

Mamie: MA1

Friday nights were always good for homework. I hated to procrastinate, and who knew how long the extra credit essay in AP History would take? It was always better to start early in the weekend to allow yourself plenty of time to finish.

“Matt?” Mom called from the base of the staircase. “I’m ready to take you and Will out to the Bowl’n’Stuff.”

“Coming!” My younger brother yelled.

He tapped on my bedroom door twice, then burst inside. I hid a smile; Matt was dressed in his idea of hot-stuff: long-sleeved polo, jeans and hiking boots. Ella Mitchell must be going to the lock-in. Well, he wasn’t drenched in Axe, thank goodness. Our older brother, Brent, smelled like a department store cologne section when he left on his date earlier in the evening.

Matt held out what appeared to be an oversized cell phone. “Colonel Black’s giving Will and me the night off. He wanted someone on call, though...could you answer this if anyone calls?” He glanced over his shoulder, probably making sure Mom wasn’t standing behind him. “It shouldn’t ring, but I just don’t feel right leaving it unmanned.”

Unmanned. When had my fifteen-year-old brother started sounding so...so...*Army*?

Probably when he got drafted by a magic knife to hunt things that should exist in nature.

I still had a hard time believing grown men would put Matt in danger over and over again but to hear my uncle tell it, Matt was not only necessary...he was critical. It made me angry, though. What if something happened to him?

I held out my hand. “I’ll keep it for you, but it better not ring. You deserve some fun for once.”

He flashed me a grin, all at once reminding me that, despite the unusual growth spurt he’d gone through the last few months, he was still a kid. “You’re awesome, sis. Don’t study too hard.”

As if there were such a thing as studying too hard. “And you stay out of trouble.”

“Always,” he answered, already halfway down the stairs, probably so I couldn’t argue the point. Trouble found *him* more often than not.

An hour later, Mom came up. “I’m going to my room, sweetheart. I have some TV shows to catch up on. Want to watch with me?”

I bookmarked the page in my history text. “I need to work on this, if that’s okay.”

“Of course.” Mom came to kiss my cheek and tugged on one of my pigtails while she was at it. “Is there any chance I can convince you to wear your hair down for the sophomore class party next week?”

“Not a chance,” I said, but smiled. I liked my braids. They kept my hair out of my face while I was reading and they were neat and symmetrical. Symmetry made me happy; so what if other people thought they were silly? Still, I knew Mom meant well. “But I’ll make you a deal. I promise to wear my hair down for graduation.”

“That’s a while off, but since you wore it down for Mike’s going away party, I’ll quit nagging.” She kissed me again, then got up to leave. “Sleep well.”

I waved at her and opened my book again, getting lost in the details around the creation of the Hoover Dam. My paper would be on modern advancements in construction, and this was a

prime example. My friend Josephine was doing her paper on Mount Rushmore, and we had a bet to see who got the higher grade. The loser had to bake the winner brownies.

We were a little competitive—and some might say strange—like that.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but I jumped when a little trill broke the silence of my room. Matt's satellite phone was ringing. I checked the clock—midnight.

Oh, this couldn't be good.

Stiff from sitting with my legs crossed on my bed for so long, I stumbled to my desk and picked up the phone. The ID said, "Black."

"Not now," I whispered. I pushed the little talk-button and said, "Archer residence, Mamie speaking."

"Um..." a deep, male voice said. "Miss Archer, I didn't realize you'd be answering for Matt this evening."

"Who is this, please?" Sure, I was very annoyed the Army was about to spoil Matt's night off, but politeness counts, right?

"Colonel Black." He paused. Hopefully he was rethinking his decision to call Matt. "I'm in Billings...is Mr. Archer somewhere I can reach him?"

I sucked in a gasp. The fact that the colonel was *here* didn't bode well. "He's out, but I know where he is."

"Could you tell me where I can find him?" he asked, sounding impatient.

"Yes." I wasn't being deliberately obtuse, but I was going to run interference for Matt until I was satisfied they really needed him.

Colonel Black paused long enough to count to ten. "And where is he?"

"Why do you need him?"

“I can’t discuss that on the phone.”

I smirked. “Isn’t this supposed to be a secure line?”

Another ten-count pause. “Yes, but--”

“If you want to see Matt, Colonel, you’ll need to come pick me up. You can tell me what’s going on while we drive.”

This time I heard a faint growl of frustration. “Okay, fine. I’ll send someone to pick you up at the corner of your street. He’ll be there in five minutes. His name is Lieutenant Johnson, and he’ll be driving a black SUV. If you know where Matt’s, um, supplies are, please bring those, too.”

“Corner of the street, black SUV, Johnson, bring the knife and Matt’s gear. Got it,” I said. “I’ll be right down.”

I caught a grumble of something like, “...girl will be the death of me...” before he hung up. I shrugged. I couldn’t help being tenacious; my brother’s life was at stake.

Then it dawned on me...I’d just agreed to *sneak out of the house*. And I only had five minutes to figure out *how*.

It wasn’t just Mom I had to avoid, either; Brent had come home from his date at eleven, banging through the house like a drunk rhinoceros. The good news was that Brent slept like he was comatose, but I couldn’t be sure he was actually asleep yet. What should I do?

Okay, Matt usually climbed out the window in the mudroom, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to do that. There were spiders in the side yard, and...no, I just wouldn’t go that way. But I couldn’t stand here frozen. To stall, I went to pack up Matt’s things.

Matt’s room was dark, but I wasn’t about to turn on his lamp, feeling my way to his closet. I thought I’d need to turn on the closet light, at least, but an eerie blue glow emanated from a

plastic storage tote on the closet floor. Inside I found the source was coming from inside Matt's backpack, and the knife vibrated against the canvas. I knew all about the knife and its powers, but the thing still gave me a serious case of the heebies.

When I got back to my room, I glanced at the clock again. Twelve-oh-eight. Okay, Mom should be asleep by now; I'd go out the front door. Not original, but I didn't have time to come up with something clever. I grabbed my house keys, threw a sweatshirt on over my Jane Austen t-shirt and crept downstairs.

The house was utterly quiet, so when the front door's hinges squeaked, I cringed and waited for Mom to come barreling out of her room. I took two breaths, then another, and nothing stirred. I eased outside and was down the driveway and on the sidewalk before I realized I was wearing my fuzzy slippers instead of real shoes. Too late to turn back, though, because a black SUV pulled up to the corner two houses down.

I scurried up to it, hoping this was Johnson and not some random person. The passenger side window lowered when I got close and a deep bass voice rumbled, "Mamie Archer?"

"Lieutenant Johnson?"

"Yes, ma'am. Get in, please."

I opened the door, and the lieutenant and I both winced in the sudden brightness from the dome light. He smiled though, and I instantly felt at ease. Lieutenant Johnson was a big, bulky bear of a man, with dark skin and kind eyes. In fact, he reminded me a little of that actor, Michael Clarke Duncan. Who could possibly be scared of Michael Clarke Duncan?

"Where to?" he asked, sounding amused as he checked out my slippers.

"Bowl'n' Stuff. I can give you directions on the way."

He chuckled. “Bowl’n’Stuff. First time I’ve had to reel a soldier back from shore-leave from a place like that.”

No doubt. “Matt’s not a soldier.”

Johnson sighed. He sounded weary, and that surprised me. “Miss Archer, he *is* a soldier. No two ways about that, now.”

I pointed him in the right direction and we pulled away from the curb. “So what’s this about, Lieutenant?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s up to the colonel to tell you.”

“Is Matt in trouble?”

“I can’t rightly say.”

I huffed a breath. “Can you at least give me a hint?”

“Oh, no. No way.” We stopped at a red light and he turned to face me, smiling. “Your uncle told me how you found out about the program. He said, and I quote, ‘she’s like a beagle. Give her a scent and she’ll run for miles.’ You’ll just have to wait until we pick up Matt and go see the colonel.”

Uncle Mike called me a beagle? That wasn’t very nice...although I did have a tendency to be a little nosy. “Okay, fine. We’re almost there anyway.”

“Frankly, I’m kind of glad Archer has a big sister to look after him,” Johnson said. “The kid has too much on his shoulders, you know?”

“Yes, I do.” I sat back and hugged myself. The lieutenant’s comments were making me dread this meeting. What were they going to ask Matt to do?

We pulled up in front of the Bowl'n' Stuff and I hurried inside. Once I crossed through the sliding doors, though, I stopped, bombarded by flashing lights, video game noises and the dull thud of bowling balls rolling pell-mell down lanes. How on earth would I find him in here?

Then, because my luck is just plain awful, management turned out the lights.

Other than the neon lights shining down on the bowling lanes, the place was nearly dark. I turned to the front counter, which was lit by a single fluorescent bulb.

The bored college student on duty said, "Where's your wristband?"

"I don't have one. I'm looking for my brother."

"Sorry, no one comes in without a wristband."

I crossed my arms and glared at him. Too bad he could barely see me in the dark. "Look here, it's a matter of life and death. I need to find him. Now."

"Best I can do is page him."

I crossed my arms tighter. "Fine. Please do."

The guy paged Matt, cutting into the blaring music. Surely he heard that, right?

A few minutes went by, and Matt didn't show. "Could you page him one more time? Please?"

"Okay," the desk clerk said, reaching for the microphone.

"Mamie?" Will, Matt's best friend, came jogging up to the counter. "I came to find out what's going on." He looked around. "Where's Matt?"

"I have no idea, and this *gatekeeper*," I pointed an accusing finger at Mr. Front Desk, "won't let me go find him because I don't have a wristband."

Will puzzled look melted into a crafty smile. "I think I know where he is. Be right back."

As soon as Will took off toward the snack bar, the overhead lights came back on. I stood, blinking in the sudden brightness, and retried my glare on Mr. Front Desk.

He just laughed. "You're kind of cute when you're mad."

"Aren't you a little old for me?" I asked.

"I'm only nineteen...so, no, I'm not."

Flustered, I said, "Well, I...um..."

Will called out to me, saving me from making a complete fool of myself. He had Matt with him...and *Ella Mitchell*.

Under any other circumstance, I'd be really happy to see Matt looking unsteady on his feet, holding a girl's hand. Especially when said girl had been his crush forever. Tonight, though, I wasn't sure I could take any more surprises.

"Um, there's an issue, uh, at home," I said. "Nothing serious, I just need you to come with me."

Matt smiled. "It's okay, Mamie. She knows. Give me a minute."

He and Ella disappeared around a corner, leaving me with my mouth hanging open. She knows? She *knows*? Why? How? I let out a long breath. What was he thinking?

A minute later, Matt came back by himself and I led him out to the SUV. On the way, I noticed he had lip gloss smeared across his mouth, on his cheek, and down one side of his neck.

No wonder he didn't hear the page.

We got into the SUV with Matt giving me grief about sneaking out, but I reminded him he did it all the time. Besides, he needed a keeper, whether he liked it or not.

"So what's up?" Matt asked Lieutenant Johnson, eyeing the backpack I'd brought for him. The knife was glowing again. So creepy.

“We’re taking you to the airport,” Lieutenant Johnson said. “The colonel will explain more when we get there.”

The airport? My heart started to pound. Where were they planning on sending Matt now?

To Be Continued