



SUSPECT!



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**R**eally, Jen, is it too much to ask?”

I pressed my lips together. I hated that question. Dad only used it when my answering “yes” would make me look selfish, inconsiderate, and completely unreasonable.

He speared a piece of Szechwan chicken with his fork and popped it into his mouth, undoubtedly hoping that I’d agree to six weeks of hard labor at my grandmother’s bed and breakfast while he chewed.

Was it too much to ask? No. At least it shouldn’t have been. But a familiar, anxious feeling was forming under my ribs at the thought of staying out at the Schoenhaus for more than a few days. I studied the white Chinese take-out cartons sitting on our kitchen table for a few seconds, wondering why he was trying so hard to guilt me into this. Then I found the hole in his logic.

“Grandma Kay didn’t ask me to help her out,” I pointed out. “She was just giving me first shot at the job if I wanted it. That’s a big difference. I’d rather

stay here in St. Louis this summer. I put in three applications today, and two of the places are hiring.”

“But Jen, the summer tourist season has already started,” Dad pointed out. “Training someone takes time. Your grandmother thinks making beds is an art form.”

“True,” I said. Then I frowned. “Wasn’t she already training someone else?”

“Well, yes. But Bri only plans to put in about ten hours a week.”

“Bri?” I asked. “Working? You’re kidding.”

Dad shrugged. “Her mom thought it would be good for her.”

“Right,” I said. He had just given me another good reason to stay away from the Schoenhaus. Ten hours a week with Bri Harris was cruel and unusual punishment.

Dad paused a few seconds before adding, “Of course, I know Kent is leaving for college this fall...”

I kept my voice smooth and patient. “We broke up last week, Dad. I told you that.”

Dad’s eyebrows pulled together. “He was just here two nights ago.”

“Yeah, helping me study for the pre-Calc final,” I said, in my most matter-of-fact tone. Dad must have seen us sitting inches apart, leaning our heads over the same spiral notebook as. Kent explained some of the odder behaviors of sines and cosines.

“We were friends before we started going out, and we’re friends now,” I added. “That’s all.” At least, that was all Kent felt.

Dad tilted his head. “Well, even if you’re not dating that boy anymore, I know you’ll probably want to drive back into the city to do things with your other friends. If you avoid rush hour, it takes less than an hour to get out to Augusta. I’ll even cover all your gas. Just save your receipts.”

I’d been filling up the old Volvo station wagon with baby-sitting money since the day I turned sixteen. Either someone had replaced my father with a clone who looked and sounded just like him, or something very strange was going on. I needed more excuses. Good ones. Fast. I dipped my egg roll in sweet and sour sauce and took a bite to give myself time to think.

“Coach Ericks wants me to work out with Leah this summer,” I tried.. “If we get tougher and stronger under the basket, he thinks we could do well at districts. We might even make it to State.”

“There’s a hoop right next door,” Dad argued. “And Mark is staying out in Augusta this summer with his dad. Playing one-on-one with him would keep you in shape, wouldn’t it?”

Oh, yeah. Coach Ericks would probably be thrilled. Mark was at least two inches taller and twenty-five pounds heavier than I was and he never hesitated to “put a body” on me when we played basketball. It was doubtful he even thought of me as a girl. We’d been playing with and fighting over the same toys since we could crawl. Even though we weren’t technically be related—Mark was the grandson of Grandma Kay’s second husband—we were family.

Dad leaned forward in his seat. “It won’t be for

that long, Jen. Besides, if you're out at the Schoenhaus, I won't have to worry about you next week when I'm in D.C. for that conference."

I slammed my palms down on the table. My fork and plate rattled. "That's the real reason you want me out at the Schoenhaus, isn't it? You don't trust me."

"Honey, I do trust you, but—"

"And you're only going to be gone for six days. You just want to get me out of the way."

"I would never—" Dad began, and then stopped. After all, he *had* sent me out to the Schoenhaus when I was three so he could finish grad school. "That's not it at all. Come on, Jen. This would be a great chance for you to make some good money. You could help out your grandma, play basketball with Mark, hang out with Bri..."

I twitched. I couldn't help it. In fact, if I didn't have good reflexes, it would have been a full-fledged shudder.

"Ha!" Dad pointed at me in triumph. "Let me guess. Is Bri the real reason you don't want to go out to the Schoenhaus? Listen, I know she wasn't very nice to you in pre-school, but that was thirteen years ago."

Yeah. Thirteen years for Bri to work on her technique. But if Dad wanted to blame this argument on Bri, that was all right with me. "Fine," I snapped. "If Grandma Kay is desperate, I can help her out. But otherwise, I don't want to go. Okay?" I sat back, crossed my arms and waited for the "Is-this-the-proper-way-to-speak-to-your-father?" lecture.

But to my surprise, Dad only said "Okay," in a

quiet voice. He took a deep breath and held it as if there were more to come. Then he exhaled loudly without saying a word. “There’s something I have to tell you,” he said, running his fingers through his short, graying hair.

We sat in silence for a few seconds. When he didn’t go on, I asked, “What?”

“I’ve known about it for awhile, but I made your grandma promise not to say a word until after finals.”

“Okay,” I said. “They’re done.”

Dad sighed. “I was going to let her tell you.”

“Dad, *what?*” I asked, suddenly worried. I’d seen him act like this once before: the day he told me we had to give our cat Buster away because of my allergies.

“Now I don’t buy into this,” Dad said. “Not for a second. But your grandmother has really gone around the bend this time.”

I relaxed. Dad made that big announcement at least twice a year. “So what’s up?”

“She thinks your mother is really gone.”

Um, yeah. Since Mom had left over fourteen years ago and never come back, that wasn’t exactly a news-flash. There had to be something more. “And that means...?” I prompted.

“That your mother might be...dead.”

“Dead?” I repeated. “Hey, I know she hasn’t written in a few years, but...” I couldn’t go on. Despite the hundreds of excuses I had invented for my mother—ranging from evil witches and fairies when I was younger to witness protection programs and alien abduction--I had never really considered this one. “Is

that why Grandma Kay thinks Mom stopped sending me stuff?”

“No.” Dad played with his chopsticks. “Your grandmother doesn’t think your mother ever sent you anything. She thinks that your mother died the day she left.”

The words hit me like an offensive charge I’d taken once from the Tank. After the 170-pound center had knocked me flat, I’d spent twenty seconds on the gym floor trying to suck air into my lungs while Coach Ericks knelt next to me and waited for me to say something. I had to say something now, too.

“Why?” I finally asked.

“Your grandmother just knows it in her heart,” Dad said. “She’s never been big on facts.”

“So what do you think?”

“I don’t know.” It was Dad’s turn to stare at the white cartons between us. “Your mother and I had gone through a bit of rough patch in our marriage, but I thought things were getting better. Of course, it could have all been an act so I wouldn’t be suspicious....” Dad shook his head. “I never told you this and you were probably too young to remember, but your mother left me one other time. And she took you with her. It was only for a few days. I am glad-very glad-- that she didn’t take you with her this last time.”

I was horrified to see tears in the corner of his eyes. Maybe that’s the real reason big boys aren’t supposed to cry. Big girls can’t handle it. I tried to think of something else to say. Suddenly, I remembered seeing a certain box checked on my third grade school paper-work.

“But... you got divorced a long time ago. She would have had to sign something, right?”

Dad shook his head. “My lawyer hired a private detective, and he couldn’t find her. So she must not have wanted to be found. And if one spouse is absent for long enough, it’s possible to get a divorce without a signature. Eventually, it was time for me—us--to move on.” Dad sighed. “I don’t know where your grandmother gets these weird ideas.”

“NCIS?” I suggested. “CSI? Remember, she has every season of *Murder, She Wrote* on DVD. And she runs those mystery weekends at the Schoehaus.”

Dad rubbed his face with his hands. Then he almost smiled. “Yeah, that’s probably it. But it feels like there’s something more this time. I’m worried about her, Jen. So that’s the real reason I’d like you to go out to the Schoehaus.”

I hadn’t noticed anything wrong with Grandma Kay the last time I’d seen her. She’d always described herself as a “tough old bird. “ But maybe I’d missed something.. “So...you want me to spy on her, then?” I asked.

“No, of course not,” Dad said quickly. “I don’t want a weekly report or anything. In fact, I’d actually prefer not to know any details. But if you’re there, and you think that things...aren’t right, you could call me.”

“Okay,” I said, resigned to my fate. “ I’ll do it.”

“Wait,” Dad said suddenly. “Maybe I didn’t think things through all the way. This whole business could be really hard on you.”

“No. I’ll do it. I want to.” And suddenly, I did... I

loved my grandmother and I couldn't stand to think that she had...gone around the bend, as Dad had put it. But I highly doubted that was true. "You talked me into it," I told him.

"Maybe I shouldn't have," Dad looked even more worried now.

I threw up my hands in exasperation. "I'm going," I said. "It'll be me and Grandma Kay against you."

A knock sounded at the back door.

I sat up straight. "That must be Leah. We've got that bonfire tonight. I'm late."

"Oh, right." Dad raised his voice. "Come on in," he called.

The screen door to the garage opened and my next door neighbor slipped into the back hall. "Oh, sorry, Mr. Schmidt," she said. "I thought you'd be done with dinner."

"No problem," Dad said. "It took longer than we expected tonight. Have a seat. Can we get you something a soda or something? Water?"

"No thanks," she said.

As I choked down my now-soggy egg roll and a few clumps of cold rice covered with limp vegetables, Dad gave Leah a censored version of our discussion. He left out Grandma Kay's latest theory and my break-up with Kent. I was relieved. I always tell Leah everything, eventually—she was the closest thing I had to a sister—but I hadn't actually gotten around to telling her about Kent yet. When Dad wasn't looking, I carried my half-full plate to the kitchen and scraped the rest of my food into the trash can. I wasn't hungry anymore.

Leah waited until I finished backing the Volvo out of the driveway before she pounced on me: “How do you think Kent will feel about you being gone?”

“I don’t think it’ll bother him too much,” I said in the lightest voice I could manage. “We broke up.”

“Oh, no. When?”

I hesitated, knowing that Leah wouldn’t like my answer. “Um, Saturday.”

“Saturday? Why didn’t you tell me?” she demanded.

“Well, you had that volleyball tournament all weekend. And then we were both swamped with finals and...”

“So? It would have taken you two seconds.”

“I know,” I said, keeping my eyes locked on the road. Waving branches overhead made irregular patterns of light and darkness on the asphalt. “But then you would have wanted a play-by-play of what happened, and I didn’t want to start crying in the lunchroom or something.”

“Oh. Got it,” Leah said in a different tone. “Yeah, that would suck. Hey, wait a minute. Didn’t I see Kent’s car in your driveway on Monday night?”

“He was helping me study for the pre-Calc final.”

“So he gave you the old friends speech, huh? I hate giving it. I hate getting it.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, even though Kent was my first real boyfriend and this was my first break-up. “But everyone says that long distance romances hardly ever work out, so this is probably the best thing. I’d just keep waiting around, never knowing when it was going to end.”

“But he broke up with you,” Leah said. “How can that be better?”

“I can handle the knowing,” I said. “I just can’t handle the not knowing.”

And that, I suddenly realized, was the real reason I was going to spend half my summer at the Schoenhaus.