

No. 4 is Guilty

“Hi, Cameron. I was hoping that you could help us tie up a few loose ends today. I’ll be quick, okay?” I nodded my head timidly as he skimmed down the list in front of him until he found my name and jotted something down next to it. “Where were you when Ms. Richardson’s house was burglarized on February 19th of this year?” I fidgeted with the ring on my thumb and tapped my foot. “Sir, I’m going to need you to make eye contact with me.” *Goddamn. This guy is intense.* I looked up at him and replied hesitantly, “I was at a family reunion. My mother’s side. We ate hot dogs while watching speed boats on Ferry’s Lake.” The interrogator glanced down at his notes before resuming the same intimidating death stare. “Do you recall what time that took place at?” *Time? What is that? Isn’t time just make-believe so that we have some point of reference? Does he notice my pit stains?* “Did you hear me?” He was getting impatient fast. I swallowed thickly before replying, “It was around two in the afternoon until six in the evening. I helped set up too, so I was there for most of the day.” He huffed as if I had said the minimum to satisfy him. “How long have you known Ms. Richardson? A few months? A couple of years?” I shook my head slowly, “No, I’ve known her since I was born. She was my grandmother’s best friend before she died.” He picked up his pen and started writing something. “So you were quite close to her then, were you not?” My eyes suddenly became transfixed on the middle button of his shirt; it had become undone and made him look somewhat less threatening. “I mean, you could say that. My mom and I always went over there for Sunday dinner...” He gave me a small nod and stood up abruptly. “I’m going to let you go home for now. You should expect a call from us in three to four hours. Do not mention anything that occurred today to anyone else. Do you understand?” I nodded fervently, fearing that if I didn’t respond he would stab me with his pen. As he led me out of the cramped room, it was as though the weight on my shoulders only got heavier. I mean, I guess I understand why interrogators have to be so strict; America is practically a teenage rebellion in the form of a country. I walked out to the parking lot and hopped into my beat-up 1994 silver Land Cruiser, also known as Big Bertha. I hated Bertha for

many reasons, the most important reason being the giant skull on the hood of it. When I first got my driver's license, I thought it would be badass to put a large skull decal on the hood of my car. Now, I grimace every time I look at it and I wish that I had the money to take it off. I had some money, but most of it went towards buying food to support my little sister and I. I ripped down Main Street twenty miles over the speed limit, which probably wasn't the best idea given that I had just been at my local police department. When I got home, I tip-toed up the stairs slowly so that Lucy wouldn't hear me. Just when I thought I was in the clear, I heard a small voice arise from her room, "Where have you been? It's been over an hour..." I paused at the crack in her door and pushed it open slightly. I looked down to see her sitting cross-legged hunched over her barrel of monkeys connecting them carefully together. I quickly tried to formulate a lie, but the best I could come up with was; "Oh, I was staying after school to retake a test. It's high school stuff- you wouldn't understand." She continued to stare at the plastic primates, concentrating as though looking away would compromise the structural integrity of the chain she had built. "Since when do you retake tests?" I chewed on the inside of my cheek. "Hey, do you want to go to Jeremy's for dinner? His mom is making lasagna." She scrunched up her nose in disgust and added another monkey to the chain. "Ew, I hate the food that his mom cooks." "Well, we can either go to Jeremy's house for lasagna or we can have ramen noodles for the second time this week. Your choice." She put down her neon green monkey and traded it for an electric pink one instead. "Ramen noodles aren't that bad..." I sighed and scratched my neck. *Why does everything have to be so difficult with her?* "I'll make a deal with you; if we go to Jeremy's tonight, I will let you pick out a gallon of ice cream after school tomorrow." The link of monkeys smashed against the floor as she looked up at me. "Really?! Even the kind with the strawberry ribbons that you hate?" "Yep. Any kind you want." She stood up and ran past me down the stairs, "Let's go then."

The ride to Jeremy's was typically short, but somehow Lucy made it seem like an eternity. She kicked the back of my seat with a strength that you wouldn't expect from an eight-year-old. As

we entered their picturesque farmhouse the acidic smell of under-ripe tomatoes blasted my nostrils at full force. “Cameron! Lucy!” Jeremy’s mom squealed as she barreled out of the kitchen and squeezed each of us for a little too long. I smiled and replied, “Hi Mrs. Hughes. Thank you for having us over tonight.” “It’s no problem. I know that since your mom began working third shift again you guys have been on your own a lot. You never have to ask to come over here.” I gave her a small nod and looked over her shoulder to see Jeremy texting on his phone at an ungodly speed. After we had taken off our shoes, Lucy and I migrated to the kitchen table as we waited for the lasagna to finish baking. “So... how’s school going dude?” I asked Jeremy as I fiddled with the hangnail on my thumb. He looked up at me with a bored expression, “We literally have every class together. You know how it’s going.” He resumed typing as though I didn’t exist and I continued to pick at my thumb. “Dinner’s ready!” Mrs. Hughes screeched from the kitchen. She walked out with a pan of slightly burnt lasagna and an overly enthusiastic grin. We ate in silence, except for the occasional question from Mrs. Hughes about how school was going or how mom was handling stress at the hospital. When I had finished what was on my plate, I glanced over at Jeremy and noticed that his plate was still full and that he was texting under the table. “Uh, Jeremy, I need to talk to you about that homework we had in history today. Do you think you could help me with it?” Without skipping a beat he replied, “Yeah, I can help you. Mom, can we go upstairs to do homework?” Mrs. Hughes wiped her mouth with her napkin and nodded, “Sure. I have some crafts that I wanted to do with Lucy anyways.” Lucy’s face lit up with excitement at the seemingly unorthodox proposition. Once we had made it upstairs and the door had closed behind us, I turned to Jeremy in a state of panic, “Dude, something insane happened today. I got investigated because Richardson’s appliances got stolen and I honestly don’t know...” Jeremy cut me off with a snort, “I knew something was up. No one wants to come over to eat my mom’s food.” He continued to text on his phone and without thinking, I swiped it away and held it high in the air like a child would. “Hey! Give me my phone back!” “Jeremy, you don’t understand. This is serious! I’m in some deep shit right now

and all you can do is text! Have some compassion at least.” He looked at his phone in the air and then back at me. “Look Cam, you’re completely fine. I’ve got it covered. Just give me my phone back and I’ll explain everything.” I scanned his eyes to make sure that he wasn’t intoxicated or anything. I slowly lowered my hand and he snatched his phone back in the blink of an eye. He walked over to the door and pressed it to ensure that it was completely closed and then walked back to where we were standing. “I stole Ms. Richardson’s appliances. It was me.” He whispered harshly. And with those measly eight words, I saw my own imaginary chain of monkeys crumble before me. I looked at him bewildered, “What the hell man?! You sparked an investigation over this, do you realize that? They think that I could be at fault for this!” “Shhh! Keep your voice down. I was investigated too, I’m suspect four on the list they have.” He gave me a small grin and I could feel my face heat up with rage. “Do you think this is funny? Ms. Richardson is pretty much the nicest person in West Michigan and you stole from her! She’s eighty!” His grin quickly dissolved and his face grew solemn, “She may be eighty, but she’s loaded. When she passes, her wealth will pass with her because she’s alone. I’ve given this a lot of thought, and I’ve already posted her belongings online and people are buying like crazy. That’s why I’ve been texting so much; I’m closing deals.” I began pacing around his room with my arms crossed over my chest, I was on the verge of a full-blown panic attack but I wasn’t going to give in. “Why did you do this Jeremy? How were you able to get into her house? Do you realize how much trouble you’ll be in if you get caught?!” He looked at me with a sly smile and a far-off look in his eyes, “I’m aware of the consequences. I just needed to be risky, I needed to feel the adrenaline rush in my veins and I was willing to do just about anything to get that.” My eyes widened in shock, “Clearly! Why do you always act before you think? You’re going to end up in jail someday and I’m not going to be there to save you.” I rubbed my face hard and continued to pace around the perimeter of Jeremy’s room. “We have to fix this... here’s what we’re going to do; I’m going to call you a moving truck and we’re going to haul all of Richardson’s things back to her house. You’re going to take her appliances off of whatever

website you're using to sell them on and apologize to the people who have already bought stuff. After that, you are going to go over to her house and apologize to her directly and maybe, just maybe, she won't turn you in." I stopped pacing and looked at him expectantly. He sighed, "Fine. But we're going to have to do it later when my mom's asleep, she's a heavy sleeper."

At approximately 1 o'clock in the morning, Jeremy and I set out on a quest to return Ms. Richardson's fridge, oven, dishwasher, microwave, and 65-inch television. After the moving truck was loaded, I forced Jeremy to hop into Big Bertha and I dropped him off at Ms. Richardson's doorstep. I had no interest in hearing what he had to say and I wasn't about to tell my grandmother's best friend that my own best friend had stolen from her. After about forty-five minutes, I drove Jeremy home and ended up sleeping on his couch. The last thing I remember thinking about before drifting off was the look of sheer disappointment brushed across Ms. Richardson's face...

Three Months Later

I take two steps outside only to be encased in the sweltering summer heat. The air is dense, my clothes are heavy and there is a permanent layer of sweat covering my forehead. I walk hurriedly down our gravel driveway and my worn flip flops make an obnoxious clicking noise as they try to catch up to me. When I open the mailbox, I found something that I wasn't expecting; a letter.

Dear Cameron,

I would like to sincerely thank you for persuading your friend to return my kitchen appliances. They were quite expensive and I was getting pretty sick of ordering take-out. Jeremy explained to me that he stole my appliances to sell them and give the profits to you to help support your family. Although I was frustrated that he had stolen from me, I recognized his good intentions

and I have decided not to press further charges of theft. You should expect to see another letter in the mail in about five days. Inside, there will be a check but it is for your mother's eyes ONLY. Please give it to your mother immediately.

You are a good boy Cameron, the world needs more people like you.

Respectfully, Margaret Richardson

I had never truly considered why Jeremy had stolen those appliances. I guess I just figured that it was for his own gain. I feel guilty looking back on it now, Ms. Richardson shouldn't have gone out of her way to help our family. However, with the help of her money, we were able to buy so much food that we could practically feed an army. I think about her generosity from time to time, and I've concluded that I will pay my dues forward like she did when the time comes. As for Jeremy, well, he's living proof that your heart can be much bigger than your brain... but those are the best kinds of people.