

Discrepancies

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Celine scrutinized her red lacquered nails for the tenth time, then admired the toes of her vintage 2013 Louboutin heels, also for the tenth time. Scrolling through her personal connection device, as she had every thirty seconds since she'd arrived, she confirmed that there were still no missed messages. He was no longer late, he was incredibly late. The only reason she was still waiting was that this was completely out of character for Kyle, usually he was the one waiting for her to arrive. Tapping her red soles on the impression-less marble floor, she sighed, smoothed her black dress over her stockinged thighs and rose to her feet. She would get back into the car and hope he called with an explanation before the evening was over.

She reveled in the brisk tap her shiny heels made as she paraded down the marble staircase into the hotel lobby. In her studied opinion, there was no sound in the universe quite like that of a high-heel on marble. Celine was surprised at her hesitation as she moved to swing through the majestic, soaring entryway. Glancing over her shoulder, half hoping to see Kyle running down one of the many passage-ways toward her, something made her stop. After everything he had done, all that he meant to her, she just couldn't leave without knowing.

Checking to make sure the hotel receptionist was completely occupied with the group of tourists who had just congregated at the desk, Celine ducked into a nearby alcove. Reaching down, she hooked a finger in the back of her shoes and slipped off the right, then the left, catching the back of an ornate chair for balance. Her shoes dangling from one hand, she hurried back through the lobby and up the staircase, checking often to make sure she drew no one's attention. Out of sight of the lobby and safely on a carpeted hallway, Celine hurriedly shoved her shoes back on and for once had misgivings about her choice of footwear.

She was fairly certain the meeting rooms were down this hall. The hush of the hotel grew deeper as she marched down the beige carpet. Sure enough, as she rounded the corner, the flimsy easel standing guard near the unassuming wooden doors proclaimed "Actuarial Symposium". However, as she got close enough to read the agenda below, Celine realized that it had ended hours ago. A glance into the room beyond confirmed that everyone had indeed left for the day. For the first time that evening, Celine doubted her sanity. She double-

checked the message Kyle had sent that afternoon, then checked the reception on her device and finally manually synced it with the main server. There was no way it was offline, but there was no new message from Kyle. She checked Kyle's tracking feed, which confirmed he was still in the building. Her heart beat a little faster. She had heard stories about people who went missing, simply dropped off the planet, but nothing like that had happened since 2025.

She stood in the hallway for a moment in indecision. She had promised herself that she would never be one of those women who tracked their boyfriend's location every second of every day. But seeing as it was now an hour and a half after the time Kyle promised to meet her, this was starting to look like an emergency. Scrolling through her device, Celine activated her GPS tracker and typed in Kyle's name. After thinking for a few seconds, the blue marker indicating his location zoomed into focus on a miniature 3-D map of the hotel. Celine bit her lip. He was three floors up, directly in front of her. She was suddenly unsure if she really wanted to know what he was doing.

Her grandmother's quavering voice echoed through her thoughts, "In for a dime, in for a dollar." Smirking for a moment at the previous-century sentiment, Celine squared her shoulders and resolutely headed towards the emergency stairway the GPS directions indicated as the fastest route. As she climbed the stairs, she reminded herself over and over that this was completely out of character for Kyle.

It took all of her strength to push through the metal door leading to the third floor and as it swung open agonizingly slowly, Celine felt her heart thumping faster. Kyle...

Was not there. Instead of the long hallway she expected to step into, Celine found herself in a small entryway leading to an unassuming door. Was this some sort of executive suite reserved for indiscretions? The carpeted floor silencing her steps, Celine crept up to the door and pressed her ear against it. She could hear only a murmur of deep voices. Hands shaking slightly, she scrolled through her device, turning off all the sound on the applications and trying to find the sound amplifier. She was just about to activate it, when the door handle beside her suddenly jerked downward. With barely a chance to right her balance, Celine found herself staring into a large darkened meeting room, partially blocked by a nondescript man in an unremarkable suit.

His face was expressionless, "It seems we have a visitor. Does this belong to anyone?"

Kyle's wide eyes met her, stricken and full of regret, but it was her father's voice that answered out of the shadows, "This is Celine, my daughter. I apologize. I will escort her home immediately."

The suit answered, "See that you do."

Before she could fully comprehend what had just transpired, the door was slammed shut and her father was gripping her arm quite tightly and hauling her towards an elevator she had not noticed. "Papa? But... I was meeting Kyle!"

With an expression somewhere between sadness and regret, Celine's father responded, "Not now, I'll explain back at the house."

In a matter of minutes, Celine and her father were strapped into their waiting car. Her father spoke their destination aloud and moments later they were on their way, the car sailing along smoothly before coming to a gentle stop in the driveway of a modest bungalow. The car announced "Arriving at home" in a slightly stilted female voice. Her seatbelt retreated into the seat, the car door opened, and Celine stepped out, hurrying to keep up with her father. Glancing down, she realized she still held her personal communication device in a tight grip.

"Papa..."

"This way," he motioned as he deposited his coat and shoes in the entryway, Celine following closely. He led her down the narrow hall into his study and carefully closed all the curtains against the creeping darkness before turning on the sole desk lamp and coming to a stop beside his computer. "Sit down, this will take a bit," he motioned to one of several overstuffed visitor's chairs. Celine sat down impatiently and leaned forward to kick off her shoes.

Her father was already speaking. "So you know that what Kyle and I do is closely linked. I collect the mortality data for the government and Kyle is one of many actuaries who relies on this data for various calculations related to consumer products." Celine nodded quickly, Kyle had explained all this when she had first asked him what exactly he did for work. "Well, what Kyle and I have been unable to explain to you is that we currently working on the same project." Celine raised her eyebrows in surprise. "So, you've learned in

school and through various government publications that about a century ago, we found the way to ensure that everyone lives to be 120 years old. You know that no one dies before then, at least not naturally, and this fact is something that has a huge impact on Kyle's calculations in particular and for the amount of money the insurance industry makes as a whole. Since people started living longer, the insurance industry has become much more profitable and has made many people very wealthy." Celine nodded again, unsure whether to interrupt her father or let him reach his point eventually. "I collect the data that supports many of these calculations and ensure its reliability. Dates of birth, names, causes of death, dates of death." Her father paused. "The thing is... it's not correct."

Celine frowned, "What do you mean, what's not correct?"

"The data," her father replied, "The data's not correct, it doesn't accurately reflect the number of people who die accidentally before they reach 120 years." He motioned to the computer screen filling the wall behind him. "The data is skewed and millions of people are richer because of it."

"I started wondering after Therese, your mother, disappeared." He tapped the screen and the keyboard was projected in front of him. He began typing and clicking various icons in succession and Celine got up and went to stand beside him. She could see that he was deep into a central database. Calling up a search box, he typed in her mother's full name. The search returned nothing. "See?" His voice had risen slightly, beginning to verge on desperate, "She's not there, it's like she never existed." He then typed in her grandmother's name and an entry popped up, showing the age at death as 122. Celine remembered attending her funeral as a young girl.

"Okay," Celine acknowledged, "That is kind of strange. But I still don't understand why Kyle was late and you were in a meeting together with a whole group of rather sinister looking men."

Her father nodded once. "I've been aware of this issue for quite some time, but I am well aware of the consequences of bringing it to my superior's attention."

"Consequences...?"

Her father sighed, "Do you remember the girl you were friends with, the one who's father I worked with?" Celine nodded, Kate had come over often after Celine's mother had disappeared. "Well, her father and I

found this discrepancy while working together and he scheduled a meeting with his boss to discuss it. The thing is, Celine, he never made it out of the meeting. I saw him walk into the meeting room, but he never walked out. After that, I knew I couldn't talk about this with anyone, since I'm the only parent you have left."

Celine found she could no longer swallow properly. "But what changed? Why are you telling me now? And what does this have to do with Kyle?"

"Someone overheard Kyle and a few other actuaries discussing this issue at the symposium and alerted the authorities. No one is really sure how they gained access to this knowledge. But I was called in, to do damage control and convince them otherwise."

Her father met her eyes, searching for some sign that she understood exactly what he was saying. "Was it working, the damage control?" Celine asked.

Her father bent his head so that his expression was hidden in the shadows, "No."

Celine nodded slowly, picturing Kyle, so sure of the correctness of what he was saying, trying to right a wrong. That was what she liked about him, his confidence in his own perceptions, his determination to not back down. "But couldn't you warn him, tell him what was going to happen?"

"That's what I was doing just before they realized you were outside. I told him what I knew and now they know, too. They think that I brought you there on purpose, that you're somehow part of this as well."

Celine's quizzical gaze met her father's eyes. "But Papa, it has nothing to do with me! I don't even understand what Kyle really does!"

Her father shook his head, "That doesn't matter to them. All they care about is damming the leak." He clasped his hands behind his back and retreated to the covered windows.

Panicking slightly, Celine stammered, "But maybe there is no leak, maybe it's all a misunderstanding, is there some other database somewhere else?" In the gloom by the window, she could see her father sadly shaking his head.

Frustrated, Celine turned back to the computer screen and, squinting in the blue light, typed her father's name in on a whim. Nothing.

She tried it again. Still nothing.

“Papa-!” Celine spoke over her shoulder, but her exclamation was cut short as her father’s limbs jerked spastically and he slowly tumbled to the floor. A sudden draft swirled around Celine’s ankles from the hole in the window as she clapped a hand to her mouth and hurried to her father’s prone form. He lay with his eyes closed. She didn’t need to touch him to know. That was how they worked. Taken care of without a second thought, a moment’s hesitation.

Heart thudding painfully and mind frozen in panic, she couldn’t think what to do. No one else... but Kyle. Before she could think it through, Celine found herself dashing through the study, scooping up her shoes, throwing on her father’s coat in the entryway and sliding into the car. She directed it to go quickly back to the hotel. If she could get there before them...

The car screeched to a halt outside the hotel doors and she scrambled out and ran back through the lobby, reaching the third floor the same way she had only a short while ago. Flinging open the meeting room door, she felt instant relief when she saw Kyle was still there. But it was only momentary.

He met her eyes, “I was praying you wouldn’t come back.”

Then rough hands grabbed her arms and wrestled her into a seat across from Kyle.