

Heat Death

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I met my old friend Chloe Summers at the trailhead, just by the heavy chain that blocked off the trail with its rusted and bullet-riddled sign clearly stating TRAIL CLOSED and KEEP OUT.

Humans lived in colonies on the Moon as well as Mars, had two thriving space stations at Lagrange points with four more under construction, and routinely sent shuttles back and forth between all those locations. The technological leaps we'd made just in my lifetime were staggering, and many great minds assured us that the best was still yet to come.

But in my hometown in western Texas on the fringes of the Chihuahuan Desert, shooting rifles at signs was still a favorite pastime. And I wish I could say it was just the kids.

It was almost as if all the locals assumed the point of a sign was to be a target, not to convey information. I mean, if that sign had done its job, neither Chloe nor I would be there, about to hike out in the worst heat wave in meteorological history.

I turned off the engine, then took a second to soak in one last breath of air-conditioned air. Then I opened the door of my cruiser and stepped out into the late afternoon Texas heat. It hit me like a physical blow, like my whole body had just been punched by the super-heated air. My lungs protested the dryness

as much as the heat, and the first few breaths were borderline painful.

But I adjusted. I may have spent the last decade working in other more urban police departments in cities much further north, but I had been born here. This place was still in my blood.

Although I would argue that the summers had gotten a lot more brutal while I'd been away.

Chloe wasn't a park ranger, but she worked in the visitor's center part-time, and was a regular on all the hiking trails. She was a petite woman, maybe a hundred and ten pounds sopping wet, but didn't look like a child. She was hard to miss, even from a distance, and all the locals knew her well.

She was already decked out in hiking gear, complete with a coating of reddish-gold desert dust. Some of that dirt was new, a light coating on her otherwise white shirt, but the dirt on her hiking boots had built up over years. She had her head down as she walked up to me, hands in her pockets, and I couldn't see her face past the wide brim of her hat. But I could hear the tense anxiety in her voice as she said, "Hey, Lidia. I hoped it would be you that came when I called it in."

"It's my day with the cruiser. But Foley and McCormick are waiting for permission from

the park board to come in with a wagon,” I said.

“Why wait? You know they’ll say yes,” Chloe said.

“You know why. The wheels of bureaucracy may turn slowly, but they have to turn first,” I said.

“Hey, remember when our town had *three* cruisers?” she said as she followed me to the back of the sheriff’s office’s only car.

“It’s funny the things you can’t afford anymore when all your tax-paying citizens move up into space,” I said drily.

“Or just go north,” she said.

I let that comment pass. “How far in did you say you found him?” I asked her as I opened the cruiser’s trunk and pulled my cooling vest out of its cooler.

“For the two of us in current conditions, it’s going to be about an hour’s walk,” she said. She examined my clothing choices without saying a word, lingering the longest on my still new-looking boots. But she nodded to herself, and I guessed she’d given me a pass. “I have enough water for both of us if you didn’t bring enough.”

“This holds about two liters,” I said. I was putting my lightweight shirt over the bright blue vest, so I pointed at the bottle-carrying backpack with my elbow.

Chloe frowned at it, then frowned even more fiercely up at the sky. The Sun was working its way toward setting, although that would take it another four hours or so to achieve. The sky around it was cloudless, but had a smeary grayish blue hazy color that no one would ever photograph for a tourism brochure. It just made everything feel that much hotter.

“I’ll bring three, just in case,” she said and headed back to her own truck to adjust the contents of the backpack waiting for her on the open tailgate.

“I can handle this, Chloe,” I said. “You don’t need to nanny me.”

“It never hurts to be over-prepared,” she said as she shouldered her pack. She looked like a scrawny thing, and that pack was easily half her weight. But I had known her since grade school, and I had no doubts about what those thin little muscles could do. Plus, Chloe had no quit in her.

“I don’t see anyone parked here but the two

of us,” I pointed out as we passed the sign and chain and started up the first gentle slope of the desert trail. Chloe set the pace, but I could see her watching me closely to be sure I could keep up.

I tightened the straps on my backpack so that it rode a little higher and matched her pace. Chloe wasn’t the only one who didn’t have any quit.

“It’s possible he came in from one of the other trailheads, but this one is the closest. And I really don’t think he made it any farther,” Chloe said. “Well, you’ll see when we get to him.” Then she punched me hard in the arm and said, “Shuttle!”

I rubbed at my biceps and looked up into the hazy blue sky. I could just make out the contrail of a shuttle as it passed overhead. It was too high up to be landing in Houston or taking off from New Mexico. I guessed it was a European shuttle just starting to enter the atmosphere.

“Do kids here still do that?” I asked her. She shrugged and grinned sheepishly at me.

After barely a quarter of an hour, Chloe made us both stop walking to drink water. There was no shade to be had anywhere, but we both had wide-brimmed hats.

“How are you feeling?” Chloe asked between sips from her bottle. “Headache? Dizziness? Anything?”

“I’m fine, Chloe,” I said. “You don’t have to coddle me. I spent two decades here before I went up north, you know.”

“I’m not coddling you. This is just protocol,” she said. “And for the record, I’m not feeling any symptoms of heat exhaustion or heat stroke either. But don’t get cute and try powering through instead of telling me something’s up.”

“No, I won’t,” I said.

Chloe narrowed her eyes at me, but she knew me better than anyone. She knew when my voice dropped down to that register I was being completely sincere. She accepted my answer with a nod. Then we stowed our bottles and carried on with the hike.

I had forgotten how beautiful the desert could be, even when it was so stinking hot that the animals were all tucked away out of sight. I could almost imagine we were on Mars, save for the sparse if sunbaked vegetation.

But something else had caught my eye, a flash of reflected light just off the trail. "What's that?" I asked.

Chloe spared it barely a glance. "Beer can. That's new. I'll pick it up on our way back out."

"What do you mean, it's new?" I asked.

"Lidia, come on. You know this trail is my special place. That beer can, like this man's body, wasn't here yesterday."

"But the trail is closed," I said.

"It's funny how a chain and a sign don't really keep people off the trail," Chloe said. "The park service does their best, but people take their own chances. If it makes you feel better, the beer drinkers usually come out after dark to look at the stars. That's a safer time for rule breaking. And you have to admit, the view out here at night is phenomenal."

She didn't have to rub it in. I remembered as well as she did the many nights we came out here after dark in high school. But it had only been Chloe who looked up at the sky, and it hadn't been the stars that captivated her. It had been the Moon, the place she had been meant to be born and raised on, before her mother's accident had sent her back to Earth, both pregnant and in a coma. Chloe had a lot of disappointments in her life, and a lot of what-ifs she spent a little too much time speculating about.

But, as usual, I didn't say anything about that. I knew she never wanted advice from her friend with two living parents.

The beer can wasn't the only sign of people still using the closed trail, although when I started spotting the others after our second water break, I wished for more beer cans. Or better yet, traffic signs. Because without those, the things we started seeing riddled with bullets were small animals. Mostly lizards, but the occasional rock squirrels and desert cotton-tails.

"All this blood looks pretty fresh, doesn't it?" I said as we passed another rock sprinkled in reddish-brown spots. I could follow the trail to the body of the rabbit only a couple of meters away. "And this looks like more than a twenty-two."

"It's messed up," Chloe said, but didn't really look at what I was pointing to. I decided not to press her. I was used to dealing with dead bodies in my line of work, and while I was sure Chloe had seen more than her share of dead rabbits, I was also sure that finding a dead man

had probably bothered her more than she was willing to show.

Still, the animal carnage was upsetting. What was wrong with people? Was it really just extreme heat and boredom?

"He's just past this hill," Chloe said as we stopped a third time for water. "I hope you're ready for this, because he's a mess."

"I've seen dead bodies before, Chloe," I told her. Not that I'd tell her any more about what I'd seen than that. It was enough that I had to live with some of it.

"I guess. But his smell has to be unique," she said. She put her bottle away, but the look on her face was still pensive. Then she said, "Do you remember in grade school when we made mummies out of chickens from the grocery store?"

"Yeah," I said. Chloe and I had been science partners, but Chloe had been so grossed out by all of it that I had done all the work. I well remembered the feel of that muscle tissue as it got more and more tough and leathery each time I had wiped away the old salt and packed the body again in the new.

But I remembered the smell too. It hadn't been anything like the smell of fried chicken. It had just smelled like a dry, dead thing.

Five minutes later, when I was finally standing over the body, I had to agree. He smelled just like that chicken. If you had enough heat, you didn't need salt to make a mummy, apparently.

"Lidia, I think I've seen him enough. Do you mind if I just go up to that rock outcropping and keep an eye out for your boys?"

"Don't let Foley and McCormick hear you call them boys," I said as I gave her a wave of permission. I heard her footsteps over the rougher off-path terrain, but I was already in investigation mode, examining and photographing the ground all around the body for possible clues before I approached it any closer.

Like the heat, I needed a minute to adjust to that smell.

The man had fallen facedown right in the middle of the path, like he'd tripped over an exposed bit of rock and then never gotten up again. I found the rock that was likely to blame, but the erosion of the soil around it had happened over years of time, not suddenly and recently.

Well, when Chloe had called me, she had

been sure this was just an accident. It was just my training to treat every death as a homicide. It might not have been the way my predecessor had run things, but it was my way.

"He's not local?" I called up to Chloe.

"Never seen him before in my life," Chloe shouted back.

And yet there'd been no car parked at the trailhead.

But as I got closer to the body, I realized that wasn't even the start of the strange things.

Every stitch of clothes on the man's body was brand new. The treads on the bottoms of his top-of-the-line hiking shoes were almost completely unworn. There was a quality control sticker still attached to the back bottom hem of his Sun-protective shirt. His wide-brimmed hat was uncreased save for the hefty fold he was putting into it now, half-crushed under his head.

He looked for all the world like he had gone into a sporting goods store and asked them to outfit him for a hike. And then he'd come straight out here in all his spanking new gear.

This wasn't a trail for beginners in *good* weather.

So why had he come out here during a heat wave when the trail was closed to even experienced and prepared hikers?

I took pictures of everything, then flipped back the loose folds of the Sun-protective shirt. Underneath it he was wearing a cooling vest just like the one I was, although it had the flat, squishy look of a vest full of melted cooling packs. But there was no sign of moisture or even dirt that had been muddied then dried again under him. None of those packs had burst.

So he hadn't been shot or stabbed, so far as I could see.

I heard footsteps running up to me just before Chloe said, "Your boys are nearly here."

I was about to correct her word choice again, but just as I was about to abandon my examination of the ground under the body, I saw something odd.

"What's that?" I asked. It was meant to be rhetorical, but Chloe leaned in behind me, blocking out the Sun.

It was the corner of some sort of plastic pouch, but I had no idea what it was the corner of. It didn't look like modern plastics at all. More like something from the '60s or '70s.

Way before my time, but I've been to a museum or two in my day.

"I'll tell you what I don't see," Chloe said from behind me. "I don't see any water. Like, not even an empty bottle."

"What time did you find him?" I asked as I used the end of a stylus to poke at the plastic pouch thing.

"It was an hour and a half before I found you," she said. I wasn't looking at her, but I knew from the tone of her voice that if I glanced up at her, I'd see her squinching her whole face up tight. It was what she always did as a kid when she knew she was about to get into trouble.

"You were out here in the middle of the day?" I asked. Then I stepped back from the body to stand up, turn, and look at her. Yep. It was a milder squinch than she'd had in grade school, but it was definitely still there. And a little off-putting in a thirtysomething woman. But that was Chloe.

"I know this place better than anyone," she said.

"I can think of a park ranger or two who might argue with you on that one," I said.

"I know my limits better than anyone," she said, straightening her spine to bring her to her full, not terribly impressive height.

But I had to admit, she was right. Chloe didn't overestimate herself, ever. She might underestimate herself on occasion, but never the other way around.

Still. "You were out here without a buddy," I said.

"Sat phone," she said, slapping the thigh pocket on her cargo shorts. "If something happens that is so terrible I can't make a call, a buddy is only there to lead everyone to my corpse."

Then she flinched a little, not quite looking at the corpse right beside the two of us.

"Fine," I said, letting that go. "And you said you were out here yesterday. What time?"

"This point of the trail? Sunset. Ish," she said with a vague waggle of her hand.

I clicked my tongue as I thought it through. "If he started hiking this morning before ten or so, it was only in the low eighties. He might've thought he could handle it."

I looked down at the corpse again, but past the clothes to the body itself. He actually looked like he had been in pretty good shape.

Solidly middle age, but nice muscle tone. Although I got the sense that under the sunburn he might've been really quite pale. There were a few spots under his hat or under his chin that looked pasty, but it was hard to get a good look without moving the body.

"The trail was closed for a reason," Chloe said with a sigh. "We don't have the staffing to post guards."

I heard the sound of an electric motor approaching and knew Foley and McCormick were close.

"It's going to be a wait for the medical examiner to get here," I said with a frustrated sigh of my own. "He covers twelve counties, and eleven of them are more populous than ours."

"Does it matter? I mean, this was pretty clearly an accident," Chloe said.

"Maybe," I said.

But I really wanted to know who this man was.

It sucked sharing one medical examiner with eleven other counties, but on the upside, our ME was legitimately good at his job. Like me, Marco Villalobos was from the area but had gone north to first get his doctorate and then stayed there because that's where the decent-paying jobs were. Unlike me, he hadn't come back home until he retired.

But retirement didn't suit him. After less than a month, he started volunteering to help our previous ME. But that woman had *not* been good at her job. The local police departments had been complaining about her for years, but it only took Marco three months to put together enough evidence to have her convicted of an impressive array of crimes, from fraud to abuse of a corpse. Since then, he'd been working alone, for far less than he'd been getting paid back in Chicago.

It took a long time to get reports back from him. Sometimes it took months. But we could rely on his findings, and they held up in court. In a cash-strapped county, that was the best we could hope for.

This time, it did indeed take three weeks before Marco could get around to autopsying our victim. And I had to drive four counties over to his lab to talk to him about it.

But in my mind, it was worth it. Especially when the first thing he told me was the answer to my most puzzling question.

"The polyurethane is in pretty good shape, especially given what it's been through recently. It's not an antique, but it is a very good replica," he said, showing me the evidence bag that contained the strange plastic pouch. I had gotten a full view of it three weeks before, after Foley and McCormick had loaded the body onto the wagon, but that had only raised more questions in my mind.

It was shaped like a chunky L, rather like a map of the state of Louisiana. And it had a PVC tube running down the inner curve to the bottom. There were patches of Velcro on the top and down one side.

"A replica what?" I asked. There was a betting pool back at the sheriff's office. The most votes were for colostomy bag, but, like, a really old colostomy bag.

"You've never been to Space Center Houston?" he asked me, but didn't wait for a response. "This is called an IDB. In-suit drinkbag. It would attach to the HUT with those Velcro patches. HUT means 'hard upper-torso assembly.'"

"Why did this man have this bag?" I asked.

"I agree it's not the usual choice of water conveyance in the desert," he said. "You already ID'd the victim."

That wasn't a question; he knew I had. But it hadn't told me much. "His name was Brant Taylor, fifty-five years old, born and raised on the Moon. And that's about as far as I've gotten. Have you dealt with lunar bureaucracy before?"

"Yes, I have," he said with sympathy. "If it helps, I didn't get much more than that with my own records requests. Date of birth, but no place of birth more specific than 'Moon.'"

"No employment history or anything," I said.

"Oh, he was a recluse," Marco said airily.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I have a friend who retired to a dome on the edge of the Sea of Tranquility," he said. "Unlike me, he didn't want anything to do with the medical field anymore. He runs a bar that caters to . . . well, we jokingly call them Moon truckers. You know, the drivers who haul cargo between the domes."

"Brant Taylor was a Moon trucker?" I asked. But that didn't track with the clothes he had been wearing. Even the hiking pants that Marco must have cut off of his body had cost more than I made in a week.

That was setting aside the cost of the shuttle from the Moon to Houston. People who went into space saved up for decades to make the trip. And few ever came back.

"No, no," Marco said. He took the evidence bag from me, as if he still found the IDB fascinating. But at nearly eighty, he could actually remember a time when only a select few ever went up into space. And those few were idolized as heroes.

"He must have had access to quite a bit of money," I said. Marco set the evidence bag aside and reached for the tablet with his notes on it.

"He was a financial speculator. Which would mean he had connections to Earth banks and stock markets, if you really need to dig into him outside of the world of lunar bureaucracy," Marco said. "No, he wasn't a Moon trucker. But the truckers all knew him because he would hire them to bring things out to his own private dome. He paid very, very well. But even so, no one wanted those jobs."

"Really," I said.

"He could afford to be an eccentric, and he went all in," Marco said. "He paid well, but he made you earn it. And few thought it was a fair exchange in the end. I suppose the only real mystery is how he ended up dead here and not killed in his own dome by someone in his employ."

"No family, then?" I asked.

"No, lunar records would've passed on marriage records and any birth certificates where his name was on file as the father," Marco said.

"They didn't mention they even looked," I grumbled.

"No, they don't like to be forthcoming with information. If you deal with them enough, you get a sense for what's being said by what they *aren't* telling you."

"Thanks for the tip, but I really hope to never deal with them again," I said.

Given that the population of my county was dwindling year after year, that felt like a pretty safe bet.

"I'm guessing we found the same travel info on him?" Marco said as he scanned his notes.

"He took a shuttle down to Houston, but had an open return ticket. So he planned to return, but didn't know how long he'd be state-side," I said.

"That's not unusual," Marco said. "Usually

it's for medical reasons. Someone who's been living off Earth for more than a year can have a variety of adverse events that can't always be predicted. An open ticket is more about wanting the option to get home in a hurry because of medical reasons than it is about delaying the return for other reasons."

"I'm guessing the Moon is the worst, because of the gravity difference," I said.

"And you would be right," Marco said. "But this Brant Taylor was exceptionally prepared to come to Earth. He had maintained muscle tone and bone density through exercise, diet, and I'm guessing various medications that likely weren't cheap. He was in tiptop shape."

Which wasn't surprising. I had thought as much when I'd looked at him before. But also, I had gotten the strong impression he had thought he could handle that hike.

But hiking in general and hiking in the middle of a record-setting heat wave were two very different propositions.

"Why was he here?" I pondered out loud.

"Here on Earth or here in our little corner of it?" Marco asked. "Either is a puzzler, really. As good of shape as he was in, and all the effort he must've made to stay in that shape, fifty-five is a really late age to decide to come back to see the homeland. I can tell by the patterns of his bone growth that he's been in top shape his whole life. He didn't get a sudden drive to see Earth and then start the appropriate regimen."

"But he did come here. And he bought a new outfit, walked out into the desert, and died in it," I said. "We never found any other luggage, or a vehicle, or anything. But we do know he wasn't dressed like that when he got off the shuttle in Houston."

We could hear voices outside the office door, two people coming up a hall that only led to the room we were in.

"Right," Marco said, turning back to his tablet one last time. "Cause of death is heat stroke and dehydration. There's no question about that. And he wasn't cuffed or tied up or anything. I know you'll need evidence of something to keep investigating this as a homicide, but I don't have it to give you. Sorry."

"I know," I said. But I hated it. From a budgetary standpoint, I really did have to set this case aside. It looked like accidental death, or death by misadventure, or whatever.

But I still had so many questions.

"If your friend learns any more, will you have him pass it on to me?" I asked.

"I'll let him know, but I wouldn't get your hopes up," he said. "Recluse, remember?"

"Right. Recluse."

But I couldn't let it go at that.

I had a lot of time to think on the drive back home. But those thoughts weren't great. I came to a conclusion before I'd even gotten out of the ME's parking lot, but that just left too much time to agonize over the ramifications.

Because there was only one thing that connected my hometown with the Moon. And the minute I remembered that little fact, everything else started lining up so neatly.

When I got back to town, I didn't turn in to the sheriff's office or even head home.

I went first to the home of Hector and Bonnie Summers. They were technically Chloe's grandparents, but given the fact that spot for "father" on Chloe's birth certificate had been left blank and her mother had never recovered from the coma that had gotten her removed from the Moon, it would be more appropriate to just call them her parents.

I had spent roughly half my childhood in this little suburban home with its ring of junipers all around it, not quite protecting the always peeling paint from the rays of the Sun. They were the variety called drooping junipers because they always looked like they were half-dead from lack of water, all wilted and shriveled. But they looked particularly bad this year.

I knocked on the door, trying not to notice how badly the boards of the deck under me were sagging under my weight. The whole place was in need of repairs that I knew the Summers couldn't afford.

When no one answered my first knock, I knocked again. Then I took a few steps back, off the porch and onto the scabby, parched lawn. I was trying to see if there was any movement behind the upstairs windows, but was momentarily distracted by the sight of another shuttle contrail arcing across the sky. It was a cleaner blue today, not so hazy.

"Shuttle," I said to myself. But there was nobody close enough to punch.

I guess it was a little weird to be homesick

now that I was home again. But you couldn't see shuttles in the skies over Chicago or Milwaukee.

Nostalgia. That's what I was feeling. I had come back to the place I knew, but I hadn't come back to the same time.

"Lidia? Lidia Alvarez?"

It was Hector, standing in the doorway in the shadows of the porch.

"Yes, it's me, Grandpa Hector," I said and came up the steps to plant a kiss on his badly shaven cheek. He was shorter than I remembered, and grayer, but the bright blue eyes that were sparkling at me were as sharp as ever.

"Bonnie is going to be sorry she missed you, but she had the car drive her to the Wal-Mart. You know they closed the one in town, so it's a thirty-minute drive now," he said chidingly. Like it was my fault the local economy was dying.

Well, maybe he meant to make me feel guilty for not stopping by sooner. But my first three months on the job had been more hectic than I had expected. And that had been even before the dead body.

"I'm sorry I haven't been by," I said. "And I'm even more sorry that I'm not here now just to pay you a visit. You're both like family to me, and you deserve better from me."

He shuffled slowly but steadily, his hand resting on the back of the sofa as he skirted it towards his old, familiar chair. He wasn't leaning on it, but he clearly wanted to know the support was there if he should need it. The fabric across the top of the sofa was worn smooth and shiny from all the times his hand had passed over it before.

As badly maintained as the outside of the house looked, everything in the sitting room was immaculate. The plethora of porcelain figures gleamed dust-free on shelves of brightly polished wood, and everything was decked in snowy white squares of lace that I knew Bonnie crocheted herself.

I hovered near Hector in case he needed a hand getting into his chair, but not so close that he could see me doing it. Once he was safely settled—without my help—I sank into the chair next to him.

"Not a visit, you say?" Hector said, digging around the items stacked on the end table beside his chair until he found a pair of glasses. They magnified his eyes to twice their normal

size, but from the way his face suddenly relaxed, I realized he had been squinting at me without them.

"I had a few questions to ask you about a case," I said.

"The man in the park," Hector said with a sad nod.

"You know why I'm asking you about it?"

"I suppose if it was just because Chloe found him, you'd be talking to Chloe," he said. "Which means he is who I was afraid he was. The man from the Moon."

"Do you know his name?" I asked, still hoping against hope that my hunch was wrong.

But Hector just shook his head. "No, we were never allowed to know his name. His lawyers made sure of that. We never got a penny toward Maria's medical care, or for Chloe, who was deprived of her mother in every way that matters. We never got anything at all."

I braced myself for tears or maybe anger, but Hector just bowed his head as if all he felt were crushing exhaustion.

"You know, Bonnie and I had reconciled ourselves to not having children. We were both past forty before Maria came along. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't," I said. Although I probably could've guessed it. They were closer to seventy than sixty when I'd first met them. On Chloe's and my first day of kindergarten.

"As tragic as it was, what happened on the Moon, Bonnie and I always saw the blessing in it. We thought we'd never have a single child. But in the end, we got to raise two."

I let that statement sit for a moment. The central air kicked on, and a vent I hadn't noticed that was right by my foot blasted my ankle with icy air.

I crossed my legs away from the vent, then leaned in toward Hector. "I remember when we were kids, you collected astronaut memorabilia."

"I did," he said, but the look on his face was bemused. He had no clue why I was bringing it up now. "I had to sell most of it. Well, all of it that was worth anything."

"That's a shame. I remember all the models you had of the rockets. They were to scale with each other. The Saturn V was huge!"

"Yes, yes," Hector said with a chuckle. But his eyes were worried about where this was going.

"Did you keep everything you couldn't sell?" I asked.

"Most of it," he said. But he was starting to sound like he was hedging now.

"What about authentic historical artifacts? Didn't you have a few of those? I remember mission patches and things like that."

Hector looked down at the hands folded on his lap. Then he looked up at me. "I think, Lidia, it would be best if you just asked me what you want to know. Stop dancing around it."

"You had a replica of a water pouch from an Apollo-era space suit," I said. "They called it an IDB. But it wasn't real. It was a very convincing fake."

"It was one of the things I couldn't sell," he said.

"So you still have it?" I asked.

He licked at his lips as if he suddenly found them dry. Then he said, "If you like, we can go out to the garage and have a look. But it's over a hundred and ten degrees in there, and there are a lot of boxes up in those rafters."

"All right," I said. He had a point; I didn't want to go digging through boxes in his furnace of a garage.

But I didn't really need to. "Did Chloe know it was there?"

"She helped me put it there. So, yes," Hector said. Then he put a hand to his forehead and leaned against the arm of his chair. But after a moment he shifted that hand to covering his eyes.

"I guess you know what I suspect," I said.

"I guess I do," he said.

"I have to go find Chloe now. I truly am sorry."

He didn't speak at first, and I suspected behind the cover of that hand he was weeping.

But his voice was as steady as ever as he said, "She has a shift at the visitor center today. She'll be there until six."

"Thank you," I said. But I had to add, "I trust you won't call her to tell her I'm coming?"

"No, no," he said, shaking his head but still not dropping the hand from over his eyes. "No, if you think she did this, then you have proof. And if she did it, then she has to take the consequences."

"I'm sorry you never found any justice the first time around," I said. "That wasn't right."

"No, and this doesn't make it better," he said.

I had to leave him there alone with his grief, unsure of how long it would take before Bonnie would be home. But then they'd just be grieving together.

They were about to lose another daughter. But while the first one had died without ever coming out of the coma, at least this one might someday make it out of prison again.

Not in their lifetimes, though.

I sucked in a deep breath to fight down the threat of tears, then started my car and drove out to the visitor's center.

I arrived just as Chloe was locking the doors. She had her backpack on, water bottles full and sat phone in her pocket, I was sure. Her wide-brimmed hat was blocking me from her view at first, and I had to step into her path before she saw me.

She smiled at first, her usual toothy greeting. But something in my own face gave me away. And I watched as she just wilted. Her hands slipped from their grip on her backpack straps and dangled uselessly at her sides, her shoulders slumped, and her head dipped forward until all I could see was the top of her hat.

"Can I at least tell you why?" she asked. She was sniffing back tears, but she wasn't ginning up fake sobs in a bid for sympathy.

"He killed your mother," I said. "Effectively." It had taken her fifteen years to die, after all.

"Well, obviously," Chloe said, looking up at me with a little of her old fire back in her eyes. "I meant, why I lured him here."

"Because you couldn't afford to go to him on the Moon," I said. As she would say, *obviously*, because even her mother had only made it to the lunar colony by winning a lottery on top of having an in-demand skill set as an electrician.

"Jesus, Lidia," Chloe said with that frustration only an old friend can have with another. "You are the master of the obvious."

"You'd be surprised how often that's all you need when it comes to the reasons why people kill," I shot back at her with a little irritation of my own.

"He claimed it was an accident, that it could've happened to anyone, but there was a reason he had his lawyers remove his name from everything. Because he knew it wasn't true!"

"I understand that he was a problematic employer," I said.

"More than that! Do you know he lured her

out there with the promise of twice her usual weekly rate for a single day of work?" Chloe asked.

"That's not against the law," I said.

"He insisted that her wiring was to blame for a buzz in his dome-wide comms. Even though there was no way it could've been," Chloe went on.

"Again, not against the law."

"He refused to pay her if she didn't stay and fix the problem. Which she did. It took her hours, but she did it."

I didn't speak. I just waited for Chloe to go on.

She took a few deep breaths to get her growing anger back under her control. Then she said, "He put her on a two-person transport he had in his dome airlock, but he refused to drive her. She was supposed to ride in it while it was on autopilot mode to drop her off at the main dome, then go back to his dome on its own."

"Then what happened?" I had never gotten these details before. It had just been described as an accident, and nothing more was ever said.

And I had never asked. She had called herself a miracle baby, but always said it with such bitterness. I could see that the pain it caused Chloe never diminished with time, so I was always careful to skirt conversations away from it.

But I was regretting that now. As painful as it would've been, I really wished I had pressed her more when I had the chance.

Before Chloe's anger had gotten the better of her. Before she had done things that couldn't be undone.

"The transport broke down. Obviously." That time, she really did roll her eyes at me. "And he refused to answer her calls for aid. And the main dome said it was out of their jurisdiction. So she had to get into the emergency suit on her own and walk it."

"She must've had the training," I said.

"Yes, yes. It's required to emigrate up there. But she'd only been there a week. She'd never actually operated a suit in a real vacuum. And now she had to do it with no backup."

"No buddy," I said, mostly to myself. Then I asked her, "Was it a faulty suit?"

"No, of course not," she said, throwing up her hands as if disgusted with how I kept missing her point. "He was found not to be at fault.

Because as much as his transport had broken down, he had had all the correct emergency gear in place and fully operational.”

“It was her error,” I guessed.

“She shouldn’t have been out there alone!”

Chloe said. “That’s on him. She bumped something and screwed up her air mix and was too hypoxic to fix it, but that’s on him. It took too long for the dome to send out emergency workers to retrieve her after she triggered her distress button, but that’s still. On. Him.”

“So you sent him out into the desert alone,” I said.

“I couldn’t duplicate the experience exactly, of course,” she said, and she was back to slumped defeat again. “I brought him to the sporting goods store after I picked him up from the spaceport in Houston. I showed him just what to buy. The best of the best.”

“But you didn’t buy him any water bottles,” I said.

“If he would’ve asked, I would’ve told him what to get,” Chloe said. “I told myself before he got here that I was going to play fair.”

“Giving him that replica of an antique was playing fair?”

“I gave it to him when we got to the trailhead. I filled it with water and handed it to him, and asked him if he felt like he needed anything else. And he said no.”

“It was still in the seventies,” I guessed.

“It was 78 when we started,” she said. But she had gone all toneless, like she was already dead inside. “It was 112 when he finally collapsed.”

“Why did he do it?” I asked.

“He came here because I said I had proof of his crimes,” Chloe said. “Not his chief crime, ironically. But he had done some illegal things with his investment funds. And I had the receipts. All he had to do to buy my silence was come down to Earth and meet with me.”

“How did you—?” I started to ask.

“It’s actually about the fourth thing I’ve tried,” Chloe said with the saddest laugh I’ve ever heard. “I tried romancing him, pretending to be a long-lost relative, offering him lush job opportunities. This was the first time he took the bait.”

“Did you have—?”

“Of course not. But he must’ve done something illegal, since he came all the way down here to buy my silence,” Chloe said.

I couldn’t argue with that logic.

“Which left me with just two more questions.

“Did he know who you were?”

“Not until I told him. Which wasn’t until we were at the trailhead.”

There was something ominous in her tone, and I knew the answer to my last question was going to break my heart.

But I had to get the words out.

“Chloe, how did you get him to walk, and to keep walking?”

“A gun. I don’t have a gun on me now,” she rushed to add, hands held high to show me they were empty. “I took Hector’s hunting rifle out of his gun cabinet. I doubt he’s even noticed it’s missing. It’s at my house. I wasn’t going to put a murder weapon back in his house.”

“He didn’t miss it before,” I said. “But I have a feeling he’s noticed it now.”

“You went to see him?”

“I did,” I admitted. “How many of those dead animals along the trail were yours?”

“He didn’t believe I could shoot him if he ran away,” Chloe said. “He kept trying to test me. I could’ve shot him, but I didn’t want him to die that way. But he wouldn’t stop trying.”

Then she finally broke down, hands over her face as she fell to her knees.

I had to pull her to her feet to walk her to the cruiser.

But her tears ended as quickly as they began, and she stood calmly beside me as I opened the back door and took her elbow to guide her inside.

“Lidia, shuttle,” she said.

And I looked up. But she didn’t punch my arm this time. Chloe was finally letting the past go.

I just wished she’d done it sooner. ■

Kate MacLeod’s stories have appeared in Analog, Strange Horizons, and Mythic Delirium, among other places. She has written YA science fictions novel series such as The Travels of Scout Shannon and The Ritchie and Fitz Sci-Fi Murder Mysteries. The first book in her latest series, The Forgotten Planet, is currently out in stores everywhere. She also contributes to a serialized science fiction podcast called The Tales of the Chai Makhani Trio. You can learn more about her work at KateMacLeodWrites.com and at RatatoskrPressBooks.com.