

**THEY
WANT
US
DEAD**

A NOVEL

CL MONTBLANC



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CHAPTER ONE

SOMEBODY REALLY WANTS ME TO BUY WHOLESALE VIAGRA. MY inbox is so full of ads for it that I can barely find anything else. There are also a few hundred warnings about my Amazon account being terminated, credit unions letting me know that an “URGENT RESPONSE IS REQUIRED,” and Hailey from Sex Dating Dot Com asking if I’d like to have some fun.

Oh, Hailey. As if “fun” is even in my vocabulary.

I’m still pruneey from standing in the shower for way too long, like I always do, since I much prefer being consumed by hot water than by the world’s fucking bleakness. I lean back in my desk chair and examine my hands, noting that Hailey probably wouldn’t be soliciting me if she knew about my chronic pug fingers.

It’s clear that I’ve been signed up for a bunch of spam lists within the past day or so. Some people might be able to write that kind of thing off as an unfortunate mistake, an accident, but I already know for a fact that this comes from a malicious actor. I also know exactly who the culprit is.

I steal a glance at my bedroom door and its peeling poster of a 1975 Maserati, because I used to be into stuff like that. Thankfully it looks like I remembered to lock the door, considering how Mom has a chronic barging-in problem. Then I shove my giant microphone out of my face, grab my mouse, and navigate to a particularly heinous social media profile: AdventuresWithDyl.

A picture pops up of a teenage boy with a copper farmer's tan, a grin stretching his face wide. His light brown hair crests over his ears, grazing the front of his wire-framed glasses. He has on what looks like foam cosplay armor and thrusts a blue sword proudly into the air.

His bio reads: dylan, he/him, urbex and other exploits. come follow me! :)

He is the devil.

I go to report him for the billionth time, even though I know nothing will be done about it. Most of his harassment toward me has gone off-platform. And besides, who's going to look at this shit and believe *me*? This is the profile of someone who mows his elderly neighbors' lawns for free, not someone who makes my life a living hell. And I can't even fucking block him, because I just know he'd turn that into content and stir up a whole bunch of drama like a dust devil. I can already see it: callout post for Sam Tombs, part 1 of 147.

I mean, he's not the only troll out there, but he's certainly my least favorite. He's too persistent and somehow always manages to hit me where it hurts.

My sidebar lights up with new notifications for my own channel. I begin clicking through them, grateful for the redirection.

It's important for me to keep in mind that five thousand people like me enough to follow my videos, and even more than that engage with me in a positive way. It makes me feel

like what I'm doing is really worth all of the time and effort. And maybe even the harassment.

All of these kind strangers seem to understand how important it is to draw attention to cold cases and bring peace to the families involved. Meanwhile, AdventuresWithDyl has yet to realize that nobody wants him crawling around their local sewers with a digital camera.

I can't even remember how this feud started, some months ago, except that *he* was the instigator. And he clearly doesn't plan on ending it anytime soon, which is also why I'm going to figure out his phone number from one of those sketchy websites and make sure every desperate politician in California knows that he's almost ready to start voting.

Another notification pops up, but this one's better than all the others because it's from Arya Shankar.

Scheme Queens

OMFGGG SAMMY CHECK UR EMAIL!!! 😊
WE GOT THE THIIING!

For a second I assume she's in with AdventuresWithDyl on the spambots, even though she's been one of my closest internet friends for years, but there's absolutely no chance of that. She did call him cute, once, in the middle of me complaining, but she quickly learned her lesson after that. So, I give Arya the benefit of the doubt and comb through my recent emails—more carefully this time.

Standing out among all of the junk, there's a message from "Helen @ ToTC."

Congratulations, Helen says. You've been selected. It's the exact same way all spam emails start, so I'm not holding out a lot of hope. But then I keep reading, propelled forward by my trust in Arya. Considering her entire brand revolves

around tearing scammers to pieces, she wouldn't lead me astray.

You've been selected as one of eight guests for the inaugural Teens of True Crime event, hosted at the Roth Manor in Los Angeles, California.

We sought out young content creators whose work in the true crime space has helped to resolve real criminal cases and were thrilled to receive dozens of applications. After reviewing your impressive history, we would like to invite you for a week of networking, mentorship, and enriching activities to help you improve your craft. Our goal is to use learnings from the week to establish this retreat as an annual fellowship program, so we may provide talented, hardworking teenagers with a free source of education and support . . .

My heart begins stuttering in my chest as I take in all of the details.

Right. I remember this now. It's that thing I applied for on a whim because Arya begged me to do it with her. The type of opportunity that felt like such a long shot that I'd completely forgotten about it the moment I pressed "Submit Form."

I don't usually dip into the internet sleuthing side of things, but I *did* once help link a missing persons case to a then-unidentified John Doe from the NamUs database. The whole situation was really more of a fluke sparked by my chronic doomscrolling, but I guess these people were impressed. Then again, "*dozens* of applications" does reflect how niche our corner of the internet really is.

Helen didn't hide the list of recipients on the email, so I take a peek at who else is invited. Arya's the only one I

recognize off the bat, which is both shocking and kind of exciting. I can probably learn a lot from these people and make some important new connections while I'm at it.

And all of that means more reach, more income, and more people I can help.

Oh, man. I wasn't expecting anything more exciting than Dad's signature fajita dinner tonight.

Now that shit's getting real, I proceed to do some of my own digging on the organization. There's a legit-looking website, Helen seems to be a real human being whose socials come up online, and there's absolutely nothing to do with entering my credit card information. I just have to reply with an RSVP and then show up to Roth Manor in a couple of weeks.

Sunlight slices through my blinds, casting a hazy glare across my monitor. Dad will probably call me for those fajitas soon. I'll have to ask my parents if I can go to this thing, and the thought of that gives me nervous jitters.

But what else am I going to do—stay at home making videos by myself all summer? It doesn't take an MD to see that I'm fucking depressed. Every facet of my life points to it, though all you'd really need to do is look at my wrinkly fucking fingers.

For once, I have to be honest with myself.

The reason I waste so much water is that I simply cannot bring myself to leave the shower. It's comfortable, and it drowns all of the bad stuff out, and I'd live there forever if I could. But because I can't, I've had to devise a strategy: at the very first impulse, make my body leap out before my mind can catch up and stop me.

I'm kind of thinking that's what I need to do here. I can't spend the next month going back and forth about it, standing under the proverbial showerhead.

If I ever want things to change, I need to leap.

By the time my brain starts to doubt this, my fingers have already sprung into action.

SamTombs

Prepare for the best hug of your fucking life, bc I'm in!!!



The morning of the retreat, I'm scrambling to pack my bags while also wondering if it's not too late to bail.

It's embarrassing to admit, but I'm mildly terrified to go. I've never been away from home for longer than a single night; nearly eighteen and not even a summer camp experience under my belt. On the other hand, I clearly need to get out of the house before my desk chair becomes molded to my body like a turtle shell.

My bedroom is a mess of clothing and recording equipment. It's all black on white, white on black. Dad's tried so hard to sneak in a little color—a potted plant here, a tchotchke from Family Thrift there—to no avail. It's a unique decor style that Arya labeled as “bare-bones, Spartan IKEA bullshit” after I let her see too much of the room on a video call once.

My phone buzzes with a push notification: It's a comment on a video I posted last night. I'm too busy right now to get distracted, but my wandering eyes betray me.

AdventuresWithDyl

YOU ARE A NASTY LITTLE WORM WITH NO MORALS

I stare at the words, fighting back the urge to reply, “as opposed to . . . a worm that has morals?” or, “wow, so you're

obsessed with a worm,” but frankly, the asshole’s not worth my valuable time.

I Frisbee my phone onto my bed and start rummaging through my closet, trying to pick out which of my black shirts and black pants feel most appropriate for a Teens of True Crime event. It’s practically my uniform, now—the only thing I’m seen wearing in my videos. I’m honestly surprised Mister AdventuresWithDyl hasn’t ribbed me on that one yet. You know, suggesting I only own one shirt that I never wash or something equally unfunny.

Ugh . . .

One little reply to him should be fine, actually. It’ll only take a second.

SamTombs

I’m sure your 23 followers are super impressed with your attitude. Or maybe they don’t care, actually, considering they’re all bots?

Eat shit.

The LED panels above my desk creak, and I know I should pack them up to make sure they don’t somehow get damaged while I’m gone, but there’s no time. I unplug the lights, tidy their cables, roll up my green screen, and leave it at that. My chargers are yanked out of their sockets, and I send them flying like foxtails toward my open bag. That’ll have to do.

“Sam! Your ride is here!” my mom calls from the front of the house.

With that, I throw my bursting duffel bag over my shoulder and bid goodbye to my tiny bedroom studio.

Mom and Dad are both lined up by the front door like they’re seeing me off to the army. Dad’s eyes look a little

teary, as though I'm leaving for months rather than a quick Sunday-through-Sunday. Mom looks more nervous than sad, wringing her hands and trying not to drop her blatantly fake smile.

She's never been the biggest supporter of my social media exploits. She thinks talking about cold cases online puts me in danger. If I were any good at lying, I'd tell her she's totally wrong.

"Did you remember everything?" Mom asks. "Underwear? Medicine? Floss?"

"I'm sure the rich-people house will have plenty of stuff," I say with a sigh. "I'll text you about the floss situation when I get there."

"But the organizers said there might not even be service up there, isn't that right?"

"Yeah, so I guess don't assume I've died from a gum infection if I don't text you."

Mom's smile twitches, almost imperceptibly, at my morbid joke.

"And if someone ever tries to lay a hand on you . . . ?" Dad starts.

"Strike to the neck," I recite, whipping my hand forward to demonstrate. A few years ago I may have found it silly, but lately I've felt appreciative of Dad's little self-defense lessons.

You never know what might happen. Especially when you're . . . *like me*. Gender nonconforming. Blurring the lines in a way that can give awful people confusion-aggression. It's not a problem I typically run into in LA though, thankfully—even out here in its questionable suburbs.

Dad ruffles my hair. "Go get 'em, Sammy."

He opens the door, and I step out into a wall of heat. There's a distant smell of smoke, somewhere out there, be-

yond the already-torched hills that surround my neighborhood. It's not like I'm going super far—just about an hour east toward North Hollywood—but I'm still tingling with excitement to get out of here.

In front of me and our dying, yellowed lawn is a tiny black car. A GLE Coupe, to be exact, which is too flashy to be a favorite but still undeniably cool. I wave at the driver and charge forward, almost skipping with enthusiasm, to chuck my bag into the trunk. I come back around to the passenger's side door and throw it open, ready to confirm my identity with the driver.

But when I peer inside, somebody else is already sitting there.

That's odd. I would've thought that a bougie charity org could afford to send eight people their own individual rides. . . . But the notion quickly makes me embarrassed, because I'm grateful that travel was subsidized *at all*, especially given that the family car is busted. If another attendee happens to live near me, then I'd genuinely prefer the earth to be polluted a little bit less, anyway. Carpooling is fine.

Until it's not.

I catch a glimpse of a guy with tawny hair and tanned skin. He blinks up at me, blinded by sunlight, as I slowly drop myself into the seat next to him. I notice his round glasses, perched low on his nose, which seem so familiar that I swear to myself I've seen that exact pair before.

And then it hits me.

And then it hits him.

The door clicks behind me, and we begin to roll. But there's just no fucking way—I cannot accept what I'm seeing right now to be real.

Even though my brain isn't processing, my fight-or-flight is kicking in, because I'm pawing helplessly at the door

handle like I would genuinely risk a tuck-and-roll escape right now to get out of this situation.

Because I would.

Because I'm looking directly into the smug goddamned face of AdventuresWithFuckingDyl.



CHAPTER TWO

OUR CAR HITS A POTHOLE, AND ADVENTURES WITH DYLAN'S FINGERS land on my upper thigh.

"Sorry!" he squeaks, drawing his arm back like my body's made of wasps.

"Apology rejected," I reply, relishing the hint of annoyance that twitches his lip.

In person, Dylan's a tall, spindly thing trapped inside a starchy white button-down. Combined with the stern expression written across his fine-boned face, he looks like he's just been forced to attend a bar mitzvah at gunpoint. His hair forms a scholarly center part, the tips of his brown fringe grazing his eyebrows, the same exact shade as his irises, due to even his genomes being uncreative.

Dylan sits there quietly for a minute, then sighs. "I was hoping you'd be slightly more mature in person, but I guess you can't even pretend to be civil, huh?"

The fucking audacity.

"You're not supposed to be here," I mutter. "You weren't

on the guest list. You don't even do true crime content. You film abandoned buildings and dig up dead people's treasure chests."

We hit another bump, which sends us scrambling toward our respective windows.

"Well, first of all, Nailah News broke her arm surfing and had to drop out. I just got the call this morning that I'm to replace her. Second, I sincerely doubt you've watched my content. My most popular series is actually about a hotel that collapsed due to criminal negligence by its construction manager."

"Wow . . . I stand corrected." I fake a loud yawn, stretching my arms out just enough to "accidentally" bonk his forehead. "All twenty-three followers must have really showed up for that one."

Dylan swats my arm away. "Listen, asshole. Just because my account is still small doesn't make me inferior to you. I deserve to be invited to this too."

"It's just wild to me that you weren't disqualified for your terrible attitude alone. Surely the organizers haven't heard about you harassing me, but once we get to the event I'll have to—"

"You mean my comments?" Dylan chuckles, low and gravely. "What about the comments *you've* left *me*? I distinctly remember you replying to one of my selfies with 'Oh, Jesus—barf emoji—algorithm, please get this evil Peter Pan twink off my feed.'"

My cheeks burn. I'm not especially proud of that one . . . but my dad *did* teach me to fight back.

"Fair enough," I reply while glaring out the window. Dylan may have started this, but technically either of us could have ended it by now. "Mutual agreement to not tattle, then."

The rest of the car ride is blissfully silent. I split the time between texting my parents and answering a few straggling DMs. Dylan doesn't take out his phone, so I have to assume that nobody loves him, which would be wholly unsurprising.

Eventually we're winding our way up Mulholland, surrounded by tall bushes on both sides of the street, which are meant to block private residences from prying eyes. The south side of the road suddenly clears, revealing a vista over all of Hollywood. The whole beautiful, rotten city, laid out like a filthy carpet sample.

Then the car dips, the feeling of the road beneath us changing. Seemingly out of nowhere, we're now crossing a wooden bridge that curves along the mountain road.

"They didn't mention the Murder Bridge in the email," Dylan mutters.

"That's what you get for being Teens of True Crime's sloppy seconds, I guess."

He's unaffected by my dig, too preoccupied. "No, seriously—what the hell happened there? The asphalt beneath it was like, crumbled away."

"What do I look like to you? A road scientist?"

Dylan gives me a discerning stare. "You don't want me to tell you what you look like."

I clutch my heart, waiting for him to roast me. I know quite well what I look like already: a pale baguette draped in thrift shop garbage. All of the My Chemical Romance guys merged into a singular form. A rat who once made a wish to become a human lesbian from the 1980s.

But Dylan doesn't elaborate. He simply folds his arms over his chest and angles himself toward his window. If this attitude problem doesn't resolve itself quickly, I may have to throw myself off the Murder Bridge.

But before I can self-defenestrate, we're already pulling up to the house where we'll be staying for the next week.

In my head this was going to be the usual ultramodern mansion: all clean and white like Hollywood teeth, more glass than anything else, with infinity pools on every corner of the estate.

This is decidedly not that.

In front of us spans an old Victorian home, a castle made of red sandstone and gaudy tile. A narrow set of stairs leads my eyes up toward the central spire of the house, which looks like a giant lopsided cone. It's an early-1900s architectural mess—the type that only an old man with far more money than taste could ever have loved.

"We've arrived," the driver says gruffly, pulling up in front of the stairs.

But Dylan and I don't move. We sit there for a while, waiting for the other to exit the car.

"You first."

"No, you first."

I'm aware that it takes two people to argue, and that I'm not exactly the most laid-back person out there, but never in my life have I encountered someone so perfectly designed to push all of my buttons. We remain in a silent standoff until the driver lets out an annoyed sigh.

"Okay, go," I urge, but Dylan shakes his head stubbornly.

"As soon as I get out, you're going to have the driver turn around and take you home with my luggage still in the back. Either that or you'll make him floor it and run me over."

I throw my arms up. "And would that really be the worst thing in the world, Dylan?"

I reach over him to open the car door on his side. Dylan struggles to block me, squirming behind my arms as I lean

over his legs to grab the handle. "Jesus, you're so fucking entitled," he growls.

"Entitled to eject your annoying ass by force if you don't hurry up. Now get out."

The door flies open, sending me sprawling across Dylan's lap. He recoils, pushing himself backward, until we're both flying out of the car with the momentum. My left elbow cracks against pavement and my other arm lands on the flat block of Dylan's chest. He lets out an "Oof!" as he falls on his tailbone, and I realize that I can't really move my body, and my knees are slotted on the inside of his thighs.

We attempt to untangle our legs while mumbling obscenities. Before we can even get up, tires squeal behind us—the driver has already tossed our bags and sped away. I can only hope that none of the guests who have already arrived saw what just happened, but I'm not feeling particularly optimistic at the moment.

There's a sharp pain where I just hit my elbow, radiating through my entire left arm. "Fuck, my funny bone," I groan, while finally managing to push myself onto my feet. "I think I broke it."

"I think it was already broken," Dylan replies flatly.

I freeze to look at him.

Dylan is still on the ground, covered in gravel and dust, and this is the first time today that I've seen him smile.

I want to kick him in the mouth.

From the top of the stairs, a woman's British-accented voice calls down to us. "Sam Tombs, and . . . Nailah? Sorry—Dylan Lawry? Please come inside."

I catch my travel companion's gaze. His smile has faded like it was never even there, and there's a sudden dark look in his eyes. A look that says to me that he's just realized we're

in for seven full days of this, him and I. A look that says he's starting to think that he might be the water to my grease fire.

And I just know we're going to make this whole fucking house explode.



The building groans as we enter it, like it already wants to spit us back out.

The British woman who greeted us—Helen—ushers me and Dylan into the entryway. Her dark hair is pinned to the back of her head, a smart tablet pressed protectively to her chest.

“Holy . . .” Dylan whispers, looking around us.

The house is a vision of opulence—from a different era, from some land inconceivably far away. The floors and ceilings are carved entirely from a rich, brown wood, every doorway framed by Grecian columns. A chandelier that looks like a prop from *Phantom of the Opera* hangs over us, the pattern in its glass elegant and lacelike. Above the wood-panel wainscoting is a strip of wallpaper the soft orange color of a dying flame, with swirling green accents that feel Italian to me—or at least fake-Italian, like an Olive Garden.

“Welcome to Teens of True Crime’s inaugural event,” Helen says warmly. She looks over her shoulder to shoot us a proud smile. “We are so very pleased to have you here.”

It’s comforting to be met by the face of the organization—despite all of the signs pointing to its legitimacy, there was still a small part of me that thought the meetup could be a scam. I guess Helen could still ask me to hand over my wallet though. I don’t have much cash, but my Dave & Buster’s card is pretty loaded.

“Thank you for having me!” I reply.

I expect Dylan to say something like “thank you *more*” in order to outdo me, but he’s just quiet. His right hand keeps running over the left one like he’s trying to polish a stone.

“How was your journey here?” Helen asks, as we all stand awkwardly in the threshold.

“Good, um . . .” My thoughts cut back to falling out of the car. “Sorry if the driver gives you a bad rating though. We may have been a little . . . loud.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that. He works for the estate. We would never entrust you to a stranger,” she explains.

Makes sense, and it’s also very reassuring that she cares about our safety.

Helen leads us to a living room sitting area, where two people are positioned on opposite ends of a long wooden bench. “Speaking of our drivers, one of them is buzzing me now, which means more guests are about to arrive! I’ll be back shortly,” she announces before hurrying away.

Dylan quietly dismisses himself and heads in the opposite direction, which I hope will become a trend.

I take in the two strangers in front of me, who both appear mildly uncomfortable, and smile. I want to have a good reputation among these people. My peers. If they like me, it might lead to raised awareness for my channel and all of the cases it covers. If they hate me, they could do a nasty callout or something. Which . . . would ruin everything I’ve spent the past three years building.

“Hey there, I’m Sam!”

Sometimes I also lead with “they/them,” but I eased off a few years ago after some weird interactions—hostility that was too exhausting to deal with—hoping that word-of-mouth among good people would do the trick. But I *have* been wondering. . . . It’s exactly what they want, isn’t it? To not be confronted with my existence. Maybe I should be better about

standing up to that shit, but, I don't know. . . . I'm just so tired lately. And I'm scared. And that's okay, too, I think.

The guy on the left eyes me, pressing a leather notebook to his chest as if I would ever try to grab it from him. He's a nondescript bespectacled white guy who has box-dyed black hair like mine, which could either be a bonding opportunity or rude to bring up. The painfully obvious distinction between us is that he's built like a linebacker. It's overall a very Clark Kent look.

"I don't want to talk to you," he says, biceps stretching the limits of his comically small T-shirt while he shifts around.

Off to a great start.

Next to him is a girl with bright pink lipstick and long black hair parted down the center. She wears an expensive-looking blue jumpsuit and a cross-body bag printed with cartoon dogs, while her arms are laden with bangles.

She shakes her head disapprovingly, her jewelry jingling. "Ignore him. He's being super mean to me too. Anyway, hi! I'm Jen."

The smile she gives me is wide and genuine. I'm glad that at least *someone* here is being nice. Especially because Arya hasn't arrived yet.

"How long have you been waiting?" I ask Jen, and instantly regret it. Might as well have asked about the weather or, like, taxes. I am hopelessly out of practice with socialization.

She doesn't seem to mind though. "I actually got here last night! There was some issue with the original flight I'd booked."

The boy's eyes flicker over to her with sudden interest. "Arrived *here*? The house?"

"Kind of." Jen giggles nervously. "I tried to get here early, but the front door was locked, and I swear it felt like some-

body was watching me from the windows. So, I gave up and stayed in a hotel instead.”

He scoffs. “Showing up that early is so rude.”

“God, I can’t do anything right with you!” Jen covers her eyes and groans. “Why are you even here if you’re just gonna be unfriendly? I thought we’re supposed to get to know each other and collab.”

The linebacker boy begins scribbling in his notebook without another word.

Unease washes over me, prickling the hair on my arms.

I came into this experience with so much optimism, but before it’s even started, it feels like things are falling apart. I’m still trying to keep my spirits high, stay hopeful, but between AdventuresWithDyl and now this, that’s starting to become a challenge.

Maybe this meetup is legitimate, but the vibes here are already so fucking off.

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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