

### SCENE 3

As we made our first foray into the tragic morass of *King Lear*, little was clarified. What became painfully clear to me, however, was that we had greatly underestimated the enormousness of Richard's absence. He was more than a vacant bedroom, an unoccupied seat in the library, a chair at our refectory table where he sat like Banquo's ghost, invisible to everyone but us. Often I thought I saw him out of the corner of my eye, a passing shadow, slipping out of sight around the corner. By night he was a recurring character in my dreams—as my midterm scene partner, or my silent companion at the bar—twisting the most mundane scenarios into something dark and sinister. I was not the only victim of these nocturnal torments; James had taken to muttering and fidgeting in his sleep, and on the nights I shared a bed with Meredith, sometimes I woke to find her trembling beside me. Twice we were all woken by sounds of screaming and sobbing from Wren's room. He was as much a bully in death as he was in life, a giant who left behind not an empty space so much as a black hole, a huge crushing void that swallowed up all of our comforts, sooner or later.

But as we were moving cautiously into the shortest calendrical month, our comfort was mostly my responsibility.

Cleaning the Castle had become my primary occupation outside of classes, rehearsals, and homework. My custodial schedule was irregular, determined largely by when I had a free hour and nobody else was in the building. These coincidental opportunities were few and far between, and I was forced to seize them whenever they arrived, regardless of how tired I was. The second day of February found me on my hands and knees in the library, finally doing what I had put off for weeks and thoroughly cleaning out the fireplace.

The remains of a few logs rested in the grate like a pile of blackened bones. I lifted them delicately for fear they would crumble and leave streaks of soot on the carpet, and deposited them one by one in the paper sack I had appropriated for the purpose. Despite the persistent winter chill I was sweating, fat salty beads falling from my forehead onto the hearth. When the logs were all safely stowed in their bag, I reached for a dustpan and brush and started on the pile of ash, which had built up like a mountain against the back of the chimney. As I swept, I muttered Edgar's lines under my breath:

*“Who alone suffers suffers most i’ the mind,  
Leaving free things and happy shows behind:  
But then the mind much sufferance doth o’er skip,  
When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.”*

Unable to remember the following line, I stopped and sat back on my heels. What next? I had no idea, and so crawled farther into the fireplace, beginning the speech again as I resumed my sweeping. The densest mound of ash collapsed under my brush, but as I pulled it forward, something dragged beneath the bristles. A long twisted line, like a snakeskin, had appeared on the floor of the fireplace. Fabric.

It was nothing more than a scrap, five inches long and two inches wide, curling in at the edges. One end was heavier, double-stitched—a shirt collar, maybe, or the seam of a sleeve. I bent my head low over it and blew gently, so a few little puffs of ash whirled up. It had been white once, but it was badly singed and badly stained with something dark deep red, like wine. I stared at it for a moment in consternation, then froze where I was kneeling on the hearth—so horror-struck I didn't hear the door downstairs. But the footsteps in the stairwell grew louder as they ascended, and I came back to life with a jolt, seized the insidious thing off the floor and stuffed it into my pocket. I grabbed the dustpan and brush and jumped to my feet with one held at each side, like sword and shield.

I was still standing in this rigid, ridiculous way when Colborne appeared in the doorway. His eyes barely widened, quickly adjusted from surprise at my presence to recognition. “Oliver.”

“Detective Colborne,” I said, clumsy and cotton-mouthed.

He pointed into the room. “May I come in?”

“If you want to.”

He slid his hands into the pockets of his jeans. His badge glinted on one hip, and the butt of a handgun bulged under the hem of his coat on the other. I deposited the brush and pan in the closest chair, waiting for him to speak.

“Aren’t you usually in rehearsal this time of day?” he asked, tugging the curtains apart in order to peer out the window, toward the lake.

“I’m not called for combat until five.” I rummaged through my mental archives for one of Gwendolyn’s breath control routines, hoping to clear my head.

He nodded and gave me a quizzical smile. “And what exactly are you doing? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Cleaning.” I counted four beats to breathe in.

His mouth twitched, as if there were a genuine smile hiding under the superficial one. “I never thought Dellecher students the sort who did their own cleaning.”

“We don’t, usually. I’m on scholarship.” Five beats to breathe out.

He chuckled, like he couldn’t quite believe it. “So they’ve got you cleaning this place?”

“Among other things.” My pulse began to slow. “I don’t mind.”

“You’re from Ohio, is that right?”

“You’ve got a good memory. Or have you got a file on me somewhere?”

“Both, maybe.”

“Should I be nervous?” I asked, but I felt markedly less so. Colborne was a more discerning audience than I was used to, but an audience nonetheless.

“Well, you’d know that better than I would.”

We stared at each other. He still had that two-layer smile on, and it occurred to me that under any other circumstances I would have liked him.

“Hard not to be nervous when the police are in and out of your house

so often,” I said, without thinking. He didn’t know I’d overheard his conversation with Walton a month before. If he noticed my blunder, he didn’t let on.

“Fair enough.” He glanced out the window once more, then crossed the room and sat down on the couch in front of me. “You all read a lot, or are these just for decoration?” He pointed at the nearest bookshelf.

“We read.”

“You read anything besides Shakespeare?”

“Sure. Shakespeare doesn’t exist in a vacuum.”

“How so?”

I couldn’t tell if he was truly interested or if it was some kind of ploy.

“Well, take *Caesar*,” I said, unsure what sort of incriminating information he might hope to get from the question. “Ostensibly it’s all about the fall of the Roman Republic, but it’s also all about the politics of early modern England. In the first scene, the tribunes and the revelers talk about trades and holidays like it’s London in 1599, even though it’s supposed to be 44 BC. There are a few anachronisms—like the clock in Act II—but for the most part it works both ways.”

“Clever man,” Colborne said, after a moment’s consideration. “You know, I remember reading *Caesar* in school. They never told us any of that, just dragged us through it. I must have been about fifteen and I thought I was being punished for something.”

“Anything can feel like punishment if it’s taught poorly.”

“True. I guess I’m just wondering what makes a kid about that age decide to devote his whole life to Shakespeare.”

“Are you asking me?”

“Yeah. I’m intrigued.”

“I don’t know,” I said. It was easier to keep talking than to stop. “I got hooked early. The high school needed a kid for *Henry V* when I was about eleven, so my English teacher took me to the audition—she thought it might make me less shy, I guess—and somehow I wound up onstage with all these boys with swords and armor, who were all twice my size. And there I was, shouting, ‘*As young as I am, I have observed these three swashers,*’ just hoping people would hear me. I was terrified

until opening night, but after that it was all I wanted to do. It's a kind of addiction."

He was silent for a moment, then asked, "Does it make you happy?"

"Sorry?"

"Does it make you happy?"

I opened my mouth to respond—*yes* seemed the only possible answer—but then I closed it again, uncertain. I cleared my throat and spoke more cautiously. "I won't pretend it's not difficult. We're always working and we don't sleep much and it's hard to have normal friendships outside of our sphere, but it's worth it just for the rush we get, being onstage and speaking Shakespeare's words. It's like we're not really alive until then, and then everything just lights up and the bad stuff disappears and we don't want to be anywhere else."

He sat inhumanly still, keen gray eyes fixed on mine. "You paint a very good picture of addiction."

I tried to backtrack. "It sounds overdramatic, but that's just how we're wired. It's how we feel everything."

"Fascinating." Colborne watched me, his fingers laced between his knees, the pose casual but every muscle in his body taut with expectation. The ticking of the mantel clock was enormously loud, beating directly against my eardrums. The scrap from the fireplace felt like a ball of lead in my pocket.

"So," I continued, anxious to change the subject, divert it away from what I had just said. "What brings you back down here?"

He leaned back, more relaxed. "Sometimes I get curious."

"About what?"

"About Richard," he said, and it was jarring to hear him say it so easily, the name we all avoided like a curse word, something even more profane than the oaths and obscenities we used so liberally. "Don't you?"

"Mostly I try not to think about it."

Colborne's eyes flicked from my feet to my face and back. An evaluative look. Measuring the depth of my honesty. "I can't help but wonder what happened that night," he said, one hand drumming idly on

the arm of the sofa. “Everyone seems to remember it differently.” There was a subtle, cloying challenge in his voice. Answer if you dare.

“Everyone experienced it differently, I think.” My own voice was cool and flat, my nerves settled again by the fact that he’d given me a part to play, and as a casting director he was no more imaginative than Gwendolyn. I was peripheral, a bystander, an unwilling witness who just might be won over. “It’s like watching the news. When there’s a disaster, does anyone really remember it the same way? We all saw it from different angles, different vantage points.”

He nodded slowly, considering my rebuttal. “I suppose I can’t argue with that.” He pushed himself to his feet. When he was upright again he rocked back on his heels, looked up at the ceiling. “Here’s what I struggle with, Oliver,” he said, speaking more to the light fixture than to me. “*Mathematically*, it doesn’t make sense.”

I waited for him to elaborate. He didn’t, so I said, “Math was never my strong subject.”

He frowned, but there was a flicker of amusement in his expression. “Surprising. After all, Shakespeare is *poetry*—most of it, anyway—and there’s a certain mathematical pattern to poetry, isn’t there?”

“You could say that.”

“In any mathematical equation, a series of known and unknown variables add up to the given solution.”

“That’s about what I remember of algebra. Solve for  $x$ .”

“Precisely,” he said. “Well, here we have an equation with a known outcome—Richard’s death. We’ll call that  $x$ . And on the other side of the equals sign we have your—that is, the fourth-years’—accounts of the event.  $A$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$ ,  $d$ ,  $e$ , and  $f$ , if you will. And then there’s everyone else. We’ll call them  $y$ . Nine weeks later we have all the variables accounted for, but I still can’t solve for  $x$ . Can’t get the two sides of the equation to balance.” He shook his head, the motion measured and deliberate. “So what does that mean?”

I stared at him. Didn’t answer.

“It means,” he went on, “that at least one of our variables is wrong. Make sense to you?”