Ster had been a good detective, yes, but in concert with the others. This was the first time he'd worked a case by himself. Maybe he couldn't do it.

He hadn't seen any of his old crew in dog years. Missed the bastards, but whenever he called, they were busy. He got it. Didn't like it, but got it.

He got up to pour himself another cup of coffee. Something was bugging him about the conversation last night. There was that pause when he asked Bonnie if Jane had confided in someone else. Why? What was she hiding?

And the first time he met Luis he said he didn't know Fuzzy's mother. Later he said he'd seen her on the MAX. Ster felt like Luis was telling the truth both times. Maybe he was. Maybe he had seen her but didn't know her. Plus the guy was an alcoholic. Probably not the best memory retention.

Another piece of the conversation didn't fit with the puzzle as Ster had laid it out. He could feel the idea just beyond his reach, like a name on the tip of his tongue. He was just about to catch the errant thought when he heard Fuzzy humming upstairs, obviously awake. Ster put aside Lydia for now. Yeah, he had to find her, but he also needed to be a grandfather.

Ster gave Fuzzy a bath and dressed him in his one set of clothes and last diaper, trying to ignore his worries about Lydia and stay focused on the task at hand. To be present, as Alice used to say. She used to say that to him a lot.

Ster started down the stairs toward the kitchen, thinking about Alice, then realized Fuzzy wasn't behind him. So much for being present.

Commented [CB7]: Though wild hare sounds like it'd make the most sense, the saying is "wild hair."

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Commented [CB8]: I can see how Ster's voice has been punched up from the previous draft, and it's working really well.

CHAPTER 34

“Like sew-sew?” said Harper. “Not really. I’m a so-so sewer. Nice, right? So-so sewer?”

“Nice.” This could work. God, Ster hoped so. He couldn’t miss this opportunity to find Lydia. “Do you think you could sew the ear back on Fuzzy’s hoody? He’s looking lop-sided.”

“My roommate can probably do it. Bring it by here.”

“Great. I’ll drop him off around one.”

“Wait, him or the hoody?”

“He throws a fit if you try to take it away from him, so I thought maybe you could watch him for a couple hours and get the ear sewed on. I could pick him up around six. Or seven.”

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“Let me check. . . . Nope, I’m still at work. Which you knew because you called me at the library.”

“Can’t you put him in Story Time or something?” It was probably impossible and a huge favor to ask of a stranger, but Ster didn’t have any better ideas.

A pause. “Okay, since you’re a library patron and a former cop I know you know that you don’t just dump little kids off in the library, so I’m going to assume that you need to do something without Fuzzy around...”

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“The call was received at five-twenty-eight p.m. on December fifteenth and originated from a pay phone by the Skidmore Fountain. One of the few remaining ones around.”

“From Old Town after dark. Must be part of the community there.” Most Portlanders stayed away from that part of town after dark.

“Probably. Maybe a friend of Jane’s. By the way, how did he take it?” Will nodded at Fuzzy. “I mean, the news about his mom?”

“Mama?” Fuzzy stopped eating and looked at Will, then at the door, as if his mother might be right outside. “Mama?”

“No,” Ster said. “She’s not here. She’s not coming.” He started picking pepperoni off another slice. “Do you want more pizza?” he asked Fuzzy.

“That seems like a lot of pizza for a little—oh.” Will’s face said, “*Oh, I get it, a distraction,*” then “*Wait, you didn’t tell him?*” then “*Really?*” Yeah, an open book.

“He wouldn’t understand,” Ster said. Of course, Fuzzy chose that moment to look at them both with a very adult frown.

“You have to tell him. You owe it to—”

“Okay, okay.” Ster put down his slice of pizza and scooted his chair closer to Fuzzy’s. He took a deep breath. “Fuzzy, about your mother...”

“Mama?” The boy’s dark eyes looked somehow darker. Ster wondered for the hundredth time in his life how eyes could say so much.

“Yes, your mama.” Fuzzy didn’t break eye contact. “She’s not coming back.”

His little brow knit in confusion. “Not coming?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

Will had come around beside them. He patted Fuzzy’s shoulder. “But you’ll have a nice life here with—”

Commented [CB25]: For this situation - someone reading the inner thoughts of another person, I’d choose either quotation marks or italics but not both. Italics would be more consistent with the Chicago Guide for Copyediting Fiction, and less easily confused with spoken dialogue.

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CHAPTER 46

“Did you hear something?” Ster said to Will.

“Yeah.” Will sat across the kitchen table on his phone. “I think it was a mouse. Under that blanket.”

“Not a mouse.” Fuzzy’s face peeked out from the blanket, which was draped between two hardback chairs. “Me.”

The blanket fort had been Will’s idea, and it was genius. Fuzzy had drug his few toys inside and played some game which involved trucks, from the sound of it, and left Ster and Will to work uninterrupted. Ster perused the NamUs site again, looking for a missing woman who fit the real Jane Doe’s description, ~~while~~ Will checked the REGION database to see if Jane or Lydia had any brushes with the law.

They’d worked for nearly an hour when Fuzzy farted loudly and an unmistakable smell wafted over from the fort. Now Ster said, “I think I see it. It’s an awfully big mouse.”

“Me!” Fuzzy toddled out of the fort, dragging his bunny behind him.

“Hey, it’s Fuzzy. I wonder if he’d like a cookie after a diaper change?” For whatever reason, the boy had recently decided he did not like having his diaper changed, and Ster was not above bribery.

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