



Murder makes a VLOG



Shannon Symonds

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1

Back to School, Act I

“Don’t look,” Sophie whispered.

“I can’t help it. It’s like watching an oncoming train,” Esther said. She hung her raincoat up behind a desk in the Oceanside High Library.

In the mirror by the coat rack, she watched her boyfriend, Parker Stuart, practically drool over Ashley Cadeau. He was smiling and his eyes twinkled while he tutored her at a table. His blond hair fell in his face when he leaned across the table. They whispered to each other over books and paper.

Then, as if he felt Esther watching him, he looked right at her, still smiling. She waved and weakly smiled back. He winked. Esther tried to wink back, but because she could never get winking quite right, she awkwardly blinked both eyes while grinning.

Ouch, Esther thought, burying her face in her hands. *I don’t know why I thought a summer boyfriend would stay with me. Why date a girl geek when he can have Ashley?*

“You looked,” Sophie said. She sighed and shook her head. “You don’t need to be jealous.” She hung her cardigan up next to Esther’s raincoat.

Esther leaned in closer to Sophie. “I’m not jealous.”

Sophie raised her eyebrows and snickered. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t believe me either.” Esther shrugged. She looked across the ancient library. Esther admired the black oak paneling, rows of carved bookshelves, and the large stone fireplace. The eclectic furniture surrounding the fireplace didn’t fit the stately room. It revealed the small town school’s dismal budget.

“I really missed this old library,” Esther said. “But I didn’t miss all the high school drama. Last year, everyone knew about my dad going to prison for trying to take me away from Mom. I couldn’t believe what people said online about it. Small towns are great until you have a secret and it gets out.”

“They forgot all about you as soon as Alfie Ripley took his dad’s fishing boat without asking and beached it in the cove.”

“I wonder what they said about him online. Poor Alfie.”

Checking her brown hair in the mirror again, Esther shrugged and thought to herself, *Yup, it’s still brown, long, and frizzy. Oh, and look, it matches your swampy green eyes.* She got a brush out of her backpack, along with her chemistry and AP Lit books. She dragged

the hairbrush through her hair, somehow managing to make it even frizzier. Then she threw the brush back into the pack and stashed it under the desk. Out of habit, she took the library keys out of the coffee cup and unlocked the drawers.

“Welcome back, girls,” Ms. Priest said from her nearby office.

“Hey, Ms. Priest. You look like you’ve been on vacation.” Esther smiled. The young librarian smiled back and came out to give Sophie and Esther a welcome back hug.

“I just got back from Los Angeles and before that, Haiti. I’ve missed you girls. This old library feels a little haunted without your constant whispering.”

“Haiti?” Sophie said. “That sounds fascinating. Nice tan. Did you buy any books?”

“As a matter of fact, I bought two things in an interesting antique shop. I found this gorgeous spider ring with a red stone and a book on Voodoo history. Take a look. It’s sitting on my desk.” The ancient cover looked like it was made out of something other than leather.

“Is that alligator hide?” Esther asked.

Ms. Priest laughed. “I have no idea. It has over three hundred handwritten spells in it, though.”

The book made Esther’s skin crawl. Designs were pressed in the leather, and a copper and silver insignia was set in the center of the book jacket. It looked like the book was held closed by a leather strap that hooked over a bone sewn to the front cover.

“Boo!” Ms. Priest said.

Esther jumped.

“Now get to work, you two. We need chairs around the fireplace.”

Sophie gave Esther a wide-eyed look. They both backed out of the office.

“Come on,” Esther whispered to Sophie. She felt a shiver go up her spine. “I don’t want to be near that book, and I also don’t want to watch my boyfriend be chatted up by Ashley.”

Sophie shook her head. “What are you worried about? Number one, Parker is totally lovesick over you, and you’re every bit as interesting and cute as Ashley. In fact, you’re the same size and shape, tall and built like pencils. And number three, you both have the same gorgeous eyes with long lashes, just like me.” She batted her black lashes behind her round glasses.

Esther’s chin drew in and she tilted her head. “You forgot number two.”

“It isn’t a pleasant number. I’m into prime numbers right now. More important than how you look is the fact that you are almost as smart as I am . . . almost.”

Esther’s laughed. “We’ll know who the smartest is when they announce who made valedictorian in our senior year. And, Miss Smarty, I don’t look a thing like her. Her eye shadow is amazing, and those lashes . . .”

“You too can have lashes like that for ninety-nine, ninety-nine a month. And anyone can put on eyeshadow. You just don’t wear any makeup—not that you need it.” Sophie shook her head.

“I wouldn’t know how to put on makeup.” Esther paused. “Quiet, I don’t want them to hear us.”

“Look on YouTube. They have tutorials for everything these days,” Sophie said.

Esther walked across the room to the fireplace, trying not to look at Parker again. Sophie pulled one of the two black leather couches back, and Esther moved the other. They put a rickety podium near the hearth and made six rows of ten oak chairs,

including a new metal and plastic chair at the front.

"I'd research makeup application, but my mother says I'm a natural beauty." Sophie made duck lips and framed her face with her hands. "Aren't you excited to see everyone tonight?" She moved a chair. "Some of these chairs look they won't hold anyone over a hundred pounds."

"Then two of you should fit." Esther chuckled.

"Hey! I think I grew this summer. Okay, I bought platforms so I could look Ransom in the eyes when I dump him."

"Are you really going to dump him? You're sure?" Esther stopped what she was doing and searched Sophie's face. "You look nervous."

"Me? I'm a tough chick." She smiled and struck a power pose. "Remember? We are the Jiu Jitsu yellow belts. If he gives me any flak, I'll demonstrate my mad Jiu Jitsu skills."

"Oh, now I'm scared." Esther snickered. "Seriously, whatever you decide is okay. I'm with you. BFF, okay?"

Sophie smiled. "Best friends for giving that player what he deserves."

"Speaking of players." Esther looked back at Parker. Quiet laughter floated like poison to her heart.

"He waned when we came in. He's crazy about you."

"I don't know why. Look at him. He could have anyone. If I didn't like him so much, I would dump him before he dumped me." Esther shook her head and opened the shutters on one of the east side windows.

"But he wants you. Ransom could also have anyone. And he does. He isn't smart enough to hang onto a good thing. And if Parker wants pretty over brains—bye, bye pretty boy. Neither of us deserve that."

The library door opened and Parker's twin, Paisley, blew through the doors with Nephi like a Pacific summer breeze. Paisley wore shorts and a white tank top with a cowboy hat and boots.

Ms. Priest emerged at her door, the laughter police. She shook her head, and both girls turned and pretended to straighten a chair. It only made the giggling worse.

Esther took a deep breath and slowly blew it out, trying to compose herself. Then she realized Sophie was staring at something. She followed her line of sight. Paisley had taken off her aviators and cowboy hat, her long, thick blonde hair falling to her waist. Her summer tan made her white teeth look brighter. She leaned back against the library desk and Nephi, well over six feet tall, leaned over her. His rain-soaked brown hair curled around his deep brown eyes. Every muscle in his arms was tight.

"Gross," Esther said. "Why did he cut the sleeves off his T-shirt? He looks . . ."

"Spectacular. Your uncle is a hottie."

"You're delusional! Do you have your glasses on?" Esther shook her head but smiled. "Look." She pointed out the window to the parking lot. "Madison Merriweather and her daughter, Bridget. I think that's the movie director, M. Slade Baxter, with them. The meeting is supposed to start in a few minutes. What are they doing?"

Bridget stood with her arms folded and her dark eyes glaring at her mother. Her black hair drooped in the rain. Her mother, Madison Merriweather, ignored her. Madison was arguing with M. Slade Baxter, who would direct the movie of her bestselling novel, *Blessed Be*.

“What’s wrong with Bridget?” Esther asked.

“She always looks like that. But what are the director and Madison fighting about? Do you think there’s a problem with the movie?”

“I hope not. I gave up my job at the coffee shop to tutor actors in math to make sure the younger cast members don’t fall behind in their online classes. I’m counting on the movie to build up my college savings.”

A gold Cadillac Escalade pulled into the parking lot. Ashley Cadeau’s mother got out, as well as a handsome young man with auburn hair who looked like Ashley.

“Sophie, does Ashley have a brother?”

Sophie was grabbing a few more chairs. “I don’t think so.”

A small black car parked, and a pretty girl got out.

“Look, it’s Elizabeth Coakley! She is so much smaller than she is in the movies. I think she isn’t any taller than you, maybe five-foot-one.” Esther chuckled when the actress with a short black afro opened an umbrella. “She’ll have to learn about umbrellas on the coast.”

Sophie looked out the window just in time to see an ocean breeze turn the umbrella inside out and blow it across the parking lot. Elizabeth abandoned the umbrella, pulled her coat over her head, and ran for the door with Madison, Bridget, and the director following her.

“We need to tell her why we all wear hoodies,” Sophie said. “Did you see that?”

“Hello, beautiful,” Parker said, interrupting Sophie. “Are you ready for this?”

Esther turned around, only to be hugged by Parker and fall into him with a smile. *Does he mean it?* She looked over his shoulder for Ashley and found her standing by the door. Looking down at her feet, Ashley was taking a tongue lashing from her mother.

Sophie interrupted. “Who are you tutoring?”

“I don’t know.” Parker stepped back from Esther and shrugged. “I hope they tell us tonight. I can do most subjects, but I am not as good as you are in AP Lit.”

“No one is, big boy.” Sophie smiled and Esther laughed.

“Except me.” Esther winked at Sophie. Since their freshmen year they had both dreamed of being class valedictorian. It had become an old rivalry.

“I pity the person who has to make that decision.” Parker smiled. “Let’s go find a seat. Nephi!” He called out and waved, bringing Ms. Priest flying across the room.

“Parker Stuart,” Ms. Priest said, folding her thin arms and looking up at him. “It may be summer, but we will keep library decorum. I will not have you tutoring students, slobbering on girls, and shouting in my library at any time. Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes, Ms. Priest,”

He’s blushing. She nailed it. He was slobbering. Good for her. I don’t want it either. Surprised, she realized she was going to cry. *Deep breath, in, out, tongue on front teeth. In through the nose.* Esther did everything her mom taught her to do when she felt overwhelmed.

2

Auditions

When the room was full, students, parents, actors, and the director all talked in low tones. Ms. Priest took a small bell from the carved mantel and rang it. Everyone settled into their seats.

Esther sat between Sophie and Parker in the front row. Nephi was on the other side of Sophie with Paisley and the Stuarts, Parker and Paisley's parents. Sophie's father, Mr. Ito, had actually shown up. He was in a lab coat and standing in the back of the room. His glasses looked exactly like Sophie's round glasses, so it was hard for Esther to see his eyes from this distance.

It looked like more than thirty students from Oceanside High had come to the meeting with their parents. Ms. Priest and the new high school principal, Mr. Kelly, were representing the school. The only person Esther didn't see was Ransom, who was playing the lead in the movie and playing with Sophie's heart.

"Welcome," Ms. Priest said. "Max, you have the floor."

Max? Esther thought. *So that's what the M. stands for in M. Slade Baxter.*

Slade pointed at someone in the back of the room. Esther looked and saw a cameraman with a small video camera. He didn't look much older than she was. He wore a baseball cap over black hair and wore jeans, a T-shirt, and Converse shoes. He nodded at Slade, and a light on the camera indicated he was filming.

"Hello! I am M. Slade Baxter, the director. But you can call me Slade." He spoke far too loudly for a library. Ms. Priest just smiled. "Welcome! I hope you don't mind, but we film everything. We'll use film from tonight for our ongoing vlog, website, and on our social media sites."

Ashley was sitting on the other side of Parker and actually giggled. She whispered to Parker, "This is so exciting." She leaned toward his shoulder.

Esther elbowed Sophie, who just looked at her and rolled her eyes.

"Don't worry, be happy. Trust!" Sophie said.

"We're sending around paperwork." Slade motioned to Ms. Priest, who picked up a stack of folders and began handing them down the rows. "Anyone wishing to participate will need to sign a liability and a parental consent form. As you probably all read in the flyer, we have the privilege of filming Madison Merriweather's bestseller, *Blessed Be*, in

your town, Necanicum. Give her a round of applause.”

Esther passed the folders along. She, Sophie, and Parker had already completed their forms as tutors for the actors.

Slade cleared his throat. “You parents will be excited to hear that Family Friendly Films will be producing the movie based on Madison’s book. We hope that helps you trust that we will be operating the Family Friendly way.”

“What does that mean?” Esther whispered in Parker’s ear.

He looked at her with his brows drawn together, thinking. “I guess that means the movie will be clean. You know?”

Slade stepped out from behind the pulpit and began slowly pacing as he continued. “As a part of publicity for the movie, and to build excitement, we are letting local youth audition for parts as student witches. We believe kids from town will give the movie a real local flavor.

“Part of the story takes place at Bideford Castle College. Those of you who are chosen as main cast or students of Bideford College will need to agree to be a part of the project for three years and travel to Madison Merriweather’s castle on the northern Washington Coast for a portion of the shoot. The castle in our story has a nearby town and is supposed to be on the Oregon Coast. The nearby town, Bideford, Oregon, looks just like your beautiful little village. Parts of the movie will also be filmed in other local spots, like your quaint school library and the Stuart family house.”

A round of applause interrupted Slade. He grinned and said, “Thank you. Yes, it was Madison’s idea.” He pointed to her, and she stood to her full height and wrapped herself in her black cape. Her usually perfectly coifed hair was hidden under a wide-brimmed hat, pinned on by a black cat pin with a diamond in its eye. She nodded, and her green eye shadow reflected the light. Her daughter, Bridget, didn’t even look up. She kept her arms folded around her damp T-shirt and her slinky frame slumped in her seat.

“Anyway, folks, we thought it would be splendid fun to have the entire audition experience filmed like a reality television show. Anyone can sign up and give it your best shot. For the first round of auditions, we will do a short film of each interested student reciting parts from the book. And yes—we will share the bloopers on the Family Friendly Films channel and social media. But don’t forget, we also need extras, so if you aren’t chosen for a main part, you might be hired as an extra.

“We’ll choose some of those who audition to go on to a second round. Now, these won’t be like any other auditions you’ve ever heard of. Family Friendly Films is excited about our unique idea. The second round of auditions will require those of you trying out for parts to participate in a series of events, like surfing on the coast. We will be watching you to see if you have what it takes to wow the world. You know—that spark. We will also be watching to see if you work well together and follow directions. But don’t be nervous. We love outtakes, so you don’t need to know how to surf before the audition. We will have instructors and expert help.

“During the entire process we will share the actors’ day-to-day experiences online in vlogs, social media, and more. Some of the audition events will also be live on social media. But understand, if you’re chosen, we expect a full commitment to an entire series of movies based on books by Madison.” Slade waited silently for a wave of excited chatter to end.

He held a hand up and the room quieted. “As you know, *Winter Solstice*, Madison’s

second book, has been number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list since its release, so there will be more books and movies.”

Sophie jumped to her feet, applauding wildly. Esther reached over and tugged on the back of her shirt, motioning with her eyes for her to sit down.

“Sorry,” Sophie said. “Fan girl.” She pushed her glasses up and sat down, a cheesy grin still pasted on her face.

Slade smiled at Sophie. “Family Friendly Films makes clean, quality entertainment. This movie won’t just be a movie. It will have merch, celebrities, and be an experience every kid in the country will want to share with you. I have no doubt your auditions will go viral on social media.

“We are also committed to choosing role models for all the parts. We really want to get to know you during the auditions so we can make sure you’re Family Friendly material, as well as a potential star.”

“Calvin, can you put up the poster here?” Slade pointed at a blank spot on the wall next to the fireplace. Calvin jumped up and hung a large poster.

“Calvin, my assistant, is posting a list of other activities we may or may not do and more details about the initial audition. I’ll be here to answer all of your questions.”

With that, the parents and students started approaching Slade. The meeting was over.

“Are you going to sign up?” Ashley leaned around Parker to ask Esther.

“No. Sophie, Parker, and I are tutoring.”

“Actually, I’m going to do both,” Parker said. “I just decided. What do you think?”

“You can do what you want,” Esther said, and tried to smile. The look on his face said he didn’t believe her.

“Let’s go to your place after. We can talk. You should try out too.” Parker gave her hand a squeeze.

Esther’s eyes opened wide. *Me? In a movie? Terrifying. Doesn’t he know by now I’m an introvert?*

“Are you trying out?” Esther asked Ashley.

“I’m already in it. I’m one of the stars. Didn’t you know? I met Slade in L.A. when I had a child role for FFF.” She smiled and flipped her long auburn hair off her shoulder.

Mrs. Cadeau got up from her seat next to Ashley. “Ashley, we need to go. Lauren is exhausted from his flight. We’re going for sushi and an early bedtime. Have you girls met Ashley’s cousin Lauren?” She smiled at Sophie and Esther. Lauren stood up and extended his hand.

Parker, Esther, and Sophie shook it.

“Delighted to meet you,” Parker said in his proper English accent. “How long will you be visiting?”

“I’m not visiting. I have a part as a student in the movie.” Lauren gave them a tight-lipped grin, nodded, and left the library with Ashley and her mother.

“Let’s go back to your house and work on my new van,” Parker said to Nephi.

Nephi nodded and put his arm around Paisley’s shoulder. “I’ll bring Paisley with me.”

“Sounds fun.” Esther gave Parker a hug.

“I’m in. Let’s clean this place up.” Sophie took two chairs and started the process.

Nephi leaned over Esther’s shoulder and asked, “Who’s buying the pizza?”

“You are, my man,” Paisley said. “Who could turn down another night in a smelly garage with me?”

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