

Forest Forks runner-up for town gossip, Polly Cassidy eyed my buggy contents, six bottles of wine—buy two get one free!—, a bag of grapes, and a six pack of Joe’s favorite beer. I made a mental note that next time I should shop for food first and then wine. I grabbed a pack of multi-grain rolls and tossed it in to cover a couple of bottles of wine. I smiled, checked out Polly’s buggy contents, corn chips, dip, and full-sugar soda, and smiled brighter. I attempted a “let’s keep this to ourselves” look, but Polly wasn’t having it.

“Hey, Charlie, have you heard from Oscar?” She pushed her buggy out of the way of traffic, signaling this would be a full conversation and not a quick hello. *Darn it.*

“We saw him last week.” Oscar was technically our tenant, living in our lake cabin rent-free while he went to college, but he’d become more to Joe and I.

“Weird. He hasn’t been to work for three days. It’s not like him. He’s not answering his phone, either.” Polly dropped that bomb casually.

“What? Why didn’t you call me?” A horrible itch taunted my brain, the one I always got when the kids called and started the conversation with, “Mom, I’m okay, but...”

She raised an eyebrow, “I thought you’d know.” She kept the, “because you’re a meddler” silent, but I still heard it.

I wasn’t a meddler. I was a concerned citizen, parent, and community member. Maybe I over-involved myself on occasion, but only when absolutely necessary. Like finding a home for Oscar.

“Has he done this before?” I asked. *How did someone miss three days of work and not get fired?*

She wrinkled her nose. “Not really. He’s been late a couple of times and missed a few days. He usually calls. It’s weird that he’s not answering his phone.”

“Uh-huh. You’re not worried?” Because I was. The itch was so strong now, it needed a tube of hydrocortisone, a bottle of Benadryl, and a gallon of calamine.

“Well, we figured we’d call you today since he doesn’t have an emergency contact listed. I guess it’s just luck I ran into you.” Her gaze dropped to the wine bottles again.

“I’ll drop by and check on him.” I turned my cart toward the checkout. I considered leaving it in the aisle, but that was rude and Piggly Wiggly rarely had a buy two get one free wine.

“Thanks, Charlie. Have him text me, please,” Polly called out to my back.

The cashier seemed to recognize my anxiety level and avoided the usual small talk, helping me get out of there fast. I sped to our family's lake cabin, past the autumn-colored hues of the trees, and squinted in the bright light of October. I raced toward Oscar, calling his cell phone, hoping he was just screening his calls. My call went to voicemail twice, and my text to Oscar went unanswered.

He'd missed work for three days?

Oscar played soccer with our son, Drew, from grade school through high school. His parents kicked him when he turned eighteen because he'd admitted he was gay. We moved him into the cottage immediately. The boys attended different colleges and drifted apart, but Oscar came over for family dinners and holidays occasionally. He'd worked at Tyler Rigby's Law Office as Polly's office assistant since he'd started college.

I ignored the hitch in my chest and instead focused on the hammering in my ears. He probably overslept and was in the shower.

The West Virginia sky held no clouds to blanket in warmth, and frost sparkled in the shadows of the trees. It should have been pretty, but the diamond-frost chilled my bones. My brittle fingers white-knuckled the steering wheel. I turned onto the county road toward the cabin on the shore of Ghost Cat Lake and through 120 acres of unspoiled woodlands of Forest Forks.

I swallowed my fear, covered it in common sense. Oscar probably had the flu and forgot to charge his phone.

I turned onto the private road marked with a "No Trespassing Sign". Gravel pinged against my wheel wells, cautioning me to slow down. I parked next to Oscar's Jetta.

It had been weeks since I'd been at the lake, and the porch needed a coat of stain. I rapped on the front door. Drew had disconnected the doorbell several years ago. Above the button Oscar had placed a placard: "For total annihilation, press." I peeked through the window beside the door into the pristine living room. Apparently, I was the only resident of Forest Forks with a dust-bunny infestation issue.

My blood seemed to have congealed and my heart pumped hard.

Something was wrong.

"Oscar? It's Charlie." There was no reply except for my nerves coiling tight. I stepped off the porch and walked around the cabin. I didn't care if it was rude; I peeked in his bedroom

window. Oscar's made bed sent a shiver of ice down my spine. If he was sick, why wasn't he in bed?

I moved to the back of the house and opened the screen door. Keeping it open with my hip, I fumbled with the key. I blamed the trembling on caffeine, not fear. The key slid in, and I turned the knob, the wheeze of the hinges prickled my neck hair.

Inside, the unnatural quietness rattled my brain, shuddered through my body and turned my bones to ash.

The whisper of my feet across the linoleum seemed to echo in the silence.

"Oscar? It's Charlie. Are you okay?" The small kitchen was tidy, even his kitchen towel hung neatly folded over the handle of the dishwasher. It was like Oscar channeled June Cleaver—and he was too young to even know who she was.

Oscar sat in the living room recliner.

Not breathing.

Not moving.

Eyes open, unseeing.

Dead.

Very dead.

I reached out to take his pulse but flinched when I touched his icy cold wrist. My heart squeezed; a crescendo of thumps echoed in my ears and I fumbled with my phone. I swiped at the screen, but my troll-like uncoordinated fingers hit 991, 611, 941. I held my breath and slowed down, tapped 9-1-1 and send. I pressed my fingertips to his neck, prepared for the cold this time, but not the hard, lifeless muscle underneath.

"911. What is your emergency?" It sounded like my sister-in-law using her I'm-in-charge-now tone.

"Liz, is that you?"

"Charlie?"

"Yeah, I'm at the lake cabin. Oscar's work asked me to check on him. I think he's dead." I swallowed against the knot creeping up my throat and threatening to release itself as a sob.

"I'm sending an ambulance and the police."

"Good." I knelt next to the chair, my knees digging into the carpet. "Maybe he's in a diabetic coma...a really deep coma."

“Maybe.” I recognized her mom ‘maybe’ tone, meaning no.

I put my hand in front of his nose. “Oscar, it’s Charlie. Honey, you don’t look so good.”
There was no response.

“He’s not breathing,” I whispered like I was afraid he’d hear me and think it was an insult.

“Okay, just hang on. The ambulance will be there in another five.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat and a low mournful sound escaped. He was so young. He was my son’s age. What happened?

“Don’t touch anything,” Liz said.

Had I touched anything? The screen door handle, but I’d used the key to unlock and open the door. I fisted my hands, stood, and looked around the cozy cabin where we’d spent almost every summer weekend with the kids, from diapers until Oscar moved in. One thousand square feet, two bedrooms, one bath, and filled with wonderful memories.

“What happened, Oscar?” Wiping the tears from my face, I wanted to shake him, make him wake up; but I’d known he was dead even before touching him. He was too still.

“Just another minute, Charlie,” Liz said.

It wouldn’t matter.

I waited in the confined space, inches from a dead body that once contained the life of a sweet, lovable, trustworthy man. He looked older in death. Missing was his infectious smile that could charm an old lady out of her last bingo card. He wasn’t exuberant. Perhaps being a gay man growing up in a small town like Forest Forks, he’d chosen to adopt a steady persona. But he was quick to smile and enjoyed life. He’d been a great friend to Drew in middle school and a supportive soccer teammate.

An Argyle Sweater daily calendar sat on the television stand with a book of limericks underneath. A photo of Joe and I with Oscar and Drew at their high school graduation was taped to the bottom of his television. We should have invited him over to dinner more often than just major holidays.

The sticker on his tablet proclaimed Kimmy Schmidt for President. He’d kicked off his shoes revealing socks decorated with turkeys and pilgrims.

Where did he find size thirteen pilgrim socks? Did he have matching boxers? Because Joe would look hilarious in those. *Am I getting shocky?*

The ambulance's siren grew louder. "Tell the ambulance to use the back entrance," I said to Liz.

"Okay." She relayed my message.

A moment later a voice called out from the kitchen. "Hello? EMT."

"In here," I answered. "They're here, Liz," I said into the phone.

"Okay, sweetie. Call me if you need anything."

Two men entered and I stepped away from Oscar. I recognized Eddie from our church, St. Lawrence, and he gave me a quick nod.

"Hey, Charlie. How long have you been here?" Eddie asked.

"Ten minutes, maybe." I sat on the couch, then rose quickly, not sure what I was supposed to do.

"Charlie, maybe you should wait outside," Eddie said while his partner attempted to take Oscar's vitals. I didn't want to watch. At my work at Sunnyview Villages Rehab and Retirement, my elderly patients had prepared for death. It was expected. Oscar was supposed to find love and grow old.

"Alright." I left through the kitchen with its white appliances and cabinets, and Oscar's cheerful blue towels and coffee pot. I sat on the picnic table bench in the side yard, hugging myself tight, reining in my grief. A young man gone... There would be time for emotions later. Glowing amber and yellow danced *on the* surface of the lake, reflections from the deciduous forest preparing to hibernate.

Please just be hibernating, Oscar.

The deputy's cruiser parked next to my car. I pushed off the bench and headed toward it. A rush of dread slid down and weighted my legs, making each step heavier than the last.

A closely-shaved square head popped up from the car, followed by big shoulders—no neck. The head swung around and a steel-blue gaze I recognized locked on me. "Charlie, you should sit down." Tom walked over, grabbed my elbow and eased me back onto the bench. "You look like you're gonna pass out."

"Eh." My heart and brain refused to cooperate, and I hated sounding wimpy in front of my son's old soccer coach and Boy Scout leader. "I'd say it's good to see you, Tom, but..."

"Yeah, I get that a lot." He patted my shoulder. "You stay here, I'll be right back." He narrowed his eyes. "You want me to call Joe?"

“No. I’ll call him.” But I wouldn’t call my husband, not yet, because he was operating and there was nothing he could do. As a surgeon’s wife I’d learned when it was reasonable to call and what could wait.

Tom gave me a chin-nod and headed inside the small cabin. I studied the surroundings, anything other than thinking about Oscar. The neighbors to the left, the O’Reilly’s, had left for Florida a few weeks ago. To the right stood the McGuffin’s cabin, currently inhabited by their recently retired son, Raylin, or so I’d heard. Raylin’s parents were residents at Sunnyview Villages Rehab and Retirement, where I worked. I hadn’t met him, just heard the stories about Forest Fork’s Don Juan who retired after putting in 20 years in the military and moved home. He’d be in his forties, and I wondered if he’d find a new career or stay retired. A faded car listed forlornly in his driveway, its tires settled into a muddy rut because they’d neglected to re-gravel. A bright blue coupe was parked in the grass next to the front door. McGuffin’s front door opened and a pixie-sized gal slid outside and tiptoed to the coupe. She slipped in, looked over, gave me a half-wave and drove off, the tires spitting gravel in her wake. She looked familiar.

“Who was that?” Tom stuck his head out the cabin doorway.

My brain tried to put a name to the face, a skill I lacked. “Dana, Darla, D-something. Arlene Carries’ daughter. She’s around my kids’ ages, older than Drew, younger than Ann.” What was she doing at the McGuffin’s?

Tom walked over and sat next to me on the bench. “I’m sorry, Charlie. The coroner is on his way, but my guess is Oscar died a day ago.”

The cold reality tingled over my skin. I welcomed the numbness. The EMTs left, heads bowed and avoiding eye-contact.

“If it’s okay, can I ask you a couple of questions?” Tom asked.

“Yeah.” The word creaked out my rusted-closed throat.

“Why did you come out here today?”

“I bumped into Polly Cassidy and she mentioned she couldn’t get in touch with Oscar. He wasn’t answering his phone and had missed three days at work. I tried calling and texting but didn’t get an answer, so I drove out here.”

Was I babbling? I bit my lips closed and watched Tom scrutinize me. We were having a staring contest and I was going to lose.

“You called Oscar?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Tom stood quickly. “Do me a favor, call him again.”

I pulled my phone out and called Oscar, following Tom to the kitchen door. We both listened.

“My kids always put their phones on silent,” I said.

“I’ll check out the rest of the house. Hang up when it goes to voicemail and call again.”

I waited in the kitchen, but not patiently. I redialed three times, checked out the refrigerator—no insulin, no leftovers, no takeout, and lots of green vegetables and juice.

Did he become a vegetarian? Had he always been a vegetarian? I cringed at the memory of bringing the soccer team pepperoni rolls and jerky for snacks.

Next to the fridge, I opened the pantry and found mac-n-cheese, DexTabs for his diabetes, ramen noodles with chicken or shrimp, and a large jar of peanut butter.

Tom came around the corner. “What are you doing?” His commanding cop-voice made my insides curl tight.

I closed the pantry door. Guilt and embarrassment heated my face. “I’m being curious.” Although some people thought my curiosity bordered on meddling and prying.

“Yeah. And what did you find out?” His tone softened.

“That either he eats better than I do, or he only likes to make three things. Did you find his phone?” I turned my back to the living room, away from Oscar’s corpse.

“No. But I’ll search his clothes when the coroner gets here, and then his car. Tell me what happened when you got here.”

“I knocked, nobody answered. I came around to the back door and used my key. He didn’t respond when I called out. I stepped into the kitchen and saw him, sitting in the chair. I knew something was off. I called 911.”

“Did you touch anything?” Tom raised an eyebrow making me want to confess.

“Just now. Sorry, I forgot. I looked in his fridge and pantry. I also tried to take his pulse, but he was so cold...” I shuddered. Inhaled slowly. Contained the crazy. “I know he’s a diabetic, but he’s so careful. He has an insulin pump, too. He’s had it for years.”

“Did he have any enemies?” Tom asked, his voice professional.

“Not that I knew of.”

Tom’s eyebrow twitched. “Girlfriend? Ex-girlfriend?”

My eyes snapped wide. I thought everyone knew about Oscar. “Tom, he’s gay. His parents kicked him out when he turned eighteen. We offered him the cabin and helped him move in. We promised he could stay rent-free through college.”

“I knew his parents kicked him out. I didn’t realize he was still living at the cabin.” Tom drawled. “I wasn’t sure you knew about him.” His lips firmed, the ends curling up, locking in anymore thoughts.

“I understand.” Small towns were good for guarding secrets. “He dated a very nice man last year, but they broke up amicably when the guy moved to Ohio for a job. As far as I know, he hasn’t dated anyone seriously since.” Although, he wasn’t likely to tell me if he was dating someone new.

“Ohio’s not that far. Do you remember his name?”

“No, I called him Charlie Hunnam.”

Tom’s brows knitted together. “Why?”

“He looked like the actor, Charlie Hunnam.”

Tom studied his hands. “When was the last time you saw Oscar alive?”

That word stung. Alive. As in not dead. I held my breath and released it slowly, venting my heartache.

“Saturday. Joe and I ran into him at the movies. He was alone, coming out of the bookstore.”

“About his parents...” He looked at me, his eyes saddened to a muddy gray. “Did he still talk to them?”

“He talked to his Mom, but not his Dad.” I hated they made Oscar feel worthless.

“I guess I’ll call her.” He shot me a look like he wanted me to offer to make the call.

I raised an eyebrow, suggesting he man-up.

His shoulders slumped, and he looked around the room. “Anything seem out of place to you?”

“Other than the cleanliness? No.”

Tom leaned forward, interested.

I needed to dial back the sarcasm, my go-to response to awkward or stressful situations. “I haven’t been out here in weeks, and truthfully, it was this clean then, too.”

Tom cleared his throat and scanned the room. “You don’t have to stay, Charlie.”

“What happens now?” I hated the idea of leaving Oscar. “Someone should stay with him.”

“The coroner will bring him to the Medical Examiner for an autopsy. We’ll move forward from there.” He shifted his weight and his thick leather belt creaked. His hand scrubbed the back of his head. His discomfort seeped into the air, and I inhaled the bitter sorrow.

Oscar was dead.

Gone.

My heart felt hollow, grieving for a young life that should have had a future, a young man my children’s age, gone. Oscar was dead.

Tom stepped forward. “I’m sorry, Charlie.”

I wasn’t sure if he meant that I’d found Oscar, or that Oscar died, or that I was now freaking out about my own children. He patted me awkwardly on the back until I gulped and the dam that had been holding my emotions in place crumbled.

“Oh, hell.” Tom pulled me in for a hug, stuffing a kitchen towel in my face, I assumed, to prevent the transfer of snot. Tom was always one step ahead of most folks.

I allowed myself sixty seconds of tears and then reeled myself in. It helped that I heard a vehicle drive up. It was a small town, and my hugging a man that was not my husband was better fodder than Mabel McClure writing bad checks at the Pass-n-Gas.

“I’m okay.” I wiped my face with the towel. I folded it over, damp side in.

“Do you want me to drive you home?”

“No.”

The knock on the back door announced the coroner.

The idea of Oscar being treated like a body and not a boy was too much. “I’m going to go. Will you let me know what the coroner finds?”

“You bet.”

I stepped onto the gravel driveway and looked over at the McGuffin’s cabin. I may be myopic, but is he?