

THE INTERROGATION (FRAGMENT 1)

May 1, 2017, 2:19 p.m.

Case #: 75932.394.1

OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPTION OF POLICE INTERVIEW

—START PAGE 1—

INVESTIGATOR: Thank you for joining us, Ms. Hart. For the record, I'm Detective Tyrone Stevens with the Los Angeles Police Department. This is my partner, Detective Andrew Morales. Today is May 1, 2017 at 2:19 p.m. This interview is being recorded.

HART: Why am I here exactly?

INVESTIGATOR: Just a few questions. Could you please state your full name for the record?

HART: Tessa Lynn Hart.

INVESTIGATOR: Occupation?

HART: I'm a social media consultant.

INVESTIGATOR: Consultant. Very nice. You're how old now?

HART: I'm nineteen.

INVESTIGATOR: And how long have you been in that profession?

HART: A few months. I started in January.

INVESTIGATOR: What date in January? Can you recall?

HART: January 1.

INVESTIGATOR: New Year's Day?

HART: Yes.

INVESTIGATOR: And what services do you provide for your clients?

HART: Only one client. I run his Twitter... Sorry, can I have a glass of water?

INVESTIGATOR: Are you all right?

HART: No... [pause] It'll pass. Just give me a sec.

INVESTIGATOR: Are you ill, Ms. Hart?

HART: I'm OK now. What were you asking me?

INVESTIGATOR: What do you charge as your consulting fee?

HART: I can't tell you that.

INVESTIGATOR: Ms. Hart, this will all go much faster if you simply answer the questions.

HART: I'm really not allowed to say. I signed a nondisclosure agreement.

INVESTIGATOR: Well, let me ask you this. If we were to contact your so-called client, would he corroborate your statement that he employs you as a... What did you call it again? A social media consultant?

HART: Are you calling me a liar?

INVESTIGATOR: I'm simply trying to get the facts on the record.

HART: Look, I can prove it. I'm not delusional, OK?

INVESTIGATOR: No need to get defensive, Tessa. We're simply trying to establish your employment history.

HART: I already told you as much as I can say about it, so can we please move on?

INVESTIGATOR: I'll decide when we move on.

HART: I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude, but you haven't even told me what you're investigating. What division are you guys with?

INVESTIGATOR: Homicide.

HART: Oh.

INVESTIGATOR: Ms. Hart, the Twitter account you say you run... Is it by any chance the Twitter-verified account of Eric Thorn?

HART: What homicide? Is someone dead?

INVESTIGATOR: Tessa, did your role as a social media consultant include the tweet sent from the @EricThorn Twitter account on... Andy, what was that tweet again?

INVESTIGATOR 2: "Sleep with a leech, and it just might bleed you dry." Tweeted January 1, 2017 at 7:26 a.m.

INVESTIGATOR: That's right. New Year's Day. Tessa, you tweeted that message from Mr. Thorn's account, did you not?

HART: Like I told you, I signed a nondisclosure—

INVESTIGATOR: Do you have a copy of the agreement you signed?

HART: N-no. I mean, not on me. I don't carry it around with me.

INVESTIGATOR: See, the odd thing is, according to the Twitter records we obtained, someone tweeted that one message, and then there was no further activity on the account for an extended period. In fact, the account with username @EricThorn was completely inactive over the entire month of January. Does that sound right to you?

HART: Wait. You already have the Twitter records?

INVESTIGATOR: And then the account resumed activity on... Do you have that date, Andy?

INVESTIGATOR 2: February 3, 2017.

INVESTIGATOR: Tessa, what happened on or about February 3, 2017?

HART: I'm not stupid, OK? You obviously already know.

INVESTIGATOR: For the record, Ms. Hart.

HART: February 3. It was a couple days after the news broke.

INVESTIGATOR: What news, Tessa?

HART: It was all over the Internet. There's no way you could've missed it. I was living out of a VW camper van on the other side of the Mexican border, and I still heard the news...

INVESTIGATOR: Tessa, can I ask you to clarify what news story you're referencing?

HART: It started with one little post on Facebook, and then it spread like wildfire. It trended on Twitter for weeks. You'd have to be living under a rock not to have heard about it. I mean, I practically was living under a rock.

INVESTIGATOR: For the record, you're referring to—

HART: Dorian Cromwell, lead singer of Fourth Dimension, spotted by some goatherd in Switzerland...very much alive.

1 DEAD CELEBRITIES

February 1, 2017 (Three Months Earlier)

“AND THIS JUST *in. We’re getting word now from sources in Switzerland that the Facebook Live video has been authenticated. The man in the video is, in fact, Dorian Cromwell—*”

Tessa squinted at the tiny image on her phone, straining to make out the facial features of the blurry figure. The thirty-second clip showed a lone man making his way down an icy slope. He had his face tipped down, eyes on the uneven terrain, but he glanced up and raised a ski pole in greeting as the clip ended.

Dorian Cromwell, for real? How could they be so certain? To Tessa, the man looked more like a cross between a hippie and a homeless person, with a scraggly beard and a mop of unwashed hair that hung down below his shoulders. She supposed she could see a passing resemblance to the formerly clean-cut boy

band leader, but it was hard to say. A bush of facial hair concealed the whole bottom half of his face. The video was shot from too far away to make out his age or eye color.

Someone had streamed it on Facebook two days ago with a geotag in Munster, Switzerland, and a clickbaiting caption:

Guten Tag, Dorian. #DorianCromwell #VeryMuchAlive

Tessa had noticed the story on TMZ the other day, but she hadn't given it much thought. Just another rumor started by some attention-seeker. It happened with Eric all the time too. In the month since Eric's disappearance from Texas, he'd been "spotted" dozens of times by fans around the world. All fake, of course. Those pics were old shots doctored in Photoshop, easily recognizable to anyone who followed Eric's social media half as closely as Tessa always had.

Still, the mere thought of dead celebrities made Tessa's pulse rate jump. She shifted position inside the back of the van, sitting up straight. The thin, fold-down cushion that served as her sleeping surface creaked beneath her weight. At the noise, her eyes flicked to the tinted van window beside her. She'd propped it open a few minutes ago to let in a whiff of the cool mountain air. It was after dusk, and the long shadows of the pine trees cloaked the van's interior in darkness. No one could see her inside. The rational part of her mind knew that—and yet she fought the urge to pull the window closed.

"No," Tessa muttered. She'd suffocate in here without fresh air. She closed her eyes and pulled in a deep breath, counting the beats inside her head.

Eric one...Eric two...Eric three...

Better.

There was no one out there watching her. Tessa had learned to view the lingering sense of dread with clinical detachment. It was anxiety, creeping up on her. A quirk of her brain chemistry. Nothing more. Nothing real. The van was parked at the far end of a densely wooded campground in the foothills of a Mexican mountain range. It was quiet here, with only a couple other cars parked near the cabins at the other end of the unpaved lot.

No one was watching. No one cared about some beat-up old VW camper with Texas plates.

Tessa exhaled slowly, releasing the tension from her lungs. She turned her attention back to her phone. The story about Dorian was turning into more than idle Twitter gossip. Tessa was tuned in to a live stream of U.S. network television, and they'd interrupted the evening news to cover the breaking story. She wished that they would freeze the frame so she could study the face in the video. She didn't dare hit Pause, for fear that she might lose her connection to the feed.

The show went to commercial, and Tessa glanced toward the window again. She pulled out one of her headphones to listen for the sound of approaching footsteps, swallowing against the bubble of tension that swelled inside her chest.

Her ears were greeted by the gentle sounds of nightfall. The distant hoot of an owl. The babble of the creek that ran nearby. The breeze stirring back and forth through the tree limbs. Not a human sound in the mix.

Safe.

If only she could make her mind believe that...

Tessa scowled. She knew she should focus on the positive. She would always have anxiety, but she'd come a long way since December. Literally. Her phone's GPS placed her at 543.2 miles from her childhood home in Midland. To think, only a month ago she'd worried she would never set foot outside her front door.

So much for small steps. Tessa pursed her lips at the thought of her old therapist, Dr. Regan, and the excruciating desensitization exercises she'd prescribed. What a monumental waste of time. In the end, the small steps led nowhere. Everything had changed in one night. One giant leap.

Tessa couldn't really blame her therapist though. She never would have attempted this trip if she hadn't been forced by circumstances. Tessa still longed for the safe cocoon of her childhood home, but she knew she could never go back. Not after what happened there on New Year's Eve. The house itself had become one giant trigger. The mere thought of the rotted old back deck made Tessa's mouth go dry.

No, her old safe refuge was lost to her—like an empty womb, and she was the infant who'd been ripped from it and cast out into the cold, harsh world. By dawn on New Year's Day, she'd understood that she couldn't stay there any longer. She knew what she had to do.

A month had passed since that morning. All that blood... staining her hands, her clothes, her mother's hallway carpet...

Then easing the Ferrari down the unplowed, snowy streets, with its owner hidden in the trunk...

And then the frantic flight across the border. Tessa had rolled into this campground by nightfall on January 2, and the journey had taken every ounce of mental stamina she possessed. She'd collapsed after she got here. Taken a double dose of anxiety meds and slept in the back of the van for twenty-four hours straight. But she'd made it. When push came to shove, she was stronger than she knew.

Tessa nodded to herself. She turned her back to the open window and bent forward over her phone. The live stream cut back to the news studio, and Tessa slipped in her earphones to listen.

“Once again, if you’re just tuning in, a spokesperson has confirmed that Dorian Cromwell is not dead. He has been living for the past seven months in an underpopulated region of the Swiss Alps, accessible only by foot or cross-country ski...”

Tessa fought back the urge to shake her phone. The whole story made no sense! Dorian's death couldn't have been staged. They found his body in the Thames. They conducted a murder trial and locked up his killer in a psych hospital. How could he have faked all that?

“—still a lot of unanswered questions.” The news anchor paused and pressed in his earpiece, listening. Tessa leaned forward as she waited for new information. *“Right. I’m getting word now that—”*

But Tessa never heard the end of his sentence.

Out of nowhere, the sound cut out. Tessa's head snapped up. She registered the shadow of a human arm, reaching through the window behind her. She lunged to close the curtain, but not before her gaze locked with a pair of eyes peering back at her in the darkness.

"Oh my God," she whispered, clapping a hand to her heart. "You scared me!"

Her travel companion made no reply. He slid the van door open, with her headphone jack in his hands and a curious expression on his face.

"Sorry, sweet pea," Eric said after he settled onto his half of the double mattress. "You looked intense. What are you watching?"

2

ALIVE AND WELL

ERIC HANDED THE headphones back to Tessa. He stretched out on his side, with his head propped in his hand and his knee forming an upright triangle with the mattress. He recognized it as a classic underwear modeling position—a pose he'd struck so many times that it must have lodged itself permanently in his muscle memory.

He wrinkled his nose and sat up.

Tessa watched his movements, but her eyes looked blank and hollow. Had it been the wrong move, pulling out her earbuds? He could see he'd set her off by the way her face went rigid. In the month since they'd run away together, Eric had learned to recognize that tension at the corners of Tessa's mouth whenever her anxiety level rose.

"Are you OK?" he asked, reaching for her hand. "I didn't mean to creep up." He'd gone out to stretch his legs under the cover of darkness, and he couldn't have been away for more than

ten minutes. He'd pulled out her earbuds without thinking—one of those playful gestures of intimacy that people do all the time when they're in a relationship. She must have been too fixated on her phone to hear him approach.

Tessa pulled her hand away, but her face softened. She scrunched her mouth to the side, trying for a stern look. "Sweet pea, Eric? Are you still calling me that?"

Eric grinned. "That's your name! It's not my fault you turned out to be nonspherical." He waved his hand with mock irritation toward the long, slender legs that lay beside him, clad in a pair of skin-tight yoga pants, with her fuzzy, pink bunny slippers crossed at the ankles.

A reluctant smile curled her lips. "Um, that nickname sounded a lot less cheesy over DM."

"No good?" He reached over and pinched her knee, gathering the black spandex between his thumb and index finger. "Would you prefer Snowflake?"

Tessa laughed. Eric moved to draw her legs toward him, but she swatted his hand away. Her eyes returned to the cell phone in her lap. "Wait. You have to watch this!"

She tucked the headphones into the kangaroo pocket of her sweatshirt and turned up the phone's speaker volume as high as it would go. Eric stifled a groan. What was it, YouTube? He wasn't in the mood for social media. Not now. He finally had the only person in the world he cared about sitting by his side—close enough to reach out and touch her face.

And all she wanted to do was look at cell phone videos?

With a sigh, Eric leaned closer, struggling to make out the tinny voices. They really should have bought a second cell. They'd picked this one up on a supply run into town, but they hadn't wanted to waste the cash on two. It wasn't like they had anyone to call except each other.

"What is this?" Eric asked. It looked like the evening news. He took the phone from Tessa with a tiny pinprick of alarm. His face had been in and out of cable news coverage ever since his disappearance. Had they found something new? Were they on to him?

"It's not about you," Tessa said, reading his thoughts. "It's Dorian Cromwell. That video of him skiing the other day!"

Eric squinted at the screen. "That video was fake. It barely even looked like Dorian."

She tapped his arm to shush him, and Eric strained to catch up with the broadcast. The silver-haired news anchor was yammering about solicitors and Scotland Yard.

"I'm joined now via satellite by British legal analyst, Horace Killjoy. Horace, what can you tell us?"

The image cut to a middle-aged man in a business suit, fidgeting with his tie. *"Anderson, from my sources at Scotland Yard, it appears we're looking at an elaborate conspiracy involving a number of key players at DBA Records, and possibly extending to one or more members of the British law enforcement community."*

It couldn't be true, could it? Dorian's murder...a hoax? Eric shook his head, forcing his attention back to the interview.

“—may be in a spot of legal trouble. It will be interesting to see how this plays out.”

“Could Dorian Cromwell be facing prison time?”

“Possibly.”

“Is it a crime to fake your own death?”

Eric’s spine went stiff. That part he understood—and it hit awfully close to home. It was a question that robbed him of sleep more nights than he cared to admit.

He hadn’t paused to consider the legal ins and outs that morning in Midland when the plan had first taken shape. Running away had seemed like their best option at the time. Tessa didn’t feel safe in her house anymore—not after being held hostage there by her stalker. Eric had offered to take her with him on the road, but they both knew it would never work. He was trapped in a record deal, contractually obligated to appear before crowds of people and smile pretty for the camera. If Tessa went public as his girlfriend, the scrutiny would be intense. No way could she withstand that kind of attention. Eric himself found it terrifying most of the time, even without a history of agoraphobia.

It was Tessa who’d figured out the answer. The whole plan had started as a joke. At least, he’d thought Tessa was kidding when she first brought it up. She’d sat cross-legged beside him on her bed, covered head to toe in her thick flannel pajamas, when he saw her eyes go wide with a flash of inspiration.

It’s perfect, Eric! You said so yourself. It’s only a matter of time before some copycat turns up, and another celebrity winds up dead.

It had taken him a moment to catch up with her...

Don't you get it? she'd explained, tugging at his arm. *I'm the copycat! They let me walk out of that police station alone with you. No bodyguards. No security. No witnesses. Just some emotionally unstable fangirl with the object of her obsession. You know what conclusion they'll leap to if you don't show up for sound check in the morning!*

Eric shifted uncomfortably. His eyes darted down to the tender skin of his inner elbow. The array of needle pricks had long since faded, but he could still recall the stinging pain. Tessa hadn't been the most competent phlebotomist. She'd never performed a blood draw on her own before—only watched her mother doing them. Eric winced as he recalled the way she'd poked and prodded with her mother's spare equipment before she finally hit a vein.

He still couldn't believe anyone had fallen for it. Tessa Hart, a murderer? She'd taken a pint of his blood...left her house looking like a crime scene...and that final tweet she'd sent from his phone had sounded pretty damned incriminating... But the whole plot seemed ridiculously transparent to him. Could two teenagers with a phlebotomy kit really outwit the FBI?

Maybe.

The authorities didn't know his true state of mind. They didn't understand how trapped he felt by his old life—how badly he wanted out. His parents might have had some clue, or maybe his manager, Maury, but none of them had ever really listened to a single word Eric said.

So here they were a month later, and so far everything had played out as Tessa predicted. She had her face plastered all over the FBI Most Wanted List, and @EricThorn's famous last words had been retweeted 11.2 million times...

But otherwise they were safe. They were together. And most miraculous of all, they were free.

At least for now.

Eric blew out a tense breath. He returned his attention to the phone.

“—not a crime in and of itself. However, it appears that Dorian may have continued to receive royalty payments through a Swiss bank account during the time of his sequestration. He could be looking at charges of money laundering or even income tax evasion—”

That didn't sound so good. Eric looped an arm around Tessa's shoulders and hit the pause button. “Hold on a sec. When was this show broadcast?”

“It's a live stream! Don't pause it!” Tessa reached for the phone, but Eric had his hand over the screen, blocking her. “Eric, you're going to lose the feed.”

“I don't understand,” he said. “What makes them so sure he's still alive?” He eyed her skeptically, his gaze flitting from her face to the phone and back again.

“I don't know, but they're saying it's confirmed. Dorian's supposed to give a statement any second. Hit Play!”

Eric handed the phone to her, but the image had gone black. Tessa tapped the play button again, and Eric's grip tightened

around her shoulders as they waited. At last, the image sprang back to life.

The scene jumped forward to a new location. The camera panned across a long table covered with microphones, all pointed in the direction of an unmistakable face. The young man seated in the center had his hair pulled back in a messy man bun, and the bottom half of his face appeared oddly pale from where he'd shaved his beard—but otherwise he looked the same as ever.

Dorian Cromwell, in the flesh. Alive and well. He cleared his throat, and the camera zoomed in close.

“Hi, guys. As you can see, the rumors of my death have been mildly exaggerated...”

“I can’t believe it,” Eric murmured, but he couldn’t deny the evidence before his eyes. Dorian Cromwell filled the screen, reading a prepared statement off a crisp, white sheet of paper.

“On behalf of myself and everyone at DBA Records, I’d like to apologize to the fans, and to anyone else I may have caused undue distress...”

Eric choked. Undue distress? That was one way to put it. He’d spent the better part of a year fearing for his life because of Dorian’s murder. Ever since the story broke last summer, Eric hadn’t taken a single step without looking over his shoulder. And none of it was real. Pure smoke and mirrors...and public relations. Just like everything else in his phony, bubblegum-pop existence.

Honestly, he should have known.

Tessa must have seen his expression change. Her hand brushed against his knee. “Eric?”

He tilted back his head. Why did the van’s interior feel ten times smaller than it had a moment ago? Eric reached up and grazed the ceiling with his fingertips. “I turned my life upside down because of him. The whole reason I’m here is because of Dorian!”

Tessa pulled his elbow down and inched closer. Her hands ran up and down the length of his forearm to soothe him. “That’s not the only reason. There was other stuff too, wasn’t there? The followers? The fame?”

“Yeah, but—”

“And it was because of me,” she said. She laced her fingers through his and raised her eyes to look at him. “I mean, I thought that was part of it. You ran away with me to protect me. Didn’t you?”

Eric’s face softened as he heard the quaver in her voice. He clasped her hand firmly. It killed him every time he saw her doubts resurface. If anything good had come out of Dorian’s deception, it was the fact that it brought the beautiful girl beside him into his life. He didn’t regret for a second the way he spent the past four weeks.

Eric dropped his arm to her waist and pulled her toward him, pressing his mouth into her hair.

“Of course it was because of you,” he murmured. “So we could be together.”

She nuzzled her face into the crook of his neck, and Eric

closed his eyes. She felt so fragile—so thin and slight. It filled him with an overwhelming urge to keep her safe.

The truth was, he'd do anything to shield Tessa from the harsh light of public scrutiny. She had more to worry about than celebrity gossip and overbearing fans. Tessa still had a stalker on the loose—another unintended consequence of their decision to run away. The police had locked up Blair Duncan, but they couldn't have held him for long. None of the charges would stick without the victim around to testify. For all Eric and Tessa knew, Blair was out there at this very moment, biding his time, waiting for Tessa to resurface.

Eric gave her shoulders another protective squeeze. His eyes drifted back to the scene unfolding on the phone. Dorian's voice sounded flat, his face devoid of emotion, as he read the statement prepared for him by publicists and lawyers:

“I would also like to apologize to my countrymen for any alleged legal or financial wrongdoing. I remain a faithful British subject, and I would take this opportunity to beg the crown for leniency...”

Tessa tensed in Eric's arms. “He won't really go to jail, will he?” she asked. “It's all spin, right?”

Eric shook his head. “I don't understand. What law did he break?”

“They said something about income tax evasion.” Tessa sat up straighter. “You don't think you could get in trouble for that, do you?”

Eric laughed. “For tax evasion? Tessa, look at this place.” He gestured around the van's cramped interior. No furniture. No

running water. Not enough headroom to stand. “We’re basically living in squalor. I don’t have any income.”

“We sold your car though,” she responded. “Does that count?”

Eric dismissed her worries with another low chuckle, but he couldn’t deny a sliver of concern. They’d ditched his beloved convertible at a chop shop on the side of the road, traded in for this rusted-out camper van and a trash bag full of cash. Was that income? He’d left all his other worldly possessions behind him. Tens of millions of dollars, abandoned and untouched. The government couldn’t come after him for a measly fifty grand—a mere fraction of the Ferrari’s rightful value. Of all the worries that kept him up at night, it had never occurred to him that he could be in trouble with the IRS.

“I suppose it’s not too late,” Tessa said slowly. “It’s not April 15 yet.”

He looked at her blankly.

“Oh, come on, Eric. Tax day?” She poked him in the chest. “Even rock stars have to file their taxes by April 15.”

She did that sideways scrunchy thing with her mouth again. Eric grinned. “My job was to keep my abs tight and occasionally play a guitar. I had a manager to take care of the finances.”

“Well, maybe you need to give your manager a call, before you end up sharing a prison cell with Dorian.”

Eric’s smile faded. Call Maury or go to jail for tax evasion? He wasn’t sure which option sounded worse...

For now, Eric raised a finger to his lips to hush Tessa.

Dorian's voice had grown more animated. He pushed aside his sheet of paper and leaned into the mic.

“My only excuse for my actions is that fame itself comes with an astronomical price, not measured in pounds sterling. For years, I have paid dearly. I have been hounded. I have been stalked. I have been relentlessly slandered in the press, along with everyone important in my life. I know I’m not the only one who has suffered and sought refuge.”

Dorian paused and looked directly into the camera. Eric sat transfixed, his eyes locked with Dorian's piercing gaze. He had the strangest sensation that Dorian could see him—that the other man was looking straight through the screen.

“I’m not the only one. There are others like me. I call on them to come forward and stand with me. If you’re out there somewhere, watching this broadcast, then I beg you. Please. I’m in trouble. I need your help.”

Eric slipped his hand into Tessa's. She let out a gasp, and Eric felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck as Dorian plowed on.

“You know who you are, but I’ll name you if I must. I’m speaking, of course, of Tupac, Michael Jackson, and most recently, Eric Thorn.”

3 JUST ANOTHER SNOWFLAKE

TESSA HIT PAUSE on the live stream and turned to face Eric. His jaw had dropped open at the sound of his own name on Dorian's lips.

How did he know? Tessa wondered.

Eric must have been thinking the same thing. He looked dazed, but he gathered himself after a moment. He squared his shoulders and reached for the phone. "I have to talk to him."

Tessa grabbed his wrist. "Eric, no!"

"You heard him. He knows I faked it. I have to find out who told him. If my label is on to me—"

Tessa cut him off. "But what if he doesn't know? Maybe he's just guessing."

"Well, I have to find out!"

"But if he doesn't know, then you'll be outing yourself..."

Tessa's voice trailed off. Eric wasn't even listening. He grabbed the phone and swiped through the apps on her

display. “Where’s Twitter? Do you think Dorian reactivated his old account?”

Twitter? The word hit Tessa like a slap across the face. “Eric, no. You can’t!”

He paused, his forehead crinkling. “I’ll start a fake account.”

“No.” She shook her head fiercely. “Talk to him if you want, but not over Twitter.”

“How? Call the operator and ask them to connect me to Dorian Cromwell? It’s not like there’s some magic phone directory for pop stars.”

He chuckled, but Tessa only crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Um, have your people call his people?” She grabbed the phone out of his hands and navigated to the keypad to place a call. “Go ahead,” she said. “What’s the number?”

“What number? Dorian? I told you—”

“No, not Dorian.” Tessa raised her eyebrows meaningfully. Eric’s face fell as he caught on.

“Tessa, I am *not* contacting Maury! Forget it. No way.”

“I know you don’t want to, but it’s safer.”

Eric rose to his knees on the mattress, wiping his palms against the fabric of his jeans. Tessa had come to recognize the expression that crossed his face. Not quite panic. More like a hunted animal, startled by the sound of a snapping twig.

“You don’t understand,” he said, his words tumbling out in a rush. “I just want to find out what Dorian knows. I’m not necessarily going to do anything about it. But if Maury figures out I’m here, then it’s over. He’ll tell the label. They’ll force me to come back.”

“But I’m sure Maury wouldn’t do that if you explained the situation—”

“Tessa, you don’t know what my record label is like. They’re horrible people. Maury shields me from the worst of it, but there’s only so much he can do!”

He raked a hand through his overgrown hair. It stuck up wildly at his hairline, and Tessa reached out to smooth it down. Eric caught her hand instead and pressed it against his cheek. She watched the tense lines in his forehead disappear with the touch of her fingertips—and somehow, the sight calmed the worries racing through her own mind.

His voice sank low as he drew her close. “I’m not ready to go back. Maybe in another month or two, but not now. I need more time.” He pressed a kiss into her palm, and Tessa felt her resolve melt at the gentle insistence of his lips. “*We* need more time.”

Tessa’s eyes fluttered closed. “There you go again,” she said softly. “Deflecting. Always deflecting.”

His breath tickled her cheek as he whispered in her ear. “Is that one like projecting?”

“Deflection,” she answered, twining her fingers through his shaggy hair. “That’s when you change the subject to avoid a topic that makes you uncomfortable.”

Her lips parted, waiting for his kiss. Instead, she felt the glide of cold metal as he removed the cell phone from her hand.

“Guilty as charged.” A hint of a smile tugged at the corner of Eric’s mouth as he tapped the screen. He found the Twitter

app, and a shudder ran through Tessa's shoulders at the sight of the log-in screen. She'd sworn to herself that she would never touch Twitter again. Not after what happened the last time.

Eric navigated to create a new account, but Tessa couldn't bear to watch. She fixed her eyes on her bunny slippers and pulled the air deep into her lungs.

Eric one...Eric two...Eric three...Eric Thorn...Eric five...

The jagged edge of panic loosened its grip around her throat. Not that she felt relaxed. Not by a long shot. Every instinct screamed against the idea of a new Twitter account. But Tessa calmed her mind enough to question the source of her anxiety. Was it based on a real threat? Or was distorted thinking magnifying the danger in her head?

"Trust me," Eric said. "I'll pick a super-secure password." Tessa read over his shoulder as his thumbs flashed across the keypad. She squinted at the string of characters he input. It took her a moment to realize what it was.

Password: TEXASjf97bv

"The license plate number from the van?"

Eric glanced at her sideways. "Totally unhackable, right? No one else could guess that but you and me."

The next prompt came up on the screen before she could respond. Their account still needed a handle. "I'll make it look like a fan account," Eric told her as he typed. "Nobody pays attention to those."

Username: @Snowflake734

Tessa recognized the title of his most recent single, “Snowflake.” Eric’s label had released it a week before his disappearance. With the publicity generated by the crime, the song had ended up with more downloads than any other single he’d ever recorded.

“Why 734?” she asked. “Does that mean something?”

Eric shrugged. “Snowflakes 1 through 733 were taken,” he said with a dry laugh. “See? Just another snowflake. I blend.”

He hit Create Account, and the new profile sprang to life.

Just Another Snowflake (@Snowflake734)

TWEETS

0

FOLLOWING

0

FOLLOWERS

0

Tessa’s stomach did a somersault. She quickly looked away. Her eyes darted toward the window of the van, but night had fallen. It was pitch-black outside. She only saw the pale oval of her own face reflected in the glass, echoing the same expression Eric had worn a moment ago.

Haunted. Spooked.

“Please don’t tweet anything,” she whispered. “Please, Eric. He could be watching. He’s still out there somewhere.”



Blair sat in the coffee shop, hunched forward over the table with his phone hidden in his lap. He could feel a crick forming in his neck, but he didn't straighten up. He liked the way the tabletop shielded his screen from the view of nosy onlookers.

Some people...always inserting themselves into everyone else's business. Maybe Tessa had the right idea, hiding out in her room for months on end. People could be such trouble-makers. Why couldn't they keep their eyes to themselves?

Blair hated logging on from a public place, but he had no choice. He needed the free Wi-Fi. At least the staff here left him alone, as long as he refilled his coffee every few hours.

He inserted his earphones and tapped the Twitter app open, entering the same search term he input every day.

#EricThorn

He'd been following the news coverage ever since the police let him out of custody. The Texas police had him extradited to Louisiana, but the DA there declined to prosecute. They didn't consider it a priority to press stalking charges when the victim was a murderer herself.

Of course, Blair didn't buy for a second that Tessa had actually offed Eric Thorn. He knew her better than that. She was nothing if not conniving. Blair's biggest mistake in Texas had been underestimating her capacity for deceit. She'd gotten the better of him, and the memory still rankled. He'd have a few things to say when he found her.

She and her *beloved* Eric had obviously faked the crime and run away together. They'd turn up eventually. Blair would be watching when they did. He had new accounts on every social media app in existence, and he spent all day, every day, refreshing...and refreshing...and refreshing...

It was only a matter of time before they poked their heads out from wherever they were hiding. Then Blair would get her back. He didn't know what she saw in that talentless pretty boy anyway. Eric Thorn... Blair let out a snort. Someday, he and Eric Thorn were going to have a serious meeting of the minds.

For now, Blair returned his attention to Twitter's current list of trending topics.

Interesting.

A shadow fell across the table, and Blair sensed someone standing on the other side. He leaned further forward, hoping the stranger would take the hint, but he heard the sound of a girl clearing her throat. With a grunt, Blair glanced up.

"Hey, are you using this chair?" The girl didn't wait for an answer. Wooden chair legs scraped across the floor. Blair darted a glance around the coffee shop, but all the other seats were full. "Are you saving it for someone?" she asked, as she set her drink down on the table.

Blair shook his head. He stuffed his phone in his pocket, and his chair clattered as he thrust himself to his feet.

"Take it," he said without meeting her eyes. He left his half-empty coffee cup where it stood and headed for the door.

He'd come back later. After the lunch rush. No point raising a fuss. He didn't want to draw attention to himself.

And most of all, he didn't want an audience for what he had in mind.