

# CS HIGH



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# 1

**livor mortis:** *a purplish discoloration of the skin starting twenty minutes to three hours after death*

## TUESDAY MORNING, ZERO HOUR

Simon ripped the sheet of notebook paper out of his binder, crumpled it into a tight ball, and flung it across the room. *Ping.* It ricocheted off the whiteboard and landed in a heap of a dozen others around the perimeter of the recycle bin. *So much for a basketball scholarship,* he thought. He bit the eraser off his pencil and spat it out. At this rate, he could kiss off his math scholarship, too.

He glanced at the clock above the teacher's desk. Thirty-eight seconds. Why couldn't he differentiate the function of  $f(x) = e^{(3x)}$ ? This was elementary math. Calculus 101, not multivariable. He had solved more difficult equations in fourth grade.

Simon's hand shook as he plugged another set of numbers into his graphing calculator. *Why can't I solve this? Is there something wrong with my brain's left parietal lobe?* He'd never had such difficulty before. "Brilliant," teachers wrote on his report cards. "A gentleman and scholar." Simon had never earned anything less than an A+ in any course at Pinehurst Academy, even advanced placement. He had always been able to solve Mr. Smithson's math problems.

Until now.

Another peek at the clock. Twenty-three seconds. Sweat pooled under his armpits.

Simon looked to his left. Bobby Tate had just set his pencil down and was leaning back in his desk, his hands folded behind his head and a snotty grin plastered on his face. *Seriously? Impossible.* No way had Bobby solved the problem that he couldn't. Simon doubted if the loser could calculate his GPA. He pushed his glasses higher up his nose. Just beyond Bobby, Marcus was furiously scribbling on his paper—in fact, all five members of the varsity

basketball team were. They didn't look stuck at all. What universe was he in? Why was nobody else struggling?

Twelve seconds. He would need a shower before his engineering class.

Simon gnawed on his lower lip and tried to focus on the paper in front of him. If the graph of  $f$  was obtained by compression, the graph of  $e^{(x)}$  was . . . That was it! All slopes were magnified by a factor of 3. The answer was  $f' = 3e^{3x}$ .

The chimes rang before his pencil touched the paper.

"Time's up," Mr. Smithson said, peering over Simon's shoulder. "You know the rules, Mr. Musgrave. Pencil down, please."

Simon stabbed his pencil on the desk so hard that its lead tip broke off. "Aaaghhh!"

A shrill buzz followed by the first notes of "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" silenced his scream.

Simon jerked awake. Unburying his arm from under the covers, he punched the snooze button on the alarm clock. Even Mozart was grating at the crack of dawn.

Pegasus, Simon's Labrador puppy, jumped off the foot of the bed and scampered out of the room. His heart racing, Simon rolled over on his back and, swallowing hard, peeped over the edge of the blanket. *Thank God.* He was in his bedroom, not a classroom. That was the last time he'd eat four scoops of triple mint fudge before going to sleep.

Simon rubbed the crust off his eyes. Without his glasses, the clock's green neon numbers were blurred.

"Oh, no!" he blurted and jumped out of bed. He was late.

It was Tuesday. He couldn't be late on Tuesday.

Luckily, he had ironed and laid out his school uniform the night before.

\*\*\*

It was still dark when Simon and his father exited the interstate and tooled along Ocean Crest Road. "C'mon, Dad, can't you speed it up?" Simon was jamming his own foot into the floorboard, as if by miming he could get his

dad to drive faster. “Mr. Smithson’s got a problem on infinite sequences for us to work on.”

The fog had thickened overnight and reduced visibility to a few meters despite the Tesla’s climate control system, forcing his father to drive well below the posted speed limit. Martin Musgrave turned left on Academy Drive and carefully navigated around the curves and up the hill toward the campus. He signaled to turn into the school’s front parking lot and glanced over at Simon. “Good luck on your chemistry test. Stoichiometry equations can be tricky. I know you’ll do—”

“Dad! Watch out!” The Tesla’s collision warning system had activated before Simon’s scream.

A dark Mercedes sedan had bolted out of the blanket of fog and was heading directly toward them. The car nearly clipped the Tesla’s left front fender as it swerved around the bend and crossed over into their lane. Simon’s father jerked the steering wheel to the right and slammed on the brakes. The tires squealed on the wet asphalt.

Simon twisted around and looked out the rear window. The Mercedes’ red taillights disappeared down the hill.

His dad shouted several curse words that Simon had never heard him use. “Who the heck was that?”

“Don’t know.” The car wasn’t unique. Three-quarters of the parents at Pinehurst Academy drove top-of-the-line S-Class Benzes. “I only caught the last two digits of the license plate.”

“Probably some—” Martin clamped his lips shut, censoring himself this time. “Some *parent* dropping off his kid before the stock market opens. We’ll keep an eye out for it. I’ve got a few things to say to the driver.” Martin muttered several choicer words.

Simon’s heart was still pounding when his dad pulled alongside the curb in the drop-off zone in the parking lot. The only other car in the lot was Mr. Smithson’s older model but freshly detailed Volvo parked against the back fence in the area reserved for the faculty. Simon grabbed his backpack from the back seat and slammed the car door. The chapel bells chimed the half hour as his dad pulled away. If he sprinted, he could reach Hartford Hall in one minute and seven seconds—or exactly one-hundred-and-forty-two paces.

*OneTwoThreeFourFiveSix* . . . Simon darted in and out of the shadows cast by clusters of pine trees, squishing through the damp grass of the central quadrangle. He took the key Mr. Smithson had given him, but the main door to Hartford Hall was ajar. Strange. The building was usually locked this early in the morning. Maybe the others had arrived ahead of him for zero hour, which would be a first. Zero hour was the time before school reserved for club meetings, and as the youngest member of the Math Club, Simon always was the first to arrive.

Although the front door was unlocked, the hall lights were off except for the chandelier bathing the foyer in a yellowish glow. Simon's wet sneakers squeaked on the tile as he quickly walked down the dim, shadowy corridor. Mr. Smithson's classroom door was closed, and no light spilled into the hallway from underneath it. That was unusual, too. Mr. Smithson always propped open the door . . . waiting.

Simon knocked. "Mr. Smithson?"

No answer. No familiar, "Good morning, Simon. I've got a tricky one for us this morning."

Simon rapped again, a bit louder. "Mr. Smithson? Are you in there?" He placed his ear against the door. Classical music played softly in the background. Chopin. "Mr. Smithson?"

Still no answer.

How could he not be there? Mr. Smithson was never late, always arriving well before zero hour.

Slowly twisting the doorknob, Simon pushed open the door a few inches and fumbled around for the light switch. The fluorescent bulbs flickered several times before illuminating. His eyes strayed along the rows of empty desks, moving toward the front of the room, and then froze.

The teacher was slumped over his desk, motionless.

"Mr. Smithson?" Simon took a small step forward. "Are you okay?"

Even as he spoke, Simon knew it was a stupid question. The man was pitched forward on the desk with his right arm extended forward as if reaching for the pull chain on the small Tiffany lamp. His tie dangled in a pool of liquid near an overturned traveler's mug, and his left hand was knuckle-white around an amber plastic medicine vial. The gray head that Simon was so used to seeing

nodding proudly as they worked their math problems was turned to the side, its neatly trimmed beard resting on a pile of papers. Mr. Smithson's eyes behind his wire-rimmed glasses were open but vacant. The melancholic strains of "Etude in A Flat Minor" floated from the pair of stereo speakers on the bookcase.

"Are you asleep?" *Please be asleep.* "Mr. Smithson?" Simon rushed forward but stopped short of the desk, jerking back at the close-up of Mr. Smithson's huge, dark, dilated pupils and mottled purplish skin. Livor mortis had already set in.

Simon stood there a moment, motionless. *Help.* He had to get help. Where were the others? Had the Math Club meeting been canceled? His legs felt like they were made of granite, his feet trapped in sludge, but he willed them to move. Spinning sharply, he dashed out of the classroom and ran full-speed down the hallway, his backpack pounding against his shoulders. Panicked, he didn't even think about rooting for the iPhone buried at the bottom of the bag. "Someone help!" he cried.

Crashing open the door to Hartford Hall, Simon plunged into the fog and raced across the quad toward the administration building. *Please someone be there. Please someone be there.*

The steps were slick, but he bounded up them two at a time anyway, slipping just once. Bashing his knee sharply on the brick barely slowed him. Using the iron railing, he launched himself up the last steps and slammed into Marcus Jackson, who had just come through the security office door.

"Whoa! Slow down, buddy!" Marcus grabbed Simon's elbow to prevent him from falling backwards. A basketball popped out from under his arm and bounced down the steps. "What're you doing, trying out for the track team?"

"Wh-where's the security guard?" Simon struggled to catch his breath. "I need help!"

"He went to unlock the back gates. What's up? Are you okay?"

Simon pulled loose and lunged at the door. "Call 9-1-1! Call 9-1-1!"

"What's wrong?" Marcus turned and peered into the fog. "Is there a fire?" He craned his neck as if looking for smoke.

Simon threw the office door wide open and bolted in. "Mr. Smithson's dead!"

## 2

**Kastle-Meyer test:** *a chemical test to identify blood*

### **MONDAY MORNING, THE DAY BEFORE**

“Oh my gosh! Is that blood?” Laurel nearly broke Marcus’s arm as she tried to push past him into the classroom.

“Ow,” he squawked as her backpack slipped off her shoulder and fell on his foot. He bit back the words on his tongue, instead grabbing the sleeve of her polo shirt and yanking her back. “Don’t! Can’t you see the glass?”

“Not with you blocking the door.” She tried knocking his hand free, but the six-foot-four basketball player held tight. He made her settle for looking under his armpit.

Not that what she saw would make any sense. Their high school forensic science lab looked like a riot scene. Four student desks were overturned at the front of the room, and broken pieces of glass were scattered across the floor along with several wet, red drops. *Plink . . . plink . . . plink*. Marcus’s eyes focused on the teacher’s desk where droplets of brownish liquid fell from a venti-sized paper cup tipped over on the desk, collecting in a puddle on the linoleum.

“What happened?” Laurel asked. “Did somebody get hurt?” She twisted and pulled without success. “Move!”

Marcus wasn’t about to let her go. By now their other classmates had gathered in front of the door and strained to see inside room 102.

“What’s going on?” a boy’s nasal voice shouted from the back of the group. “Let us in!”

Marcus assessed the scene. Somebody had been thorough to the point of leaving a roll of crime scene tape and a box of disposable nitrile gloves for them on the epoxy blacktopped lab counter nearest the door. Marcus knew what to do from here. He had watched every episode of every season of CSI—the original Las Vegas series and the half-dozen spin-offs—at least twice. He was grateful to late-night cable TV, Netflix, and Amazon Prime for the reruns. His



favorite iconic Vegas character, Grissom, would take charge and make sure a crime scene wasn't contaminated. It didn't matter to Marcus that his idol had been written out of the show at the end of season 9 and was last seen trekking through a rain forest with a butterfly net. Grissom would always be The Man. Better than Cumberbatch's Sherlock. The jury was still out on the newest Nancy Drew and Criminal Brains. There might be hope for NCIS: San Diego, but he doubted if any series would replace the original CSI. He had mourned for a week when the network had canceled the series. He hoped the rumors were true that a sequel was in the works.

Marcus raised his right arm above his head, his fingers spread wide as if taking a shot from the free throw line. "Stay back!" he commanded. "The room's off limits."

"But that's *blood*." Laurel pointed at the drops spattered on the floor. Her polished nail was redder than the drops.

"Can't handle a little blood?" Marcus let go of her sleeve and stared down at her. She was more than a foot shorter than him. He wondered how she could see anything with all that makeup on her eyes. So much black eyeliner outlined her blue eyes that she looked like a raccoon.

Laurel stared at him, as if she could read his mind. He tried to think of shooting a three-pointer in Saturday's game. "Where's Ms. Mason?" she asked.

"Don't know. She told me I could meet her before class to review for the quiz, but when I—" *Bzzzz*. Marcus's phone vibrated in his jacket pocket.

"Yo, Marco Polo. C'mon, man, this sucks," Nasal Boy said, this time much louder. "Let us in."

"Okay, folks, keep it down." Dr. Gladson, the biology teacher in the classroom next door, came into the hall, his white lab coat soiled with several rust-colored stains. The pungent odor of something formaldehyde-like permeated the corridor. "In case you haven't noticed, the bell has rung, and I've got a rabbit dissection going on." He held up a scalpel and retreated into his room, shutting the door with a sharp snap. A girl's fake shriek from inside the anatomy lab rose above the buzz of Marcus's classmates.

"Ew," Laurel said, shivering. "Cutting open dead animals. That's so disgusting."

Marcus pointed at the blood spatters on the floor of the classroom. “And this isn’t?”

The phone buzzed again. Marcus pulled it out of his pocket, looked at the screen, and frowned. *Great*, he thought. The man doesn’t call for weeks, then picks now, eight o’clock on a Monday morning. Priceless.

“You could get a detention for using that,” Laurel said, gesturing at the phone. Classes had started.

“I’m sure you’d know.” A low-pitched hum signaled a new voice mail.

Laurel smirked as Marcus stuffed the phone back in his pocket. It vibrated yet again. *Jeez*. Didn’t his father know that he was supposed to be in class?

Dr. Gladson walked back into the hall and pulled a folded scrap of paper from the pocket of his lab coat. “I almost forgot,” he said. “Marcus, this is for you.”

Marcus read the familiar scribble on the note and grinned.

*You’re in charge. You know what to do.*

*Ms. M*

The ball was officially in his court. Now *he* was The Man.

“C’mon, everybody. We’ve got a crime scene to process,” he said with the same authority he used on the basketball court.

Marcus stripped off his varsity athlete’s jacket and, crouching, used it to prop open the classroom door. *Crap!* he thought as he stood up. He’d left his fingerprints on the doorknob. He had broken Grissom’s rule number one: Never contaminate the crime scene. “C’mon, everybody.” He grabbed the roll of crime scene tape and began ushering his classmates to a small alcove at the end of the hall. “Let’s go. Hurry it up.”

Laurel’s heels clicked on the tile as she struggled to keep up with his long strides. “What’s this about? Where’s Ms. Mason? Do you know where—”

“Listen up!” Marcus waited for his classmates to quiet down. “*This* is our quiz. Ms. Mason has set up a mock crime scene, and she put me in charge. I think she’s the victim. We’ve got about forty minutes to figure out what happened in here and find Ms. Mason.”

“Why do you get to be the primary?” Laurel asked.

Marcus showed her the note. “Satisfied?”

“Not really.” Her pout made her mouth look like a blowfish’s.

He knelt down and, rummaging through his backpack, tossed out a tattered paperback copy of *The Great Gatsby*, a U.S. history textbook, and several crumpled old homework assignments until he found his forensic science notebook and a pencil. He pulled out his tablet, too, just in case. He also extracted a pair of nitrile gloves. “We all can’t work in the room at the same time, or we’ll contaminate the scene.” He pitched the roll of crime scene tape to Manny. “Make sure nobody gets in who doesn’t belong.”

“Why’re you always in charge?” Bobby Tate—Nasal Boy—was slouched against a locker with his arms crossed over his chest. Captain of the basketball team, Bobby wasn’t used to taking orders, especially from his center. He spat a wad of bubble gum toward a nearby trash can. It bounced off the rim and landed on the freshly mopped tile. “This is stupid. C’mon, let’s go.”

“We can’t blow it off,” Marcus said. “We’re gonna get a grade on this.”

He wrote down three names and asked the water polo players to search the campus for Ms. Mason. “Be sure to check the faculty lounge. Maybe she’s using the copy machine.” They sauntered off without their backpacks, but at least they wouldn’t be around to mess up the crime scene.

Marcus jotted down another name. “Laurel, can you run over to the admin building and ask the headmaster if Ms. Mason called in sick or had a flat tire or something this morning?”

“Nuh-uh,” she said. “Not with these shoes.”

He looked down at her black patent platforms. Her navy and green plaid uniform skirt was about twelve inches too short, and it looked like she had borrowed her polo shirt from a sixth grader. He struggled not to stare. A single strip of pink in her chin-length black bob was tucked under a tortoise shell clip, and at least a dozen bracelets adorned her arms despite the school’s “no excessive jewelry” policy.

“How do you get away with them?” Marcus asked. “You know, the UVs.” Uniform violations normally sent teachers into fits.

Laurel shrugged. “My dad paid for your gym.”

“Fine.” Marcus erased her name and asked the Wang sisters to go to the headmaster’s office. “Ask the receptionist at the front desk if Ms. Mason signed

out or grabbed her mail.” The twins grabbed their bags and scurried off.

“You can check if Ms. Mason’s Prius is in the parking lot,” he told Laurel. “I think it’s white. License plate is CS HIGH.”

“And walk way over there?” she said, glancing down.

*Right*, Marcus thought. *The shoes*. “Would your highness care to be on the crime reconstruction team?”

“You got the name right.” She batted her spidery eyelashes innocently and then frowned. “But not the assignment.”

Marcus chewed on the end of his pencil. He was running out of things for her to do. Laurel Carmichael was one of the strangest and most annoying girls he had ever met, but she was also one of the smartest. He really could use her help. “Who do you want to work with?”

“Myself.”

Marcus sighed. “You’ll work in the classroom. With me.”

“Lucky me.” She swiveled on her heels and stalked off toward room 102.

“Watch out for the broken glass,” Marcus called after her.

Five minutes later, only two students remained without assignments: Bobby Tate and Simon Musgrave. Simon stood behind a large potted fern in the corner of the alcove outside the classroom, counting leaves on a frond. With his slender frame, khaki uniform pants, and green Pinehurst sweatshirt, he was camouflaged behind the plant. His shaggy light brown hair hung past his eyebrows, and his eyeglasses were slightly crooked. Simon was the only thirteen-year-old freshman among the juniors and seniors in the class.

“If you’re done hiding, I’ve got a job for you, too,” Marcus said, walking over to Simon. “Can you diagram the crime scene?” Simon nodded. “Start with a hand-drawn sketch, like Ms. Mason wants us to do. Then you can make another using the CRIMESKETCH app.”

Simon grabbed his lab notebook and rushed off, appearing glad to have something specific to do.

Marcus found Bobby slumped behind a desk in the classroom, his eyes closed. With his head lolled back, Bobby’s Adam’s apple protruded like he had swallowed a golf ball. Marcus punched his shoulder. “Wake up.”

“Huh? What’s up?” Bobby yawned. Drool trickled from the corner of his mouth.

Marcus recoiled at the sour breath mixed with Big League Chew. “You, now. C’mon. You’ll help Laurel and me. You can take photos. Use the new digital camera on the equipment cart.”

Bobby stretched and tossed his long, straggly blond hair away from his face. He stood and hitched up his pants, which had fallen below his hips, exposing red plaid boxer shorts. “I’ve got my own.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Quit bossing me around, dude.”

It would be better if Bobby took photos with a camera real forensic scientists use, but he wasn’t going to argue. “Start outside in the hallway,” Marcus said.

Bobby tripped over his untied shoelace as he shuffled out of the room.

“Loser,” Laurel said. “*Total* loser.”

Marcus glanced at his varsity jacket wedged under the door. He and Bobby had played basketball and football together since middle school and now were starters on both varsity teams. “He’s not so bad.”

“Yeah, right. A real Einstein.”

“Speaking of geniuses,” Marcus said, “Simon’s going to sketch the scene.”

“*Now* we stand a chance of passing,” Laurel said.

Laurel pulled on a pair of nitrile gloves. “Too bad these don’t come in another color. Plum would be nice.” She slapped a pile of yellow triangular evidence markers into Marcus’s palm. “If it’s okay with you, *boss*, let’s each search half the room. I’ll take the back.”

“No problem,” he said. Laurel ignored the tinge of red tinting his caramel cheeks.

Room 102 was larger than a standard classroom, but the rectangular space was crowded with student desks, lab counters, equipment, and storage cabinets. Laurel carefully picked a path around the glass fragments and blood drops and yanked open a cabinet. It was crammed with textbooks, lab manuals, DVDs, three-ring binders, and other teacher crap. The next was filled with test tubes, beakers, graduated cylinders, and Ehrlenmeyer flasks. The third cabinet she opened contained microscopes and specimen jars, some with dead stuff floating around in amber liquid—beetles, spiders, a couple of crustaceans, a jellyfish, and a few critters she was glad she couldn’t identify. Embryos or something. Laurel shivered. She’d start with the floor.

She placed an evidence marker next to a cigarette butt and jotted information in her iPad:

Evidence #1: A partially burnt 2-inch cigarette butt found on the floor near the safety shower in the northwest corner of room 102 in Weatherly Hall

“Hey, Mr. Basketball,” she called over to Marcus, holding up the cigarette. “You need to start hitting the trash can with your butts.”

“Funny,” he said. “Get back to work.”

The mental image of him coughing and gagging over a nasty cigarette made her smile. *Nobody* smoked anymore. “Hey, brainiac,” she said to Simon, “I’ve got some evidence for your sketch.”

Simon hurried over with a spool of measuring tape, but he didn’t use it. “Fifteen centimeters to the left of the lipstick and about twenty-one centimeters from the wall.” Brushing his hair out of his eyes, he squatted and stretched out the tape. “Bah! Off by forty millimeters. It’s 14.6 centimeters from the lipstick tube.”

*Not bad*, Laurel thought. “I need a photo over here,” she yelled.

Bobby didn’t answer. He wasn’t in the room.

Laurel cursed, causing Simon to scribble furiously in his notebook. “I knew we couldn’t depend on that jerk,” she said. “If *I* was in charge, I would’ve let him sleep.”

Simon kept sketching.

Laurel picked up the cigarette butt with a pair of tweezers, sealed it in a small plastic bag, and labeled it with her initials and the date. With any luck, they could pull DNA from the saliva. She placed evidence markers next to other objects she found: two burnt matches, one pearl earring, a tube of coral lipstick, and a gold fountain pen. No way Ms. Mason smoked—she was a competitive tennis player—but the lipstick and earring could belong to her.

Laurel leaned down and examined the fountain pen. “Mont Blanc. Impressive. Ms. Mason has expensive tastes in pens.”

“It’s probably not hers. She uses cheap ballpoints—the ones you buy in bulk at Costco,” Simon mumbled.

“Really?” Laurel said. She’d have to check if the school bookstore sold Mont Blancs. “Hey, Marcus, over here.”

“In a minute.” He was sifting through a stack of papers on Ms. Mason’s desk. “Don’t forget to confirm that the drops on the floor are blood. Check the brown smudges on the door frame, too. I’ve got some Kastle-Meyer in my bag.”

“Please tell me you’re not serious.” Who carried blood-testing chemicals around in a backpack? She dug into Marcus’s bag and found a small gray box labeled *Kastle-Meyer Reagent*. “Unbelievable,” Laurel muttered under her breath. “Sherlock Holmes in a varsity jacket.”

She removed two glass vials containing clear liquid from the protective Styrofoam mold inside the box, poured a sample of each into the kit’s plastic spray bottle, and gently mixed the chemicals. “Where did you get phenolphthalein?”

“Amazon,” Marcus said without looking up.

Laurel took aim and squirted a stream of Kastle-Meyer reagent onto the smudges.

“Stop! Don’t do that!” Simon dropped his notebook and sprinted across the lab, skidding to a stop in front of the door.

She whirled around. “Why not?”

“Look!” Streaks of bright magenta dripped down the cream-colored door frame and formed a pink pool on the linoleum.

“So?” Laurel asked. “What’s wrong?”

“If you did a Kastle-Meyer test, that’s a positive reaction, but—”

“But what? It’s blood.”

Simon pushed his glasses higher up his nose. “I . . . um . . . I couldn’t help but notice that there appeared to be a fingerprint in one of the smudges. It says in chapter 13 in our textbook, page 247, second paragraph, third sentence that you’re supposed to lift the print first and *then* test for the presence of blood.” He pointed at the door frame.

Laurel’s shoulders sagged as she stared at the magenta splotches. The fingerprint had disappeared. *Lovely, Laurel. Freakin’ lovely.*

“Crap!” Marcus said, stepping away from the drippy pink mess. “Why didn’t you just swab a small sample instead of spraying the whole door with K-M?”

“It’s not *my* fault. *You* said to check for blood. You didn’t say anything about a fingerprint.” Laurel’s cheeks were flushed, her voice an octave higher than usual. “You’re the primary, remember?”

Laurel was right. Grissom’s rule number two: The supervisor was responsible for the actions of his team. He should have watched her more closely, but there was nothing he could do about it now. “Let’s just finish up.” This CSI stuff was definitely harder than it looked on TV. “Here, I want to show you something.”

He led her over to Ms. Mason’s desk and pointed to the stack of homework papers saturated with brown liquid. Luckily, her laptop had been spared. He sniffed the puddle. “Coffee.” He picked up the paper cup. “*Cold* coffee.” He pointed at the distinctive blue-circle logo on the cup. “From the Coffee Mug.” He sealed it in an evidence bag he pulled from his pants pocket. “I also found this in her laptop case.”

Laurel grabbed the plastic sandwich bag half-filled with white powder out of his hand. “*Now* this is getting interesting,” she said.

“Maybe . . .” Marcus’s voice trailed off. “Simon, what’ve you got?”

“I found the source of the broken glass. A 500-milliliter Ehrlenmeyer flask.” A sharp jagged piece rested in his gloved palm, one of its edges smeared with a reddish stain. “It’s positive for blood.” He held up a Q-tip stained magenta with Kastle-Meyer reagent. “Hydrogen peroxide combines with hemoglobin in erythrocytes, producing a—”

“Bag and tag it,” Marcus said. He turned back to Laurel. “Here’s what I’m thinking. Ms. Mason was typing up a lesson plan or something when somebody came in and tried to grab her. She struggled, and the flask fell off the counter and broke. Somebody got cut. Just hope it wasn’t her.”

“Nice hypothesis,” Laurel said, “but how do you explain the cigarette butt, fountain pen, and other stuff I found at the *back* of the room?”

“Good question,” Marcus said. “Ms. Mason set up this fake crime scene. Everything means something. We need an evidence trail.”

“You got here first, didn’t you?” Laurel asked. “What time? Was the door open or closed? Lights on or off?” She looked around the room. “And where’s



Bobby? Aren't you supposed to be supervising him? Do you think he could've *planted* some of the evidence? You know, to mess with us?"

"Whoa," Marcus said, holding up his hand like a traffic cop. "Enough with the questions. I'm doing my best here." He ran his hands across the closely shaved sides of his short, curly black hair. "Ms. Mason told me to meet her at 7:45. Zero hour. The door was open, lights on, but she wasn't here."

"See anybody else?"

"Just Mr.—" A scrap of paper on the floor, partially hidden behind a large bromeliad plant, caught Marcus's eye. He stooped over, picked it up, and read it twice.

Before he could show the note to Laurel and Simon, a woman's voice from behind him said, "Well, what happened to me?"

Ms. Mason pulled her dark brown shoulder-length hair into a ponytail with a scrunchie and fiddled with her left gold hoop earring. After buttoning her lab coat, she circled the room and examined each piece of evidence they had collected, comparing each item to a list she had pulled up on her iPad.

"Nice work," she said, nodding. "You bagged and tagged everything I planted. Even the gross cigarette butt." She fake-shivered. "Don't even ask where I got that nasty thing." She picked up the Mont Blanc fountain pen. "Hmm. A student must have dropped this. It isn't mine." She put it back with the other evidence.

"So we passed?" Marcus asked.

"This is 'A' work. With one exception." She smiled and pointed at the magenta stains on the door frame. "Learn from your mistakes."

Marcus's cheeks grew warm. "Sorry. I screwed that up," he said, glancing at Laurel.

Laurel caught his gaze but said nothing.

Ms. Mason avoided the puddle of coffee on the desk and opened her laptop. "Tomorrow you can process the evidence and reconstruct what happened in here—after I finish my lecture on DNA." She typed in her password. "Please read the Simpson case in your textbook for homework. You'll realize the consequences of poor evidence collection."

Marcus zipped the box with Kastle-Meyer reagent in his backpack and slipped on his varsity jacket. "Hey, Simon," he said, "before you disappear

again. You did a good job.”

With the slightest nod, Simon stuffed his notebook, tablet, and measuring tape in his bag and dashed into the hallway, blending into the crowd of students shuffling to second period.

Laurel was almost out the door herself.

“Hey, Nancy Drew. Wait up,” Marcus said.

“Can’t be late to French,” she called over her shoulder. “I’m not going to spend another Wednesday afternoon in detention. And . . .” She paused. “*Never, ever* call me Nancy Drew.”

“I thought you’d be flattered,” Marcus said. “She’s back on a new TV show.” Her glare convinced him never to make that mistake again. Veronica Mars, maybe? At least he had her attention. “What do you think of this?” He showed her the words scrawled in elegant script on the torn scrap of paper he had picked up off the floor.

*Meet me in 102. Bring the money.*

“Weird,” Laurel said. “Ms. Mason said we found all the evidence.”

“Either she’s wrong,” Marcus said, “or our ‘A’ just slipped to a ‘B’.”

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