

Chapter Ten:

To Be or Not to Be

Written by: Jay Mosher

I wake up in a white hospital bed.

My throat is sore, but my body aches less and it is no longer a struggle to keep my eyes open.

When I turn my head, Clay is asleep in a metal chair next to my bedside. They're still wearing their green dress pants and white shirt. Several buttons of their shirt are undone at the top. Their chin is resting on their chest, their head bent in sleep. Clay's hair is a mess and they're still wearing their glasses--which are halfway falling down their nose.

As soon as they hear movement, their eyes snap open. I watch the tension ease in their shoulders when they see me.

"Park," Clay says hoarsely, leaning forward when I offer my hand. They hold my fingers tightly in theirs. "You're awake."

"I'm awake," I repeat. My voice sounds grainy.

"Do you want some water?"

I nod. Clay reaches over to where there's a pitcher on the bedside table and pours me some water into a plastic cup. I drink slowly. The cold water eases the scratching ache in my throat.

"How are you feeling?" Clay asks quietly. They're inspecting every feature of my face for signs of pain.

"I feel fine," I answer truthfully. "My throat hurts, and I'm a little tired--but that's it."

They sigh with relief, running a hand across their weary face. "I was so worried. The doctors treated you for shock and chloroform poisoning. They said that you should heal fine, but still--I was worried."

"I'm okay."

Clay shakes their head. "No, Park. You're not okay. You were poisoned and abducted. You could've died. How is any of that okay?"

"I'm still alive, aren't I?"

“That’s not the point.” They bury their face in their hands. “God, this is all my fault. I never should’ve taken this case.”

I reach over to rest my hand on their knee. “Don’t be stupid. None of this is your fault.”

“Yes, it is. I’m the one who agreed to take this case. Don’t lie to me, you didn’t even want me to accept, but I was stupid. *I was so stupid.*” They stifle a sob. “I put you in danger. You aren’t even a real investigator, Parker. You never wanted this.”

“I wouldn’t have helped you with this case if I didn’t want to.”

“Don’t you get it?” Clay exclaims, raising their face to look at me. Their eyes are puffy and red and there are tears streaming down their face. “This is the *second* time I’ve put you in danger because of me and my job. You wanted a normal life and I ruined it for us. I’ve screwed everything up. I never should’ve taken this job back.”

“Hey, hey.” I ease myself into a sitting position. Clay is sobbing, and I gently rub their back. “Everything’s okay. You haven’t ruined anything, Clay. I promise. Neither of us knew this was going to happen.” I sigh, trying to straighten their messy hair. “I wanted you to be a detective again. It’s your passion. I would never try to keep you from it.”

“You almost died, Park!”

“And you almost died last time.” I kiss the top of their hair. “Listen, Clay. I’m not saying that this wasn’t scary. I’m not saying that I would’ve chosen to go through this. What I’m trying to tell you is that I love you, and what’s happened isn’t your fault.”

Clay hesitantly raises their face to me. I gingerly wipe off their tears with my thumb.

“See,” I say quietly. “Everything’s okay.”

“I don’t know if I can keep doing this job, Park,” Clay breathes. “All it’s done is brought us both pain.”

I cup their face in both of my hands. “What would you do instead?”

“I don’t know. I can’t live off of acting.”

“You could help me write my mystery novels.”

They chuckle. “I’m not a very good writer and you know that.”

“I don’t care.” I press their forehead to mine. “You could help me with plots and tell me whether my writing sucks. And we can live in a little home in the country.”

“Do you want that? A little home in the country?”

“Maybe.” I sigh. “It would be much quieter. Hershey would have space to run. We could even get some chickens or goats.”

“I would go to the country with you in a heartbeat, Park.”

I pull back from them, inhaling slowly. “Clay, we have to finish this case. We won’t be able to move on until it’s over.”

“I know.” They rub a hand over the dark circles on their cheeks. “I had Blake check the storage closet, and she sent me pictures. There’s nothing there anymore. The killer must have moved everything after you found it.”

“Do you still have the fabric?”

“Yeah, I do. I’ve been waiting to ask Joel about it.” Clay rubs the back of their neck. “Actually, Joel, Floyd, and Ziggy are in the waiting room. They were worried about you after what happened, and well...I might’ve been a bit of a mess.”

“Go on, then.” I shove their shoulder. “Bring the boys in.”

Clay kisses me once and then leaves the room. I prop myself into a sitting position with the hospital pillows and finish the rest of my water. I’m sure I still look like a mess, but this is about as put together as I can be.

Clay returns with the group of worried boys. Ziggy is holding a small vase of flowers from the gift shop. Floyd and Joel both bought me a small stuffed frog that I’m sure is meant for small children but I love it all the same.

“Park!” Ziggy exclaims, setting the vase on my bedside table. “It’s good to see you awake. How do you feel?”

“I’m good, just tired.”

“You look much better,” Joel says, sitting in one of the open chairs. “We had to drag Clay out of here earlier when the doctor’s were treating you.”

“Okay, Joel. We don’t need to go into details.” Clay’s cheeks flush red and they return to the chair at my bedside.

“The nurse almost sedated them,” Floyd adds, joining Joel in the chairs.

“*Okay, that’s enough.*”

“Hey, don’t pay them any mind.” I poke Clay’s arm. “I remember how scared I was when you had surgery on your arm.”

“We’re just pulling your chain.” Joel waves them off. “I would’ve actually *had* to be sedated if it was Floyd.”

“Stop it,” Floyd blushes, but kisses Joel’s cheek.

“All that matters is that you’re okay,” Ziggy says optimistically from where he’s standing next to the other boys.

Joel frowns. “I’m guessing you didn’t see who did it?”

“No.” I shake my head. “They kept out of my sight and had an accent so I wouldn’t recognize the voice.”

“We think we might have a lead, though.” Clay stands and removes the evidence bag from their pocket. “Ziggy found this near the ropes. We think it might belong to the killer. Do you recognize it?”

Joel takes the bag from them and inspects it carefully. Floyd leans over his shoulder with a frown on his face.

“It’s definitely cashmere.”

“An expensive brand, too,” Floyd adds, pointing at the fabric. “Look at the threads, Joel.”

“You’re right.” Joel scratches his chin. “It most likely came from a sweater or cardigan. I’ve only seen two people in our production wear pieces in this material.”

“Who?” Clay and I ask at the same time.

“Art and his assistant Callie.”

My heart skips in my chest. “Irene said that Lewis and Art had been fighting before his murder.”

“You think it was our director?” Ziggy’s mouth falls open. “*Good God.*”

Clay sighs heavily. “It looks like I was wrong. Art might be our suspect.”

“Opening night is tonight,” Floyd says. “What if Art tries to hurt somebody else?”

“He will,” I declare. “This isn’t an isolated accident. Art is a hitman.”
