

A Kahale and Claude Mystery

#3

**OPERATION
VARSITY
BLUES**

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For my students, past and present.

Chapter One

Marcus

We sat in Alissa's car in the far corner of a parking lot belonging to a closed down shopping plaza outside of town. Off the beaten path and late at night, we doubted anyone would check on us. A light snow and rain mixture began to fall, which caused a sparkle in the wintry mix. A single streetlamp cast an eerie glow.

From the backseat, Janice shivered.

"Can you turn the car back on?" she asked. "It's cold."

"Here," Nate said as he pulled her closer to him. "Is this better?"

“Not really,” Janice mumbled. “But I’ll take what I can get until Lis cranks up the heat.”

“Okay,” Alissa huffed. “I’ll turn the car on... again!” She keyed the ignition and looked to me while she shifted in the driver’s seat. “Marc, you know I love you, but I’m beginning to think this new contact is playing you.”

“He said he’ll be here,” I said. I pulled out the envelope I’d found in my school locker. “Let’s wait another fifteen minutes, and then we’ll go.”

“I’m all for this, too,” said Janice as she leaned forward between Alissa and me. “But how do you know our new client is a *he*?”

“That’s no biggie,” said Nate as he joined the conversation. “Wait! I see lights ahead.”

As the rain continued to fall, a car pulled into the parking lot. Its headlights blinked twice. That was the signal. My heart raced.

“Guys!” I cheered. “We’re doing this!”

As the car approached, it looked strangely familiar.

“I don’t want to be a buzzkill,” Nate said. “But isn’t that your dad’s car?”

“Sure, looks like it,” Janice replied. Meanwhile, Alissa nodded.

“It is,” she said.

I groaned as my family’s familiar old station wagon pulled up next to us.

Dad left the engine running as he climbed out the car. Dressed in a long, dark trench coat and a black fedora, he stood there with arms crossed.

“What’s with your dad’s getup?” Alissa asked as she opened the door.

“I think it’s pretty cool,” Nate said.

The four of us exchanged looks and I sighed.

“Guess we better see what he wants,” I said. I slammed my door shut and trudged over to Dad. “Why are you here?”

The others joined me and expressed a similar sentiment.

Crossing his arms, Dad *tsked*.

“Now, is that any way to treat a new client?” he asked.

“No way!” Nate and Janice exclaimed in unison.

“He’s joking,” said Alissa as she stepped to me. “Marc, please tell me he’s joking.”

“I don’t think he is,” I said regretfully as I continued to look to Dad.

I clicked my teeth. Before my friends and I got here, we hung at my house and then we went to Slices on the Avenue. Dad had time to call us for a get-together then, so I couldn’t figure out why he waited until now.

Dad’s air of mystery seemed to diminish as he looked from the others to me.

“I...uh...” he stammered. “Here’s the thing. I didn’t want to get your mother involved, and this is a sensitive subject.”

“Can we maybe talk in your car, Mr. Kahale?” asked Alissa. “We’re all a little cold out here, and we’re getting wet.”

Dad climbed into the front seat of the station wagon. Nate and Janice climbed into the back. At the passenger side, Alissa and I hesitated.

“Do you want to sit in the front?” I asked.

“No, I’ll take the back,” Alissa said as she grinned.

“He is your contact after all.”

She climbed in the backseat while I took the front. As I closed the door, I welcomed the warmth of the car. Dad took off his fedora and stretched.

“It’s a school night, so I’ll try to make this quick,” he said. From an inside pocket of his trench coat, he pulled out a folded sheet of paper and handed it to me. “There’s been an unusually high number of our students getting accepted into prestigious schools despite the schools’ extremely low acceptance rates.”

I unfolded the slip of paper and glanced at a list of names with corresponding GPAs. I passed the paper to Alissa.

“Normally I would celebrate,” Dad continued. “Most of these students are all around good kids, but they don’t exactly shine academically or demonstrate the qualities top schools look for in exceptional candidates for enrollment.”

“I know some of these kids,” said Nate as he leaned forward. “Why not go to Principal Moss with this info?”

Dad sighed. “In our last faculty meeting, he held them up as prime examples of why our staff should continue to push every single one of our students. I did some more digging and discovered a similar trend in years past. Fourteen percent of our students are getting into prestigious schools. That’s twice as high as the national average.”

“So, why us?” Janice asked. “Couldn’t you talk to the superintendent?”

“I could, but given the recent financial scandal—”

“I get it,” Alissa cut him off. “Some of the kids still whisper among themselves about your

involvement.”

“Which is why I bring the case to you,” Dad said. “You know your classmates. Pick a handful off this list I gave you that might be willing to talk.”

“Or those we can get to slip up,” I chimed in.

Dad glared at me. “This isn’t something to joke about, son.” He shifted his gaze to the back seat. “I wouldn’t ask if I had another option.”

“This feels borderline illegal,” said Alissa as she passed the list to Janice.

“Right,” agreed Dad. He cleared his throat. “Which is why I emphasize you don’t do anything illegal. You’re gathering information. Nothing more. Burn the list once you’ve picked a handful of classmates. Whatever you find, you bring to me.”

“Got it boss,” Nate said.

“Thanks, Dad,” I added.

“Yeah, thanks for bringing this to us,” Alissa said. She paused. “This means a lot.”

Dad adjusted his seat. “If you have any doubt about this, you’re under no obligation to follow through, okay? Now, get back home before ten o’clock. It’s a school night.”

We returned to Alissa’s warm car as Dad’s station wagon drove off. In the backseat, Janice waved around the slip of paper.

“This is so exciting, you guys!” she cheered. “We got a case, and I think I know who each of us should start with.”

While Janice and Nate discussed the list, I glanced at Alissa. She remained silent. I had a feeling she wanted out, which would leave Nate, Janice, and me to do this on our own.

Chapter Two

Alissa

As I tried to review my notes for the upcoming A.P. Statistics test on Monday, the after-lunch chatter in the classroom distracted me, and my mind cluttered with thoughts about this case. I glanced to my classmate and teammate Mel's empty seat. She played on the soccer team with me as a senior. Though her name wasn't on the list Mr. Kahale gave to us, I knew she was tight with a few of the girls, and I wanted to ask her some questions. Flustered, Mel rushed into the classroom, dropped her books on her desk and sat. At nearly six feet tall, she towered over all the girls and most of the boys. She turned to me and grinned.

"You're not going to believe this!" she exclaimed.

"What's that?" I asked.

She eagerly handed me an envelope. Immediately, I recognized the crest of Penamore College — dual roaring lions emblazoned in gold, matching lettering, and a red background.

“See that, Lis,” Mel said. “I got into my dream school!”

“Oh,” I stated.

Mel laughed. “Don’t look so surprised.”

I shrugged in a lame attempt to laugh it off. “I’m not surprised. Mel, this is incredible!”

“I know, right? They even offered me an incredible scholarship program.” She leaned toward me. “Lis, you should apply next year. Between your grades and soccer, I bet you’ll get in. They have a great law program. Plus, for the sports scholarship, you really should go out for lacrosse this year. With three of us from the same team, we’d be unstoppable.”

“Who’s the third?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Abby, of course. Our team was so lost without her last year.”

Because of her failing twelfth grade, I wanted to say. Instead, I grinned. “That’ll be awesome. Maybe you, me, and Abby could practice this weekend.”

Mel slid her acceptance letter away. “Uh, sure. We could do that. But it’ll have to be way early. She—”

“Good afternoon, class,” Ms. Berry, our statistics teacher, called out as she entered from the back of the room and brought Mel’s explanation to a halt. “If you haven’t done so, take out your homework.”

Our papers shuffled as Ms. Berry pulled up her presentation for the day. She reminded us of our big test on Monday. I, on the other hand, wondered what else Mel and Abby had planned for Saturday.

Then, I recalled two months ago after we — Marcus, Janice, Nate, and I — solved the case surrounding the missing school funds. Janice had handed me her phone. On one of her many social media apps, I saw Abby Jenkins posing while wearing a Penamore College t-shirt. Her caption read:

They said I couldn't do it. I don't even like school. Hi, haters. Look where I'm going.

Janice and Nate were convinced we had a potential case. Marcus and I wondered how Abby could've gotten into an exclusive school like Penamore. But we didn't have a legit reason to pry, not if we wanted to keep what little popularity we'd managed to earn. Then Mr. Kahale brought us the list last night. Abby was on the list.

What previous doubts I had about getting involved in this case vanished. With Mel's acceptance into the same school, I needed to figure out a way to get close to Abby. I thought Mel could help and be the person to find out more about Abby. If Janice joined the lacrosse team with me, that would help, too.

"Alissa!" Ms. Berry called, which pulled me from my thoughts. "Please read question four."

"Uh, okay," I said in a daze. I glanced at my paper and read aloud. "You run an office that employs 23 people. What is the probability that two of your employees have the same birthday? For the purposes of this problem, ignore February 29."

I paused. "Oh...can you get back to me? I know the answer. I just need a minute."

"Take all the time you need," Ms. Berry said. "Let's go on to the next problem as Ms. Claude gathers her

thoughts.”

I ignored the giggles and whispers because now the thoughts of Penamore College and Abby Jenkins’ apparent acceptance returned. Maybe with Abby being a second-year senior, the college somehow accepted her on probation. But that seemed doubtful. Her grades sucked. Plus, the odds of getting into a school like Penamore had to be extremely low. Even lower for two students from the same high school.

A nudge at my shoulder jolted me back to AP Statistics.

“Fifty Percent!” I shouted. “That’s it!” Glancing around, I realized the room was silent. Everyone stared at me, including Ms. Berry. She glared for a moment before she grinned.

“Very good, Ms. Claude,” she replied. “Do you care to explain?”

“I’d rather not.” Now, I only had room for one statistical problem.

Ms. Berry frowned for a moment. While she proceeded with an explanation, a new angle for our investigation into Abby Jenkins began to form in my mind.

The bell rang.

“Drat!” Ms. Berry exclaimed. “All right, class. You’ve got two nights to study. You’re—”

The shuffling of feet and scraping of chairs interrupted Ms. Berry’s farewell. In the hallway, I caught up with Mel.

“Hey, can Janice come with us this weekend?” I asked her.

“I didn’t know Janice was into sports,” Mel said.

“We could definitely use another middie and you’re a shoo-in for attack.”

“That’s awesome! Do you think Saturday morning at ten would be cool?”

Mel’s face flushed. “I’ll have to check with Abs. You know, she might want to take the day to get ready for Saturday’s party.”

“Right, I almost forgot.” I lied. “I was going to bring Marcus.”

Mel cocked her head. “Okay, just that Abby’s boyfriend Derrick isn’t even coming.”

“Oh...” I paused as I tried to play off Mel’s dismissal. “I’ll have to reread the invite. I didn’t think this was a girl only party.”

Mel fumbled with her books. “Don’t sweat it. Boys are allowed. I need to get to class, so I’ll let you know about getting together to practice. Even if we can’t, I’m sure you and...uh... Janice will pick up the game fast. Okay, see ya!”

She turned and disappeared into a group of students. At the end of the soccer season, she bugged me about playing lacrosse in the spring.

“Girl, you are so out of it today!” Janice squealed as she walked up to me.

“You don’t know the half of it,” I said as I turned to her. With a grin, I changed my tone. “How about we crash Abby’s party this Saturday?”

Janice’s eyes lit up. “I thought you’d never ask. I heard some chatter about it. It sounds super exclusive, so if we do get in, we’ll have to stay under the radar.”

That evening we met at Marcus's house.

"Are you sure you kids don't want any snacks?" Mrs. Kahale asked.

"You four look like you've got a lot of studying to do," said Mr. Kahale.

"We do," Marcus answered. "If we're not done in an hour, I'll come down and bring something up for my friends."

"Thanks, Mrs. Kahale," I said. Janice and Nate thanked Mrs. Kahale, too, and the four of us headed upstairs.

With one earbud in her ear, Marcus' sixth-grade little sister Bri met us by her door.

"Hey, Lis," she said. "Oh, you're all here! Do you have a case? Can I help?"

"I don't know," I said as I teased Bri. "You have to ask Marcus." I looked to Marcus and he blushed.

"No, Bri, you can't help," Marcus blurted. "We aren't on a case."

"We're doing a...school project," Nate lied.

"You all are terrible liars," said Bri as she rolled her eyes. "Just keep it down because I have studying to do." She popped in her earbud and slammed her door shut.

"Real smooth, boys," Janice said.

"What?" Marcus asked. "I couldn't find a more covert place to meet, so my parents' house is what we got."

After closing the door, we all took a seat. I filled the boys in on my theory of the statistical impossibility of two people from a small town, like ours, getting into a school like Penamore.

“So, I’m thinking you two could do some research into that,” I said. “Maybe check with Ms. Calhoun, our guidance counselor.”

“That’s a great idea,” Marcus said. He turned to Nate. “You and I could come up with a list of leading questions, right?”

Nate nodded and exchanged a look with Janice. He opened his mouth to speak but hesitated. Although they only remained quiet for a moment, I sensed something was up with Nate and Janice.

“Am I missing something?” Marcus asked. “I know it’s not all glamorous, but we need to keep things going.”

“I’m cool with that,” Nate said.

“Well speaking of glamorous, Abby’s got a party this weekend,” I said. “I think Mel can get us in. Janice and I are supposed to meet with them Saturday morning.”

“Since when?” Janice asked.

I turned to Janice. “I may have nominated you for lacrosse this season, and we’ll need a working plan for getting into the party.”

“Definitely,” Nate said. “Why are we attending?”

“We need to get close to our subjects,” Marcus replied. “I’m sure a handful of people from the list will be at the party.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’ve seen some of them hang with Abby. Others will probably be there, too.”

Janice added. “And clues. I’m sure we could go through a few drawers in the house.”

“Just remember,” I said. “We need to keep this clean and legal.”

Later, we’d work out a line of questioning for

Ms. Calhoun and some scenarios for getting ourselves into Abby's party. I wondered whether there was a way to legally acquire clues. I doubted anything would be so obvious, like a falsified grade report, especially since none of us had ever been to Abby's house, nor knew exactly what we were looking for. We would have to figure it out when we got there.

Chapter Three

Marcus

Friday afternoon found me at stage one of our investigation. Alone, I paced the hallway outside the guidance office. In a distant corridor, a single locker slammed. Except for the locker door, the building was eerily quiet. No teachers roamed the building or socialized in the hallways. I glanced at the list of questions we'd put together yesterday evening. Nate should've been here five minutes ago.

A rhythmic click of shoes on linoleum flooring drew my attention in another direction. Rounding the corner, Principal Moss skimmed a handful of papers as he marched my way, barely registering my presence. When he looked up, we made eye contact. He forced a smile.

"Marcus," he said, "you're here late, but you're

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About the Author



Tim grew up in Syracuse, New York. He currently resides in Maryland where he teaches English, Creative Writing, Film, and Theatre on the middle school level. At the insistence of his own students, he began writing seriously in 2014.

He credits his love for story to his mother, who spent countless hours reading to him and his siblings when they were growing up. Growing up, he devoured the literary words of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Piers Anthony, and many others. Mysteries, thrillers, and fantasies are among the genre he most frequently reads.

When he's not writing, he's reading, teaching, camping, or enjoying a live music concert.

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