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Cheltenham, England

WHY DOES SHE keep staring at me?

At first, Kingston had shrugged it off as a maddening teenage quirk, but now, ten minutes into the panel debate, it was becoming distracting. And that was a problem.

Public discussion groups such as this one, to which he was no stranger, required one hundred percent of his concentration and intellectual faculties. Even more so this afternoon because the other distinguished scientists on the stage with him were considered among the best in their respective branches of academia, and he had a reputation to uphold.

Yet under the girl's constant gaze, innocent as it was, he was finding it increasingly difficult to focus. Her get-up didn't help matters, either. For all he knew it might have been fashionable, but to him, the gelled short hair and layered grunge outfit, topped by a red-and-white football scarf, bordered on the comical.

Luckily he was on one end of the table. Unnoticed by most, he shifted his chair slightly, to face his colleagues more than the audience. Though she'd now faded into the periphery, he could still feel her presence. And why was she alone? he wondered. *Why not?* a steadying voice inside him murmured. *What's so unusual about a twelve-or thirteen-year-old attending a science fair symposium?* Yet it still didn't sit quite right.

The event, in the Queen's Hotel Regency Room—part of Cheltenham's annual Science Festival—was billed as a panel discussion on topics related

to the environment and green-energy programs. Lawrence Kingston, University of Edinburgh professor emeritus, had been invited mostly in recognition of his standing as one of the country's leading botanists. But—as the program chairman must have been all too aware—it was common knowledge among his peers and the media that Kingston didn't shy away from taking a contrarian stance now and then, and was often an outspoken critic of certain aspects of the “green” agenda.

Kingston's erudite and witty presence made for good box office. No matter what side of the aisle you were on, fireworks were guaranteed. But what had helped make this event a sellout was the sizable contingent of mystery and crime aficionados in attendance, who were far more interested in Kingston's spare-time exploits as an amateur investigator than they were in saving the planet.

The closing Q&A part of the program finally arrived, and Kingston now had no choice but to shift his chair and face the audience full on. To his surprise, the girl's seat was empty. She must have become bored. He couldn't blame her. Why had she made him so uneasy in the first place? he wondered. Now he would never know what had motivated her to attend, not that it mattered anymore.

The program officially concluded, Kingston and his colleagues left the stage to mingle with the audience. He was midsentence, attempting to answer a three-part question from a garrulous gentleman in the back of the group milling around him when, out of the corner of his eye, he once more caught sight of the young girl and her unwavering stare.

“Damn,” he muttered under his breath, quickly stuttering an apology of sorts to the man, gathering his thoughts sufficiently to finish answering him. Though partly hidden among the adults, he realized by her steady gaze that she wanted him to notice her. She was closer now than before, and he could see—magnified by her round John Lennon glasses—that her eyes were ice blue and unusually large for her age. Either that or her vision was so bad it needed a lot of help.

At least she has none of those wretched tattoos or piercings—at least no visible ones, he mused. Was she waiting to ask him a question or request an auto-graph? What other reason could she have for being there?

One by one the admirers and autograph seekers departed, leaving the two of them alone. As if each was waiting for the other to speak, they stood separated by no more than a dozen feet, an awkward and unlikely couple. She looked even smaller now, more vulnerable, in a way he couldn't explain. For a few seconds the only sound was the hum of a vacuum cleaner from the other side of the room, and then, finally, she spoke. Not in a voice that matched her age and appearance, but in a manner incongruously self-assured and fluent.

“Hello,” she said, eyes unwavering. “Could I please have a word, sir, just a few minutes—you and me?”

“Of course you can.” He smiled, eager to put her at ease. “I couldn't help noticing you in the audience. I was thinking how gratifying it was to see one so young at a science fair, particularly at such a serious discussion.”

“I didn't come to hear about the science, sir. Though I liked what you said about endangered animals—you know, making a comeback, mysteriously reappearing—that stuff,” she added hastily. “I really came to ask you a favor.”

“And what kind of favor would that be?”

She paused, pursing her lips, as if thinking about her answer. She blinked several times before answering. “If it's all right with you, sir, could we go somewhere quiet, where we can sit down and talk about it? It's . . . complicated. I mean, it might take some time to explain, you see.”

“I don't see why not,” he replied, knowing that he couldn't refuse, at the same time wondering what he was letting himself in for. “And there's no need to call me sir. Doctor will do fine.”

“All right.” The girl smiled. “Doctor’s cool.” “And what’s your name?”
“It’s Letty. Letty McGuire.”
“Short for Leticia?”

She shook her head. “Lettice. Let-*TEECE*,” she repeated, exaggerating the pronunciation.

“It’s unusual.”

She made a face, wrinkling her nose. “My grandma’s middle name. I hate it. They used to call me lettuce in school.”

Kingston grinned. “All right, Letty. Now, are you here alone? With your parents, or—”

She shook her head. “I don’t have any parents. But don’t worry, my foster parents know where I am and why I came here.” She patted her skirt pocket. “I’ll call them when we’re done, and one of them will come get me. We live ten minutes away. Anyway I *am* thirteen, you know,” she said, with a tinge of resentment.

Kingston smiled. “Of course,” he said, pausing. “There’s one more thing, though. My friend Andrew is waiting for me in the lounge, and I don’t want to keep him too long, he gets impatient. So why don’t we go get him first, then find a place where you can tell us both what’s on your mind?”

She beamed. “That would be brilliant—Doctor.”

Five minutes later, the three were seated in a quiet corner of the hotel’s lounge. Kingston had ordered a Coke for Letty and glass of white wine for himself. Andrew was nursing the remainder of his beer from the bar, looking as though he’d still not yet recovered from the sight of Kingston sauntering into the lounge with a teenager in tow.

Kingston’s neighbor and longtime friend had accompanied him not for the sake of science but rather the Stratford Festival of Motoring that was taking place nearby that same weekend. Three hundred classic cars, paraded

along the streets of Stratford-upon-Avon, was an event that neither wanted to pass up.

When Kingston had introduced Letty, all he had told Andrew that she'd simply asked for a favor. Now he turned to Letty.

“So what’s this all about, then? This mysterious favor?” he asked, with a twinkle in his voice.

“I want you to help me find out what happened to my mother.”

Her eyes shifted from Kingston’s to Andrew’s, as if knowing what kind of reaction her words would elicit. “She went missing eight years ago,” she added softly.

Kingston’s expression changed abruptly to frowning consternation. “Disappeared completely?”

She nodded. “She left one morning when I was little and never came back. No message, not a word. Nothing,” she said, her voice showing no trace of emotion.

“You said you didn’t have parents. But what about your father?” “He was killed in a motorbike accident when I was little.”

Kingston glanced at Andrew, who showed no inclination yet to join

in the conversation. He returned his gaze to the girl. “I’m truly sorry.”

“That’s all right,” she replied stoically.

“What about your foster parents?”

“You mean, who are they?”

Kingston nodded. “Yes.”

“They’re Richie and Molly Collins, friends of my mum and dad. Uncle Richie—that’s what I call him now—used to work with my dad a long time ago. Auntie Molly used to babysit me.”

“And you’ve lived with them since your mum disappeared, I take it? In Cheltenham?”

She nodded.

“I’m curious why you chose to seek me out,” Kingston said. “Why do you think that I might be able to help? After eight years, surely the police must have done everything in their power to find her.”

“They have. But they came to a dead end a long while ago. They told us that unless they come across new information or new witnesses, the chances of finding out what happened to her are next to none. My foster parents even hired a private detective for a while. I believe it cost them a lot of money. But that went nowhere, too.”

“What about the Missing Persons Bureau?”

Letty shook her head again. “We’ve pretty much given up on them. There’s been no change since the case was first reported.”

“What about your aunt and uncle? What do they think, after all this time?”

“They say I shouldn’t give up hope. But I know they’re just trying to be nice.” She shrugged.

“So how did you learn about me?” Kingston asked, sipping his wine.

“The *Gazette*, our local paper. There was an article about you and the Science Festival. At first, Molly didn’t think it was a good idea for me to come here, particularly by myself.” She paused, gave a quick smile. “But I finally persuaded her.”

“It seems that you’re quite good at persuasion.”

“Sometimes,” she replied, wrinkling her nose again. “Anyway, in the article it said that you were a famous professor and had also solved several crimes that the police couldn’t.” She sucked on the straw of her Coke.

“Molly said that you’re not a real detective. But I think she said that just to put me off.”

Not a real detective. At those words, Kingston exchanged a glance with Andrew, who was finally taking an interest in the conversation. And Kingston knew why.

His friend had never entirely approved of Kingston's amateur sleuthing. Andrew, in fact, had spent a great deal of time trying to deter him from "playing detective." But a year ago, when Kingston was involved in an investigation that threatened to become dangerous—and, indeed, at the end Kingston received a serious gunshot wound—Andrew insisted that in the future—should Kingston consider any more ventures or inquiries—he would take a more active role in what he described as Kingston's "ill-advised activities."

Kingston was glad to agree and promised to take Andrew's opinion and advice more seriously. And he would try, as best he could, to curb his tendency to jump into any future such situation without considering the ramifications. In turn, Andrew assured his friend that he would do his best to collaborate and to find ways to help Kingston instead of treating him like a bullying nanny and second-guessing.

That was why Kingston was glad that Letty was talking to both of them. He could see by the look in Andrew's eyes that he, too, was taken in by the girl's story; her composure and tenacity for one so young were irresistible. Even after eight years, Letty was determined not to accept that her mum was lost forever. That was much longer than most adults would persevere.

"Letty," Kingston began in the most avuncular tone he could muster, "your aunt Molly is not entirely wrong about the detective thing. Let me

explain. After I retired from teaching in Scotland and went to live in London, I fell into solving crimes more by accident than by design. Over the last few years, my reputation has been blown way out of proportion." He smiled reassuringly. "Don't misunderstand me, I'm not making excuses and I do want to help you, but you need to realize that my influence is not as far-reaching as you might have been led to believe. Not anymore, anyway. I mention this because trying to find out what happened to your mum will require working with the police, trying to persuade them

to part with information that they've gathered on the case over the years. It will be essential for us to know, exactly, not only what they've done in the course of their investigation, who they've interviewed, et cetera, but more important, what they might not have done."

Letty nodded and remained silently attentive.

"Here's what I'm going to suggest as a start," Kingston said. "Before I do, it's only fair to tell you that I no longer have the time or the energy to conduct a full-blown independent inquiry into your mum's disappearance. Furthermore, it's what the police call a cold case, which makes it even more difficult." He paused, returning her steady gaze. "That said, let me tell you what I will do. Collaborating with the police over the last few years, I've got to know a number of high-ranking officers and I'm prepared to write a letter to one of them asking if he will help on the case. I'll also ask the Gloucestershire police about the standing of the case and learn as much as I can about why it remains unsolved: anything and everything about her disappearance. This doesn't mean they'll cooperate, though. I don't expect for one moment that they'll hand over their files, or anything like that, but whatever I can get my hands on, I promise to comb through it, to see if there are instances where a second look, a fresh inquiry, would be justified. I don't want to raise your hopes, Letty, but sometimes it's the little, seemingly inconsequential, things that are overlooked in these cases. As thorough as the police are—and they don't miss much—they're not infallible."

For the next ten minutes, Letty told them everything that had happened leading up to and following her mum's disappearance. For one so young, she was unexpectedly composed and lucid. When she finished, she took a small envelope from her pocket and handed it to Kingston.

"These are photos of Mum and a couple of Dad. Molly put dates on the back so you'll know when they were taken."

"Excellent. I was going to ask if you could find some," Kingston said, impressed with her preparedness.

Andrew produced a pen and a folded program and proceeded to jot down notes on the blank back page as Letty gave them her mother's first name—Fiona—her address, her home and mobile phone numbers, and her e-mail address. She also remembered the name of the senior investigating officer on the Gloucestershire Police in charge of the case, another indication of her resolve.

Looking satisfied and animated for the first time, Letty pulled out her mobile and called her foster mum, asking for a lift. The three walked to the hotel's entrance, where they said brief goodbyes. Kingston and Andrew offered to stay until Molly showed up, but Letty insisted that she was okay waiting for the five or so minutes it would take, so they parted company. A few moments later, heading for the car park with Andrew, Kingston glanced back. Letty was still standing there, waiting patiently for her ride.

“That’s a determined young woman,” Andrew said, echoing Kingston’s own thoughts.

“Indeed. Determined, engaging, and resourceful.”

“Remind you of anyone?” Andrew asked.

Kingston smiled.

At that instant, he vowed to do his best not to let her down.