



Season Two:

Episode Fifteen

Jessica and Herman watched Niles as he drank a glass of water. His color was still off. Where he'd been red and purple as he fought for life, he was now a shade of gray.

Niles didn't want to tell the two standing before him, but in reality, he was at death's door. He could still feel the poison in his veins. He had no way of knowing what concoction Dr. Forthright had given him and he doubted it was anything that had an antidote readily available. The medicine he'd injected into his neck was just a temporary halt to whatever internal clock was now ticking down.

"I feel much better," Niles lied and gave them a smile. Herman and Jessica laughed in relief. "Now," he continued, "unless you are psychic and could sense my distress, you were coming to see me for something else."

Jessica nodded and pulled her phone from her pocket. She held it out to him. The screen showed a photo of a mirror on which a code of sorts had been written.

"Dingbat," Niles said and laughed. It was a deeper laugh than he expected himself capable of and it was one rich with meaning and memories of a lifetime ago.

"Does this mean something to you?" asked Herman, who took a seat on the edge of Niles' recliner. Jessica sat beside Niles so she could see the photo, too.

"A long time ago it did. It's not a very clever puzzle, but it's an effective one."

"What does it mean?"

“We’ll need a computer,” said Niles. “Unfortunately, mine has long given up the ghost. Do either of you...?”

Herman stood up. “Yes, I can grab my laptop from my office. I’ll be right back.”

After he left, Jessica squeezed Niles’ hand. “Should we take you to a doctor? You don’t look well.”

“Let me have a few more minutes before making that decision,” Niles said. Then he smiled. “Did you know that your mom used to call me dingbat?”

Niles noted the puzzled expression on Jessica’s face. “Didn’t think we knew each other, huh? Because your mom doesn’t like me very much.”

Niles sighed and handed the phone back to Jessica. “She and I used to be very close. Oh, nothing romantic. We both had our eyes set on other people, but we worked together. Trusted one another implicitly.”

“When?”

“During Senator Golden’s initial state senate run. She was working for his campaign and I was covering it. This was back when I was a reporter, fresh out of school and ready to tackle the world to reveal the truth. I was naïve and I think your mom liked that. Otherwise, Golden would have had me kicked off the campaign trail after the first day.” Niles leaned in. “I liked stirring things up.”

Jessica’s smile had faded. “My mom worked for Senator Golden? But she hates him. Despises him.”

“Well, your mom has plenty of reasons to dislike him. One of which might be that folks change and lose their way, give up the things that make them good for the things that make them rich. And I dare say anyone in politics loses their principles along the way, if they ever had any to begin with. Power can do that, you know.”

Niles’s face went dark and he winced, grabbing his belly. He was running out of time, he realized.

After waving off Jessica’s cry of alarm, he continued. “For your mom, she started to notice some things were not quite right. She had *privileged access*, shall we say, to Golden. So she used to send me little notes – just tips and things, really. No bombshells, just breadcrumbs.”

“So what caused your falling out?”

Niles took a deep breath, trying to push back the pain churning through his insides. “Oh, it was over something a few years later, but that’s another story. And one I think you should hear from your mom, not me.”

Jessica nodded. “Okay, but what does that have to do with this code?”

“Well, it’s a hint to the code,” Niles said. As he was about to explain further,

Herman rushed in and presented his opened laptop to Niles.

“See, the symbols here are just simple, random images. That is until you feed them through a word processor application.”

Niles opened up a blank document and began to type. “Dingbat is a clue to the key as well as to me. Back in the ‘80s, there used to be a font called Dingbat. It was created by a designer and utilized in the 80s for Apple Printers. Anyway, two of his protégés created their own set of symbols to be used in lieu of letters. Purely just to add a bit of pizzaz to a document, you understand. But then Microsoft bought the collections, combined it, and renamed it Wingdings.

“Not a lot of folks use it now, but back in the day it was kinda like the emojis everyone uses.”

Niles was typing away on the keyboard, looking from the picture on Jessica’s phone back to his keyboard. After a few moments, he let out a satisfied grunt and leaned back.

“Meet at SVSL 12 am,” read Herman.

“SVSL?” asked Jessica. “What does that mean?”

The trio were quiet for a moment, and then Herman snapped his fingers.

“Sunny Valley! Their website is welcometosvsl.com.”

Jessica raised an eyebrow. “Why would my mom be at another community?”

Herman shrugged. “No idea. Sunny Valley is kind of a dump.”

But Niles was nodding his head. “Your mom doesn’t have a friend there or anything, does she?”

Jessica shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

“And besides,” said Herman. “Who is going to let us in at midnight to try to find her?”

“Maybe we should cross that bridge when we come to it,” said Niles.

Jessica looked at her watch. “It’s 10:30. Do we just head over there now? It seems silly to wait here. Why midnight?”

Niles began to cough. He doubled over, one hand to his mouth, then slid off the bed. Herman knelt at his side. “Niles, we have to get you to a hospital.”

Niles was shaking his head, but as he pulled his hand away, they all saw the bright blood speckled on his palm.

“They can’t help me,” said Niles. “I’m a goner, I’m afraid. But I think I can hold out until we solve this mystery.”

“No way,” said Herman. “I have a responsibility for your safety. And think about all the paperwork I’d have to do if you passed away. No, sir. We’re getting you to a hospital.”

“Don’t I have the right to refuse service?” Niles asked, his eyes flashing. Herman smiled. Even during an emergency, the man was still stubborn as a mule.

“Unfortunately, no. I’d rather you be angry with me than dead.”

“You’re gonna end with me dead *and* pissed off,” Niles said.

“Herman’s right, Niles,” said Jessica. “No offense, but if you’re coughing up blood, how much use will you be creeping around a senior living facility in the middle of the night?”

“Fine, fine. Young people always think they know everything,” Niles said as they helped him to his feet.

As they made their way down to the lobby, Herman and Jessica helped Niles into a seat. “Wait here, I’ll go get my car and pull it up,” said Herman.

Herman unlocked the doors in the lobby, but as they opened Jessica gasped. “Who is that?”

From the darkness, Sara Lakshmi stepped out. Her clothes were covered in blood. Jessica screamed.

“It’s too late,” said Sara as she collapsed into Herman’s arms.

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