



Season Two:

Episode Eleven

When Herman arrived back at Shady Bluff, he found he wasn't the only one visiting the community much later than usual. Jessica Trueworthy was walking toward the building. Her shoulders were back, her steps quick and the gait wide. She looked like she meant business. Normally, Herman's heart would have skipped a beat at the sight of her, for Jessica was very beautiful, but his normally lovelorn gaze was clouded by the horror he'd just witnessed at the hospital.

But when she saw Herman pulling into a parking spot, she stopped and crossed her arms. Herman took a deep breath and stepped out of the car.

"Herman," Jessica said. Her face softened. "You look like hell."

"I feel like it, Jessica."

"What's wrong?"

For the briefest of moments, Herman considered telling her what had happened. From every interaction he'd had with her, he knew she was smart and level-headed. She could be a fierce advocate for what she wanted, but she was never overly emotional or irrational.

"Long day," he said. "How are you?"

Jessica frowned, noticing the deflection, but Herman couldn't say anything more. Someone was murdering the employees of his community. He wasn't sure he could trust anyone anymore.

"I'm worried about my mother," Jessica reminded him. She'd called earlier in the day, but Millicent wasn't answering Jessica's calls. "There's something going on. Some people might think I'm overreacting, but I know my mother and she doesn't hide anything from me. Two days without a phone call is alarming, quite frankly."

Herman wondered if it was possible whatever what was going on involved the residents as well. Not for the first time since he'd ran from the hospital did Herman question why he wasn't going to the police. For whatever reason, it didn't feel right. And he was ashamed by his act of cowardice at fleeing – perhaps he could have saved Regina's life. It was too late, but maybe he could figure out what was going on.

The front doors glided open. That was odd. The community's doors were supposed to lock at 7 p.m. It was now, Herman checked his watch, 9:30 p.m. He did a double take. How had so much time passed? He was supposed to meet Pippi here more than two hours ago. Had she left?

"I didn't realize it was so late," Herman said.

"Aren't these doors usually locked?" Jessica asked.

"Yes, they should be," Herman admitted. "It's not normal for us to have visitors so late."

"I'm not a normal visitor, though," Jessica said and gave him a smile with just a hint of mischief to it.

I loved you once, Herman thought. But his love had wrecked so many lives. His wife was gone, Maxine and Regina were dead. *She was right to stay away from me*, Herman thought.

Jessica waved her hand in front of his face, snapping him out of his self-pity.

"Shouldn't you lock them?" She pointed back at the entry way. Herman nodded. He turned off the automated sensors outside. If someone needed to leave, the doors would open, but anyone trying to get inside would need a fob.

The lights to the lobby and dining room were on, although there was no one around. Instead of it seeming cheerier, though, it was downright spooky. Herman knew everyone was likely asleep or settling in for the night, but it didn't stop him from imagining that everyone had disappeared.

Jessica headed to the elevator and Herman followed. "Did you come to check on my mom, too?" she asked.

Herman smiled. "I want to make sure she's okay," he said. In reality, he wasn't quite sure what he should be doing.

As they passed apartments, they heard the sound of televisions and music, saw caregivers heading into or out of resident rooms and Herman felt himself relax a little. Everyone was fine.

Jessica knocked on her mother's door. There was no answer. She knocked again, then with only silence responding, she pulled out her keys and let herself in. Millicent's apartment was empty. The bed was made, everything was in order.

Well, almost everything. On the mirror beside her bed, written in lipstick was a message.

Herman pointed to the scribbles. “Do you know what that means?” he asked Jessica.

“Not a clue. Looks a bit sinister.”

“Is it a warning of some kind?” Herman asked.

Jessica looked at him with alarm. “A warning for whom? My mom’s not here.”

“She might be visiting a neighbor,” he said.

Jessica pulled out her phone. “I’ll call Cordelia and see if Mom’s there.”

“I’ll check with the night staff,” Herman said. “Wait for me here.”

But no one working the night shift knew where she was. On top of that Jimmy, who was supposed to cover for Trayvon hadn’t shown up, leaving the team a person short.

When he returned, Jessica shook her head before he could ask. “Cordelia didn’t answer. So I went to her apartment. I really think you ought to take a look there, Herman. Her room is trashed, like something violent happened. But wait,” she said as he turned to leave. “I think you’re partially right about this writing. I think it’s a message, although I’m not sure to whom.”

Herman stepped closer to the mirror.

Dingbat: ☪♣♣♦ ♁♦ ♠†♠☹ 📁📄📖📗

“Who is Dingbat?” he asked.

“It’s not usually an affectionate term, is it?”

Jessica sighed and sat on the bed. “This is so strange. What the heck is going on?”

“You know who might know? Tina Testament,” Herman said. “She’s a walking encyclopedia.”

But to their consternation, neither Tina nor her wife were in their apartment. Herman checked the entry log at the front desk, but none of them had signed out as leaving for the evening. He called Pippi, who answered on the third ring.

“Pippi, where are you?” Herman asked.

“Um, it’s really not a good time,” Pippi said in a whisper.

“Are you okay? Where are you?”

“I’ll call you later, if I can,” said Pippi.

From somewhere in the background, Herman heard a voice say “Who are you talking to? You were supposed to turn in your phones!” Then the line went dead.

“Maybe we should call the police,” said Jessica.

“I think you might be right,” Herman said. But before he could dial, Jessica snapped her fingers.

“Niles!”

“Niles Coleman? I doubt he could help us. He’s not the most popular resident...”

“Oh, Mom can’t stand him, but she did say that if there was someone at the community she would want on her trivia team, it was Niles.”

“Should we visit him? It’s a little late,” Herman said, checking his watch. Niles was not always the nicest person when disturbed.

“Are you kidding me? Of course, we should wake him,” Jessica practically screamed.

Seeing her so commanding kindled the dampened spark of love in Herman’s chest. That small flame of passion also had the additional advantage of imbuing Herman with resolve and he nodded and led the way to Niles’ apartment.

There was no answer, but this time, Herman used his master key to let them in.

“Niles?” he called. “It’s Herman, we’re sorry to bother you. Are you awake?”

The apartment was dark, but from inside they could hear a strange rasping noise. Herman turned on the light. Behind him, Jessica gasped.

Niles was on the floor, his face a grimace of pain and terror. His hands were scratching at his throat and his eyes were rolling. It was a horrifying sight and Herman ran to him.

“Are you choking, Niles?” he asked. Luckily, he could hear that Niles was getting some air, although the gasping and rattling of each breath was still very scary.

Niles pulled one hand from his throat and pointed toward his nightstand. There was a glass of water, a set of reading glasses, an alarm clock, and a pad of paper and pen.

“Do you need water?” Herman asked. Niles shook his head, making a dry heaving noise.

“The pen and paper!” said Jessica, and she gave the pen to Niles, but held the pad up for him. In a thin, erratic script, Niles wrote “poison bag bathroom.”

“You took a bag of poison in the bathroom?’ Herman asked. His bureaucratic side jumped in and he imagined the mound of paperwork that would be required to detail this incident.

Niles shook his head again. His lips were beginning to turn blue.

Jessica ran to the bathroom and in a few moments returned with a small black leather bag. She opened it.

“What do you need?”

Niles stuck his hand in the bag and pulled out a small hypodermic injector. It looked like something out of a spy thriller. Niles removed the cap and placed the nozzle against his neck and pulled the trigger.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Niles began to jerk and his eyes rolled back. He made a loud moaning sound and then exhaled forcefully and was still. Herman felt Jessica grasp his hand.

“Is he...” Herman asked, but he couldn’t finish the thought. He looked over at Jessica, who stared back, her eyes filled with tears.

But before they could speak or make another move, they heard a loud gasp and a cough. They turned back to Niles who looked from one to the other and then up at the ceiling.

“Thought I was a goner, there,” Niles said and smiled weakly.

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