

STICKS + STONES

A DIGGING UP BONES SHORT STORY

TA MOORE



Sticks and Stones

TA Moore

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‘Sticks and Stones’ is a prequel short story for *Skin and Bones*, book 2 in the Digging Up Bones series.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the Five and my mum, and to Lady – the best German Shepherd in the world.

1

Mary-Anne Buchanan had nervous hands. She twisted her wedding ring until the skin under it was raw and picked at her cuticles until they bled. The white satin pyjamas she had on were spotted with blood where she'd blotted her fingers on the sleeves or thighs.

Cloister Witte was a K9 officer, not a detective. It was the sort of detail he never used to pay much attention to. All he did was find people—the lost, the running, the hidden—and bring them back. It wasn't his job to work out why they'd gone. He didn't want it to be either.

Except a certain FBI agent was obviously bad for him for more than the obvious reasons. As he leaned against the door and waited for the housekeeper to bring him an item of Judge Buchanan's unwashed laundry he watched Mary-Anne out of the corner of his eye.

She fidgeted. Her bare feet twisted over each other and around the legs of the chair. Every now and again she took a deep breath and let out a soft controlled sigh through pursed lips. Her eyes flicked nervously between Cloister, the big black dog who leaned against his leg, and the stairs.

"I'm sure it's nothing," she said in an anxious sing-song. "Late night coffee run. Or a candy run. Nothing."

Cloister nodded.

"I'm sure it is," he agreed.

"I probably shouldn't have called." Mary-Anne chewed on the ragged cuticle around a perfect, pearl-polished thumb nail. "I've just wasted everyone's time, and it's going to turn out there was no need. I'm so sorry."

Cloister reached down and scratched Bon's ears. She yawned and

pushed her shoulder against his knee impatiently “It’s our job,” he said. “And trust me, no-one’s happier than us if it turns out that we don’t get to do our thing.”

As if she could understand him Bon sneezed her disagreement with that. Maybe Cloister was happy enough to see the confused, not-so-missing person reunited with their loved ones, but Bon *liked* to do her thing. Especially since it had been a series of slow shifts the last few days. The Santa Ana winds had finally died down and it seemed like every criminal in Plenty had paused to enjoy the silence.

Or, at least, the ones that needed to be chased down had.

The most interesting thing Bon had gotten to do recently had been a trip down to the penitentiary to sniff for contraband in the guards cars. She much preferred a good, meandering trail to follow.

The housekeeper finally came down the stairs, wrinkled clothes folded over her arm.

“I wasn’t sure what was the judges and what belonged to Mrs Buchanan,” the slim, sharp-nosed woman said apologetically. “They all go into the same hamper.”

She draped the clothes over the back of a chair and glanced expectantly at Mary-Anne—who chewed her nail and stared at the door.

“Ma’am?” the housekeeper prompted after a moment. “What should I give the deputy?”

Mary-Anne turned back and glanced at the clothes left out. She started to shrug and then changed her mind as her mouth tightened and she bolted up out of the chair.

“Not those,” she snapped as she hurried over the tiled floor. “For God’s sake, Laura, I’m not giving him *those*. They were barely worn. Do I have to do everything myself?”

The housekeeper took the outburst stoically. “It’s Gwen, ma’am.”

“...yes,” Mary-Anne said after a pause. “Of course. Gwen.”

She sorted through the laundry, tossing each item aside as it didn’t come up to scratch, until she finally settled on a white, button-down shirt with floral cuffs. Her hands tightened on the fabric as she took a deep breath.

“This will do,” she said.

“Thank you,” Cloister said as he took the shirt. “One of the other

deputies will stay with you during the search. They'll keep you updated. As soon as we find the judge, we'll let you know."

Mary-Anne laughed and wiped her bloody thumb on the cuff on her pyjamas. "I'll do the same, and you can explain to Billie why I caused such a fuss when they'd just gone out for an errand."

If she'd produced a knife from under a chair and demanded loudly, 'However did that get there?', Mary-Anne couldn't have looked more guilty. Somehow that made Cloister trust her more, not less. She was obviously hiding something, but it probably wasn't guilt. Anyone who was *that* bad a liar had to know it, and they'd not put themselves in this position.

He folded the shirt inside out as he left Mary-Anne to fidget and headed for the open front door that had raised alarm in the first place. After it had been mixed in with the general wash for a day or more, the best spots for a good scent mark were under the arms and around the collar. Sweat soaked in there.

The Buchanans lived up in the hills, in what had been farmland a generation back. Now it was a manicured wilderness, dotted with idiosyncratic houses built at angles so they could all pretend the view just belonged to them.

As Cloister stepped out onto the driveway a black car pulled up behind the squad cars and SSA Javi Merlo unfolded his long, lean body from the driver's seat.

The last time Cloister had seen Javi had been in bed the night before. Sweaty silk sheets, no promises, and a smile that made Cloister remember how shit he was at 'no strings attached'.

Now he got a frown as Javi slammed the door of his car and stalked toward Cloister through the other deputies.

"What are you doing here?" Cloister asked. Bon whuffed a greeting and wagged her tail briskly as she stood up expectantly. In her experience Javi's presence meant it was definitely going to be an interesting chase. Cloister pulled back on the lead in gentle reminder and she leaned against his leg placidly. "It's a missing person, that's not FBI jurisdiction."

Javi gave him an annoyed look. "Last I checked, I didn't answer to the local dog handler." He stopped, grimaced, and pulled his hand down his face. "Long night. Bad coffee. I should have said *state* dog handler."

It was, sort of, an apology. At least from Javi. Not an explanation

though.

“I still want to know why you’re here,” Cloister said. “Is this going to be another one like the Hartley case?”

Javi exhaled and took his jacket off. “I hope not,” he said as he folded it over his arm. “But the jury are about to come back with a verdict on a federal case, and apparently the judge who’s meant to be on the bench when that happens is nowhere to be found.”

“Maybe they’re with Judge Buchanan,” Cloister said blandly. “We can’t find her either.”

2

Sometimes even Javi found being around himself unbearable. It wasn't that he couldn't help himself, he just never wanted to until it was too late.

He tossed his jacket into the back of his car and followed Cloister around the side of Judge Ellie Buchanan's appropriately nice house. The flower beds had been trampled by careless boots, but they'd obviously been well-tended with lavender bushes and anthuriums. There was only a spare patch of grass, yellowed around the edges from the hot weather, and an empty kennel with no bowl outside it.

Put him on the spot and Javi would probably call the judge a friend, even though he'd more inherited her from Sol than made her himself, but it was ring-fenced to their respective workplaces. The furthest outside of that sphere they'd gotten was a coffee at the stand outside the courthouse, while Ellie enjoyed an espresso and the cigarette she bummed from the barista and Javi pitched his case for a search warrant.

She'd never mentioned a dog. Or the death of one.

That was probably the sort of thing you told someone who you were friends with.

"That came out wrong," Javi said as he stepped over the still-raw stump of a cut down tree.

Cloister glanced back over his shoulder. "No it didn't," he said. "You were being an asshole."

From anyone else that would have put Javi's back up. He had, after all, made the effort toward an apology. Sort of. The least whoever it was could do was acknowledge that and let it go. After all, why even try if it was going to be thrown back into your face.

Cloister got away with it. Probably because he was so matter-of-fact it sucked the emotional charge out of the moment, and let Javi with nothing to hide the fact that...yeah, he had been...behind. That and--Javi let his gaze

follow the lean line of Cloister's back down to the firm curve of his ass--Javi wanted to push himself up against a tree and kiss an apology into his mouth.

Or, at least, kiss him until he forgot he was owed an apology.

"We agreed that it was better if no-one else knew that we'd hooked up," Javi said. That got him a snort. Javi had set the rules, Cloister had shrugged that he didn't care. He didn't either. Other people's opinions weren't something that Cloister bothered with, whether it was about his personal life or the fact most of his off-duty t-shirts were second-hand Disney ones. Javi admired that sometimes, but that sort of bullet-proof disregard didn't work when you had ambitions beyond a trailer and a fridge full of cold beer. "But I take the professional distance a bit...too far...sometimes."

Cloister turned around and walked backwards. The moonlight softened the harsh lines of his face, smoothed out the broken cant of his nose. It didn't make him pretty all of a sudden, but it made him look softer, younger. The ghost of who he might have been if people had tried harder not to hurt him.

Then he smirked, an amused cant of that beautiful mouth, and Javi was reminded why he was OK with this slightly more battered Cloister.

"No, that's about right," he said. "Trust me, people are going to jump to the conclusion we're screwing way before it would occur to them we might be friends."

Javi swallowed a brief, unexpected urge to ask 'are we'. It wasn't as if it should matter, certainly not right now. He folded the brief moment of tension up and put it away. His not-quite-tendered apology and Cloister's not-quite-voiced admission of their relationship cancelled each other out, he decided.

"Did Mary-Anne tell you anything that we didn't already know?" he asked.

People did. Cloister looked like a biker in search of a bar room brawl, but small children and scared women trusted him. Maybe it was the dog.

Cloister stopped as they reached the gate at the end of the path. It was all plain, grey metal tubing and wire, obviously the service entrance. There was a shiny new padlock clipped onto the lock, but it hung open. Javi made a mental note to get Tancredi down here to fingerprint it.

"She's nervous," he said.

“Her wife’s missing.”

“People are scared when someone goes missing,” Cloister said. “They’re nervous when they don’t want you to know why they’re missing. She’s both.”

Javi swore under his breath as he pinched the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb. He wished it was concern for Ellie that took priority in his brain, but the potential hassle of a pending retrial shouldered it out of the way. It had been hard enough to convince people to testify against Si Franks--who ran drugs for the cartels, the Ukrainian mob, and had ties to Russia as well--the first time.

Hard enough to keep them alive long enough to testify. Two of Si’s runners who’d agreed to speak up had been first beaten, and then poisoned in the prison. One of the clients he’d pressured for favors, both sexual and professional, who’d come forward had his family threatened and a dead rat left in his office.

“I need you to find Ellie,” he said. “Without her we’ll need to appoint another judge, and Franks’ lawyers will push for a retrial. We could lose him, and all the cartel information that’s in his head. I cannot afford that.”

Cloister crouched down next to Bourneville and rubbed her ears affectionately as he checked her collar and harness.

“Oh, well, in that case,” he said. “Because I was just going to take the night off and head home early. For you, though, I’ll do my job.”

There was no-one around. The rest of the deputies had been left to secure the house, just in case. Javi reached down and tangled his fingers in Cloister’s dark blond hair.

“Pretty sure there’s not room for jerks in my bed,” he said as Cloister looked up at him. “You know what I meant. Do your best.”

“I always do,” Cloister said.

That *was* his problem. Javi nodded his acknowledgement of that and stepped back. He loosened his collar and undid his cuffs as Cloister showed the shirt to Bon. She poked her nose into and snorted eagerly at the scent worked into the fabric.

After a second Cloister took it away and sealed it into a plastic bag. Bourneville waited, ears up and tongue out, as Cloister tucked the bag inside his shirt and scrambled to his feet. She was too well-trained to lean against the leash but her tail trembled with eagerness to wag.

“Such,” Cloister said sharply.

Bourneville dropped her nose to the dirt and gave it a perfunctory sniff. She barked once, a sharp ‘come on’, and darted out through the gap in the gate. Cloister broke into an easy, ground-eating jog as he followed her. After a few steps he unclipped a torch from his belt and flicked it on to illuminate the ground under his feet.

Javi resisted the urge to follow. He wasn’t suited for a run and while he could keep up for a while--he was fit, but Cloister ran like it was a religion--there were more useful things he could than follow Cloister’s ass.

Not as fun maybe, Javi thought with a flicker of humor as he cocked his head to the side to admire the moonlit view.

A flutter of lust warmed Javi’s stomach for a moment. It was short-lived, as the weight of other responsibilities pushed it down. It wasn’t like Ellie to be unpredictable. Even her clandestine smoke breaks were once a week, and from a pack she’d given the barista to keep for her.

If Cloister was right that Mary-Anne had something to hide, it was possible that Si had gotten to her. Prison bars and security guards was an obstacle to Si’s influence, but a drawer full of dead rats in an accountant’s office was proof it wasn’t enough. If something happened to Ellie that would be a eighteen months of investigation gone to waste, and there was no guarantee that Javi could make the case stick a second time.

It wouldn’t exactly do Ellie any good either.

Javi grimaced, took one last look after Cloister, and then turned to stalk back down the path toward the Buchanan household. He needed to find Ellie before either of those things happened. Javi didn’t want to know what he cared about more. He had a feeling it wouldn’t reflect well on him.

3

The light bounced over the rutted path as Cloister half-jogged, half-skidded down the loose shale covered hill. Scrub grew long and stringy at

the side of the road, dried out and noisy as wildlife moved through it.

Bon's ears swivelled in response to the rustle of fat bodies through the grass and the squeaky mews of something that was either a cat or a baby racoon, but was definitely interesting. Despite the distractions she kept her nose down to the trail as she sniffed out Judge Buchanan in the dirt and stones.

"Good girl," Cloister told her. "It would just bite your nose anyhow."

Bon wagged her tail in response to the 'good' and ignored the rest. The nylon weave of the leash rubbed at Cloister's fingers as he kept her fairly tight to him. He'd grown up in a area like this, a dozen old buildings scattered back along a country loop so minor it didn't have an official name. Just a number and the nickname Trash Alley, because...well...Cloister's family, cousins and uncles and friends, lived there.

People always drove too fast on roads like this, as if they assumed the whole stretch of concrete and dirt from their doorway to the freeway was for their use only. Cloister had lost a bike and the skin off his back one summer to their neighbor—you'd yelled at him for scraping up her Station Wagon—but never a dog. He didn't intend to break that streak.

A stray branch caught on his sleeve and snapped up into his face, It caught under his eye with a sharp, scratch of pain and then flicked up into his eyebrow. He winced and rubbed his eye on the back of his hand, torch beam pointed into the scrub to catch the reflection from a pair of eyes a bit too high off the ground to be a racoon.

Cloister ignored the coyote—unless it was rabid a coyote wouldn't be interested in picking a fight with a big dog and a human unless it was pushed to it—and studied the trees along the side of the path.

No broken twigs. No scraps of hair caught in the branches or bits of fabric pierced like flags.

Judge Buchanan had left the house on foot and at her own pace. No one had chased her down here, if there was anyone with her they'd not been in a hurry. No fresh scuff marks on the road, no signs of any spot where someone had dug in their heels or grabbed for something to try and slow themselves down.

Cloister had only met Buchanan once, a domestic violence case where Bon had dragged an angry, tweaking ex from under a neighbors porch. She'd not seemed the sort to be dragged off into the night without some mark of

her left behind.

At the bottom of the hill the dirt road ended in a gate. Bon stuck her nose under it and snorted in frustration as she tried one gap and then another. Second time lucky and she squeezed through the bars. The leash pulled tight between them as she leaned against.

“Bleib,” Cloister told her. She whinged her disapproval of the stay order but flopped down on the pavement. Her tail tip twitched impatiently as she waited. Cloister let the leash drop and jumped up to grab the top of the gate. The metal--rough and untreated--scraped against his palm as he pulled himself up. He kicked one booted foot between the bars and boosted himself over the crossbar. Cloister dropped down on the other side and pulled the leash back through. Bon got a quick thump to the shoulders for being a good dog as she scrambled back onto her paws. *“Such.”*

On the other side of the was a well-paved concrete road. Bon veered sharply across to the left and then keep going onto the other side of the road. Security lights flicked on as they jogged past. On a few of the gates a camera, red light bright against the darkness, tracked him through its territory.

A bench, decorated with a divorce lawyer’s capped white smile and phone number, distracted Bon for a moment. She circled around it and then jumped up onto the seat and barked as she scraped at the sun-bleached plastic.

“She stopped here, huh?” Cloister said. He snapped his fingers and gestured down for Bon. She hopped down and wove between his legs, her weight solid as she butted her shoulder behind his knees. The leash tangled around his ankles in a snare. Cloister pinned a loop under his heel and stepped out of the knot. “Bon, enough. Sit.”

With a heavy, put-upon sigh Bon sat down. She hung her tongue out of her mouth, pink and dripping, while Cloister checked the bench over. Initials had been carved into the plastic with deep, ragged strokes and circled with lopsided hearts. No gang tags. No blood.

A flicker of something yellow beneath the bench caught his eye. He knelt down and reached in the grab the scrap of paper that had caught against a loose bit of rock. It was a sheet of lined, yellow paper with a list of times and locations on it. Home bookended the list, and in between included the courthouse, a cafe—ham on rye stipulated in brackets

underneath, and a dry cleaners.

Someone had been paying a lot of attention to where Judge Buchanan went every day.

Although—Cloister glanced up the timetable posted in the metal pole—why they'd take her to get the bus he didn't know.

Some days Javi wished that Cloister *was* as simple as he liked people to think. It would make sticking to Javi's usual 'one stand only rules' a lot easier. Javi knew his flaws. He was arrogant, impatient, and he could be cruel...with some people it was so easy that 'could be' changed to 'was'.

Cloister made it easy--he was a redneck with a Montana drawl, who lived in a trailer and liked hot dogs, dogs, and bands with dog in the name--but he gave as good as he got. And he was good with people.

Not like Javi. He had a knack for fault lines, the weak points in someone where just a little bit of pressure could make you do what you want. Cloister was as manipulative as a hammer. He could read people though, understand why that weak point was there.

He was right about Mary-Anne. She did have something to hide.

"It looks like someone had Judge Buchanan under surveillance," Javi said. He enlarged the photo of the note on his phone and passed it over the table. "They tracked everything she did. Right down to her lunch order it looks like."

Mary-Anne touched her fingers to the screen and folded her lower lip between her teeth. She made a choked sound that could have been a laugh or a strangled back sob.

"Ham on rye," she said. "Her lucky sandwich. That's what she had for lunch the day she won her first big case, and what she had for lunch every day after that. Nothing like the taste of rye and victory, that's what she said."

She rolled her wet eyes and dabbed at her lashes.

"Mary-Anne, this isn't a list that someone could construct from a distance. There's too many details, too much time covered," Javi said. "This had to be put together by someone with access to Ellie's life. Can you think of anyone that she might have mentioned made her uncomfortable, maybe showed her more attention than usual?"

Mary-Annie shook her head.

“It’s probably just an intern,” she said as she pushed the phone back toward him. Her smile was watery as she shrugged. “They always try and impress her, work out how to get her what she wants before she wants it. The good ones realise soon enough that all she wants is that they do a good job.”

“Do you know any of their names?” Javi asked. He lifted his phone and tucked it into his pocket. “I could check.”

Mary-Anne shook her head and sat back in the chair. Her hands picked nervously at themselves in her lap.

“She doesn’t talk about work,” she said. “When she decided to retire we made a deal that we were going to live in the future, talk about places we were going to go and things we were going to do. So she wouldn’t change her mind. I don’t know who— I don’t think this is important, SA Merlo. Please, just find my wife and prove that I’m ridiculous?”

Definitely hiding something. Javi paused for a second as he watched Mary-Anne fret opposite him. She was nervous, too eager to brush what would normally be alarming evidence away as unimportant, and yet she seemed genuinely worried.

“You said you didn’t realise when Ellie got up during the night?”

“It’s what she did. To work. To read. To walk the dog, before we had to —” Mary-Anne stopped and pressed the heel of her hand against her eye socket. “Ellie never sleeps much. Probably because she drinks so much coffee. I’m used to her not being there when I roll over.”

“So what was different tonight?”

“We’d argued,” Mary-Anne said. “About...something and nothing. I was just on edge.”

Javi nodded. “Thank you, Mary-Anne,” he said. “I’ll get back to the search.”

He stood up and Mary-Anne mirrored him. She fumbled a bottle of pills out of her pocket and held them out to him.

“There’s something else,” she said. “I think she took some of my sleeping pills last night. They’re not that strong, but it might have made her confused. I don’t know.”

Javi made a note of the name, promised to call if he found anything, and went outside. His car was parked at the bottom of the drive, behind the

deputy's squad cars, and the white shell gravel slid under his feet as he walked down. The alarm beeped quietly as he unlocked it.

Down the road he saw Cloister lug a massive, potted fern from the back of the gardener's truck. Bourneville sat on the narrow strip of pavement with her head cocked to one side in confusion. At least, Javi thought dryly, had some idea of proper behavior.

He locked his car again, gave the long, dark road a cursory glance, and jogged across.

"Good use of police time, Deputy," he said.

Cloister put the heavy planter down on a cart and brushed his hands together. He gestured to the nervous man with 'Ballentine's Landscaping Services' sewn onto his shirt.

"Mr Dao does the landscaping at my trailer park," Cloister said. Javi tried not to wince. Or judge Mr Dao. The yellowed patches of grass around Cloister's trailer weren't exactly an impressive testament to Ballentine's work. "He's been here half the night, getting the house ready for a birthday party."

The explanation didn't make Mr Dao look any less nervous. He bobbed his head awkwardly at Javi and shifted his weight from one cracked boot to the other.

"I need to get back to work," he said in a quiet, hoarse voice as he grabbed the cart. "Everything has to be ready for breakfast. Thank you for the help, Mr Witte. Deputy."

"Wait," Cloister said as he put a hand on one of the planters. "Tell Javi here what you were telling me."

Mr Dao rubbed a rough-worked hand down his face. "I don't want to get involved."

"It could be important," Cloister said.

"No one is trouble, Mr Dao," Javi said. "It's a missing person case. We just need to find Mrs Buchanan."

"Ellie?" Dao asked. He scratched his head and nodded, more to himself than them. "She was always very nice to me. Very kind. I did some work for them."

"Was?" Javi asked, as non-accusatory as he could make the question. Somewhat to his surprise Dao just looked confused, not alarmed.

"A few months ago they let me go," he said. "Ellie, Judge Buchanan,

had asked me to take down this tree in the background. Then, I guess she changed her mind? Or maybe her wife did and Ellie didn't want the trouble. She said she'd never asked me to do anything, accused me of lying, and then Mary-Anne told me not to come back."

Cloister cleared his throat. "You saw Mary-Anne earlier didn't you?"

There was a pause as Dao wrestled with whether to say something or not. He finally nodded. "Up and down the road, for a couple of hours," he said. "She said that Ellie sleepwalked and that she'd gotten out. I helped for a while, but I had to get back to work."

Again. Javi glanced sidelong at Cloister, who didn't even have the grace to look smug.

"When was this?" Javi asked.

Dao pursed his lips and rubbed his wrist absently, even though his wrist was bare of a watch.

"It was around 11?" he said after a moment of internal calculation. "I came back from the nursery with some plants and she was already out. After midnight the lady, the housekeeper, came out and they talked for a while, then went back in."

The housekeeper had called at two am to report Ellie missing. That was a long time to wait if you were that alarmed.

"Can I..." Dao jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the drive. "I've got stuff to do."

Javi nodded. "Of course," he said. "Thanks for your help."

“Did Mary-Anne mention sleep-walking to you?” Javi asked.

Cloister patted his leg to call Bourneville over. He scratched her cheek as she leaned against his leg, fur thick and her skin warm. She panted noisily, slobber dripped on the ground, and he made a mental note to get her a drink back at the car. It hadn't been a long run but it had been a long night before they got here, and Bon had never learned that she could just walk up a hill.

“No,” he said. “It's possible. My stepdad used to sleepwalk if he got drunk. He made pancakes once.”

Javi paused at that and raised his eyebrows. “Were they any good?”

Cloister laughed softly as he remembered the squall of the smoke alarm and the black discs in the cast iron pan. They'd had them for breakfast anyhow once Dad had woken up and gotten the syrup up, charcoal, stodge, and sugar.

“Not so much,” he admitted. “But he did stuff like that, his daily routine only on auto-pilot.”

“It's possible,” Javi admitted. “Except why wouldn't Mary-Anne tell us about that right from the start?”

Cloister shrugged. “Maybe she didn't think we'd take her seriously?”

“The last thing she seems to want is for us to take this seriously,” Javi said slowly as he stared over the road at the lit up house. “She's worried, but it's like she doesn't want us to.”

“It's your job to work that out,” Cloister said. “I just handle the dog.”

That got him an exasperated look from Javi. “I apologised for that.”

“No,” Cloister drawled. He lifted Bourneville's leash and wound it around his hand. “You actually didn't.”

“It was implied,” Javi said coolly, as if that was actually a thing that people did. There were times that Cloister thought liking Javi was a sign of bad judgement on his part. “Come on. I'm going to talk to Franks and his lawyer. I want you to see if Bourneville can find any trace of the Judge around his house.”

“I'll meet you there,” Cloister said as they started over the road. “I need to update Tancredi and let Frome know where I'm going.”

Javi nodded. “I'll send you the address. Don't take too long. I don't

want to waste any time. And for the record? I am.”

“What?”

“Sorry,” Javi said. He thumbed the fob of his car to unlock the doors as they reached it and pulled the door open. “Bourneville’s not just some average dog, I shouldn’t have implied she was.”

“Yeah, that’s why she’s going to pee in your shoes later,” Cloister said.

Javi looked amused as he folded himself down into the car. “Your pick up lines need polished, Detective.”

“So it didn’t work?” Cloister asked as he leaned an elbow on the car door and looked in. The leather seats and polished dashboard looked nicer than his car ever had and it smelled like elbow grease and air-freshener. Some weekend, Cloister mused idly, he should take his to the car wash instead of just leaving it out in the rain. “

“I didn’t say that,” Javi said as he leaned back against the headrest. His face looked lean and elegant in the moonlight, all shadows and highlights and crooked smile as he looked up at Cloister. “But I’m a charitable man. I like to give back to the less...socially practiced.”

Cloister leaned down, close enough for a kiss or a threat. He watched Javi’s eyes darken in response and heat flushed a hungry distraction under Cloister’s skin. The urge to just lean in for the kiss, fuck who was watching, caught him by surprise. He resisted.

“People like me more than you,” he said.

“I don’t care if they like me,” Javi said with a curl of his lip. “I care if I can pick a one night stand up in a club.”

The flicker of jealousy Cloister was more used to. He didn’t have any right--no promises had been made by either of them, and Javi had been clear that none would be--but Cloister had always fallen hard. The Sheriff’s Department’s psychologist had his theories about that. Cloister didn’t think it was exactly a mystery why he was like this. His family didn’t want him, and that sort of thing left a hole in you.

That was his problem though, so Cloister didn’t ask if Javi had practiced his pick-up lines recently. He pushed himself upright and stepped back from the car.

“I’ll meet you at Franks,” he said. “Later on you can show me how it’s done.”

“Again,” Javi said with that flicker of a smile. “If we find the Judge

soon. Otherwise I won't have much free time for the foreseeable future."

Simon 'Si' Franks liked nice things. His clothes. His apartment. The girl with a split lip he kept in his lap.

"This is harassment," Franks' lawyer mentioned conversationally as he stepped out of Bourneville's way. "I will be lodging a complaint about this behavior."

"That's your prerogative," Javi said calmly. "Until then, the deputy has work to do."

"The warrant covers the main living areas, not the bedrooms or any electronics--"

"Leave them to it," Si drawled. He didn't look like a drug kingpin, maybe that was how he'd got away with it for so long. Pale brown hair was set a few inches back from where it should be, and his long, narrow face was so bland that his glasses and goatee looked like interruptions. He had mean eyes though. Cloister's grandmother had a dog with the same flat nastiness to its eyes. It had given Cloister's stepdad a scar on his calf that still made him limp when it got cold. "They aren't going to find anything. Unless Millie here brought something."

He squeezed his arm around the girl's stomach. She pressed her lips together, think under the coat of pink, and looked bleak. The girl and the lawyer wore very similar looks of disgust with Franks.

"Mela," the girl corrected him.

"Whatever," Si dismissed. "Let them do what they want. I'm an innocent."

"Until tomorrow," Javi said coldly. He gestured for Cloister to start the search. "Stay out of Deputy Witte's way during the search."

They wouldn't find anything. Cloister couldn't swear to that, but Bon was disinterested in the room. If she'd smelled something familiar, a scent she'd been set on before, she'd have been on alert. Not more interested in keeping a flat-eared eye on Franks.

"*Such*," Cloister told her anyhow, a scrap of shirt collar under her nose to refresh the scent. She nosed his fingers, snorted cold and wet between them, and then cast around desulatorily. Her tail was down and disinterested. "*Such*, Bourneville!"

She huffed, shook her head, and leaned into the leash as she tracked

around the wall.

"I like dogs," Si said. "Maybe I should buy your dog some steaks, huh? Nice, juicy steaks...bet she wouldn't be so interested in my business after she gulped them down."

That was why Bon only took food from a few people. There was always someone who thought poisoning a dog would do them some good.

"Would you consider that a threat?" Javi asked the lawyer.

"Shut up, Franks," the lawyer said through gritted teeth. "Remember you're supposed to be smart."

Franks shoved the girl off his lap and lunged to his feet. "Remember you were meant to get me off," he spat as he stalked toward the toilet. "Can I piss? Or you want the dog to sniff the bowl first?"

He didn't wait for an answer. The door slammed behind him and the sound of a noisy leak filtered through. Cloister rolled his eyes and led Bourneville over to the door of the bedroom. She sniffed the door and then gave him a reproachful look as if he'd set her up to fail.

"Do you want to leave?" Javi asked the girl.

She wiped her mouth on her hand. "No," she said. "He's on the tab for my lip."

Cloister grimaced. What people did in their bedrooms were their business. Someone who needed to hurt other people enough that they would pay for it rubbed him the wrong way.

"Mela is free to leave whenever she wants," the lawyer said. "My client is allowed to visit his friends and family for moral support before the sentencing."

"And barring any friends and family, he hired a prostitute," Javi said. "What else has your client been up to?"

"Nothing illegal."

"You sure?"

"It's my job to be, and to say it convincingly," the lawyer said. "Why? What's going on, Merlo?"

"Nothing."

"That seems like a lie. If this is about my clients case, disclosure is mandated. Judge Buchanan is a stickler."

He didn't sound smug or guilty, just confident. Cloister let Bourneville give up--she lay down with a sigh and rested her chin on his boot--and

shrugged the news across the room to Javi. No sign of the judge.

“You ever get tired of defending scumbags?” Cloister asked as he fussed over a dejected Bon.

“They pay better,” the lawyer said with a glance toward the bathroom. “And, of course, they’re innocent. Although I won’t be sorry to get this trial over with.”

“A conscience?” Javi mocked, voice sharp with disappointment. “That will cut into your billable hours.”

“Your concern is touching,” the lawyer said as he glanced at his watch. “I’d just rather be done with a case that has me up at this hour, babysitting a client to make sure they don’t sneak out do something stupid and play into your hands.”

Cloister paused, his fingers buried in Bon’s ruff. His Gran’s evil terrier always a babysitter too, whatever grandkid was unlucky enough to get tagged when they visited. Every time the terrier would slip its leash and to running into the woods to terrorise some racoons.

The grandkid who’d screwed up would lie, make excuses, pretend it had only been five minutes ago and they’d looked for an hour. They’d never got away with it. Granny had been sharp right to the end. The Wittes’ just got meaner as they got older.

Cloister caught Javi’s gaze over the room and tilted his head towards the door. There was a pause as Javi looked irritated, but he made his excuses and followed Cloister out into the hall.

“That bus route,” Cloister asked as they headed to the lift. “Is there anything along the route that would have been familiar to the Judge?”

Javi frowned. “It passes the Court,” he said. “Why.”

Cloister thumbed the plastic button to call the lift. “The Buchanans have a new housekeeper. They fired the gardener after Judge Buchanan forgot she told him to take out a tree. Mary-Anne was worried she’d wandered off at night and made a point of telling you that she was--”

“Going to be confused when we found her,” Javi said. “The list wasn’t surveillance. It was Ellie’s to-do list. Fuck.”

6

She didn't look confused.

Ellie Buchanan was, as far as she was concerned, in her own element. She sat on a wrought iron bench outside the courtyard, elegant in satin pyjamas that could pass for a pantsuit and grey smoke from her cigarette wreathed around her soft, rounded face as she talked. Interns--Javi had checked, she'd refused to have any this year--would have given their eye-teeth for one-on-one with Judge Buchanan like this. The three homeless men and two women she sat with her nodded and agreed with her when she paused.

"Ellie," Javi said as he approached. "Can I have a word?"

She gave him a sharp, disapproving look--she'd always hated interruptions, people deserved your attention--but nodded briskly. One of the homeless men took the cigarette out of her hand as she stood up. The other eyed Javi suspiciously, and then glanced past him to catch a glimpse of Javi. The uniform might not be one that usually portended good things for them, but after a second the man relaxed.

"SA Merlo," Ellie said. She took his elbow with the confidence of someone who knew her own skin. "Walk with me."

Her feet were bare, dirty and blistered, but she didn't seem to notice as he led her over the courtyard.

"I'm going to have to crack on dress code," she said. "I've never been as traditional as some, but there's a level of respect you have to show the building. The people who come here, the defendants *and* the victims."

"Maybe later," Javi said. "Ellie, would you let me drive you home."

Her fingers tightened on his arm. For the first time he saw something on her face that betrayed some knowledge that something was wrong. A scared crack in her polished, Judge Buchanan facade as she peered into the fog that had settled around her.

“Oh that would be nice,” she said quickly. “I don’t know how I let it get so late. I promised Mary-Anne that I’d start coming home earlier, to get ready for retirement. I’ll miss this, though. Helping people, teaching new lawyers the ropes, keeping young FBI agents in their place.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Javi said. “If I had someone to love, I wouldn’t want to waste any time to love them in. And Plenty is OK, but it’s no Barcelona.”

“Cuba,” Ellie corrected him. “Mary-Anne’s husband, his family was from Cuba. Apparently she promised him she’d go one day, take their daughter. Since Kris doesn’t want to, I get to go.”

“Cuba has beaches,” Javi said.

Ellie laughed.

The deputies greeted her at the patrol car. They let her ride in the front, as if this was just another escort for the Judge.

Javi stepped back and watched the car disappear into the dark.

“Not going to be good for your case, is it?” Cloister asked as he came up behind him.

“No,” Javi said. He was a little surprised to find out he cared more about Ellie, although he wasn’t going to put any money on feeling the same once his case against Franks came crashing down. “We’ll ask for the new judge to review the case, Franks lawyer will demand a retrial, and we’ll see.”

“See? That’s why I like my job,” Cloister said as put a hand on Javi’s shoulder. “This is just a win for me. I don’t have to make it complicated.”

Javi snorted. “You’ll have to show me how to do that sometime, because complicated is where this starts,” he said. “I have to get ahead of this, update Frome, update the FBI, get ready for every case Ellie tried in the last year to be appealed...”

“Is that an invite?” Cloister asked. “Or a brush-off.”

Whichever it needed to be. Javi thought about it--and, for some reason, Cloister on a white sand beach in nothing much at all--and picked one. “It was an invitation,” he said. “For later.”

“Not like I sleep,” Cloister pointed out. “I can wait.”

It had been--if Javi said so himself--worth the wait. They sprawled on Javi’s black leather couch, tangled around each other and too comfortable to give in to how uncomfortable the couch was. Javi tangled his fingers in

Cloister's sandy, sun streaked hair and pulled his head to the side so he could chew a kiss into the soft skin under his jaw. Pale gilt stubble was rough against his lips.

"I don't know if this is, officially, uncomplicated, Deputy Witte," he said.

"All I can do is try," Cloister said. He propped himself up on his elbow and reached for the beer that sat with the cold pizza. Javi didn't know why Cloister pretended that this--sweat, sex, and the taste of salt and skin in Javi's mouth--wasn't going to happen, that he'd just come over for pizza, or chicken, or food. He knew why *he* maintained the pretence, but as almost aggressively open-book as Cloister was he could be hard to read sometimes. "What about Mary-Anne?"

"We could probably charge her with wasting police time or obstruction," Javi said. He waited until Cloister had taken a swig and stole the beer. Whiskey would have been better, but he'd have drunk that alone. Cloister said whiskey went with bad news and worse ideas, not food. "It would never stick. Certainly not when we'd drag her into court in front of the other judges."

He took a drink of beer and leaned back, arm tucked behind his head, and looked at the ceiling. Cloister trailed his fingers along Javi's leg in an idle caress.

"Why did they--"

"One last case," Javi said. "That's what Mary-Anne says anyhow. Ellie isn't lucid yet."

"It's worse at night," Cloister said. "People with Alzheimer's, or dementia, their symptoms get worse at night. Sundowning. Bon's found a lot of confused folks who got lost in the night. Once an old man hit me with a branch because he thought I was a debt collector from the 90s."

Javi laughed, and nearly choked a pinch of guilt.

"I don't think Ellie's that confused," he said. "Not usually, at least, according to Mary-Anne. The symptoms only started this year, or only got pronounced enough to be a worry. Ellie would forget things, go home to their old apartment instead of their house, and get her schedule confused. Not like her, but nothing abnormal for most of us. Then, apparently, she called her ex to ask when she'd be home for dinner, said she'd made their favorite dish. That's when they knew that...it was bad."

“How long has it been?”

“Five months,” Javi said. “Around the time Ellie decided to retire instead of just talking about him. But she knew if she pulled out in the middle of the case, that it would fall apart. She wanted to see it through and none of us noticed anything wrong. Day in and day out she was sharp as ever. It just took a bit more work for them to keep the balls in the air than it used to.”

“Until it got worse,” Cloister said. He sat up and stretched. Javi ignored the petty grumble at the loss of heavy warmth draped over him and admired the view instead. “The new housekeeper-”

“The old one noticed something was wrong,” Javi confirmed. “They rehomed their dog because Ellie would remember it needed walked, but not how to get home. I don’t know what I’d do if that happened. What about you?”

Cloister pulled halfway through putting his t-shirt on. “I don’t know,” he admitted after a pause. It was, Javi realised with a wince, not entirely a hypothetical for him. There was a whole trauma that his brain had just shucked off, a lost twelve hour hole. “You remember that you’ve forgotten something, you know? Not what it was, or if it was important, just that it’s gone. It ends up like a cavity in your head, you can’t stop poking at it.”

“Sorry,” Javi said. “That was a stupid question.”

“No,” Cloister said as he dragged his jeans on. “Who better to ask? Look, you want to go out for dinner next week? Beer and chicken wings, nothing I wouldn’t ask Tancredi to.”

Javi should have said no. He should have turned down a lot of things that Cloister offered in that off-hand way, but he never seemed to. It was hard to remember your best intentions when you just wanted to lick the freckles off someone’s shoulder.

“I don’t see why not,” Javi said. “But I do have nice dinners without marrying anyhow. Maybe a candlelit dinner at the Galleon would be too far, but we could step it from counter service.”

“But would the chicken wings be as good?” Cloister asked as he leaned down and teased a feather light kiss over Javi’s mouth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



TA Moore is a Northern Irish writer of romantic suspense, urban fantasy, and contemporary romance novels. A childhood in a rural, seaside town fostered in her a suspicious nature, a love of mystery, and a streak of black humour a mile wide. As her grandmother always said, ‘she’d laugh at a bad thing that one’, mind you, that was the pot calling the kettle black. TA Moore studied History, Irish mythology, English at University, mostly because she has always loved a good story. She has worked as a journalist, a finance manager, and in the arts sectors before she finally gave in to a lifelong desire to write.

Coffee, Doc Marten boots, and good friends are the essential things in life. Spiders, mayo, and heels are to be avoided.

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