

From Jersey Dogs by Missye K. Clarke

“You guys know it’s almost nine,” Bobby admonished when we arrived home.

After hugs and assuring us she’d make her calls, Nana Grace loaned her Mazda3 to Jay Vincent. He let the other McGuinness drive to decompress, especially when headlights tailed us five minutes after we’d left Nana Grace’s and losing them within an hour of maneuvering Borough Park’s maze of streets. We said maybe ten words during the ride. The bomb my cousin dropped dampened his driving thrill and our moods, and despite my blooming unease, I somehow catnapped across the backseats.

“Upstairs for a few, Gramps,” Logan said, his tired tone hinting not to alert the de Franciscis of our discovery.

“Right.”

Bobby inspected his hair in the hall’s oval wall mirror. “Meant to ask you, how’d the first day go? Did you know I drove the truck home when I couldn’t find you for the keys? You weren’t answering your phone, so Triple A had to rescue me with a spare set. Pops is epic pissed.”

The urge to tell Enzo Senior and Bobby to fuck off waned when I considered the littlest de Franciscis might be in earshot, so I settled on “Not now, runt” while I leaned on the hall closet’s doorjamb to toe off my boots. How did Logan learn our biologic mothers had been murdered? How would *westay* alive if the text wasn’t a sick threat? Both worries were hamsters on a wheel in my thoughts, and yet I noticed an inconsequential thing like an ogre’s morning breath unable to compete with my reeking, urine-stained socks.

“Pops knows about the fight, too. He was gonna figure it out anyway, given that ink stain on your eye and your shredded clothes.” A broad smirk scrunched Bobby’s eyes half-closed after he locked the front door. “Just sayin’.”

Mitchell called it. The second boot hit the closet’s back wall with a muted *thunk*. “One guess I know who the stool pigeon is.”

“Aw, that hurts, McGuinness.” Bobby feigned devastation. “I mean, shoot, Mom blew up my phone looking for you two. Especially with news about some loser tits up on campus? Pops and Junior are on a new gig in Jersey City, it’s dirty, they’re tired, and you know how Mom gets when they’re in vicious GWB traffic . . .”

I’d deal with this ass-kissing weasel later. “Ever the conscientious one, aren’t ya, Giovanni?”

Bobby’s cheeks shone bright pink through the stubble. “Take that back!”

“Sucks to be you being named after your moonshine-swillin’ granddude.” I patted his face once before he yanked himself away. “You’re overdue for a Paul Mitchell treatment, soy-boy, your five o’clock’s on the rise.”

“CASPER! LOGAN!”

Bobby smirked fresh at his father’s bellow. He saluted me with a single finger and whistled as he strolled from the entryway.

No chance for a pee break or to change clothes, I walked through the living room-dining room, past the kitchen, a right turn down the short hall, and entered Pops de Francisci's home office. Logan in my wake, Mom shut the door behind us.

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"Where have you been?" Pops's resonating bass carried velvet-soft, but his indignation rippled the air. "And why did you not return my truck to the house or answer our phone calls?"

"I apologize," said Logan while I added, "We were at a friend's."

Mom stood behind her husband, sadness and concern in her eyes. De Francisci's mood stayed black fire. "Your apology is not good enough. Now, who would this friend be? Why do we not know about this person or his family?"

"We just met him today," Logan said.

"The family's name is Pedregon," I put in while handing Pops back the truck keys. "Nana Grace is retired NYPD and her grandson Jay Vincent goes to our school."

A scrim of fright crossed Pops de Francisci's dark eyes, then vanished like an illusion. Holy smokes, Logan could be right! I willed my racing heart to slow with deep breathing and bit my inside lip to keep my expression clean.

"Why did you not check your phones for our messages?" Pops asked again.

Legit question. Not having a satisfying answer, we shifted our weight, shrugged, and avoided his gaze.

"You both know not to embarrass me, yourselves or this family, in private or in public." Pops de Francisci's baseball mitt-like hands, tanned and calloused, rested on his knees. "Have you forgotten the job in Hackensack and why you two are not in my employ anymore?"

"We didn't do anything," protested Logan.

Actually, we did. Our horseplay at that site during a weekend in mid-August involved us driving the Craftsmans and Kubotas to dig trenches for an apartment complex's new hydrangeas, small trees and hedgerow plantings, and to till flowerbeds. In between work with two other two-man crews, we'd entertained ourselves with a game of Two-by-Two: a team driving a vehicle closest to any trench without falling in, that pair won. His idea of a joke while we handled a Craftsman tiller, Logan bolted just when the machine toppled into a fifteen-foot trench, me in the driver's seat, and he cracked up laughing topside, choosing the moment before to offer a stick shift lesson. Were it not for ten yards of knotted rope another landscaper dangled, I'd've been in that hole for hours waiting to be rescued. Logan, knowing I'd throat-punch him since I hated being alone in the dark, slept in the basement and didn't come near me for almost two weeks after the incident. Pops docked all three two-man teams for a crane rental to excavate the damaged tiller, its repairs, an insurance rate hike, fined by the client for completing the job four hours past deadline, and sacked Logan and me on the ride home. The Zager

custom-built acoustic I'd planned to purchase with that last paycheck, I now partially own a pair of hydrangea bushes and three young maples, instead.

Mom re-tacked a dropped memo to the corkboard between the wood filing cabinets. "Logan, darling, Bobby recorded the fight you and Casper had. You both must learn self-control. And that dead man at your school, oh, his family must be frantic." Her kind Italian-accented words gentled the room's funereal air. "Your dinner plates are in the oven."

Son of a *bitch*. God help Bobby if he uploaded it. "No, thanks," I mumbled. Anything big went down, Mom de Francisci made sure food helped digest it.

"We're good," Logan muttered.

"Regardless," Pops de Francisci continued, "you boys will compensate me for this appalling behavior. Having landscaped a home for one of my regular customers, Dr. Enoch Avery has inquired if I knew of any enterprising young men to fill stablehand positions at his cattle yard near the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. The job begins next Monday. You two will work every day after school and on Saturdays. He will pay you. In turn, you will pay rent to me."

Logan and I let 'Say *what*?' fall from our mouths.

"The decision is final." He gestured to his iMac, and Mrs. Carson's email about our office visit displayed on the screen his wide frame had obscured from view. "There is paperwork I must sign, yes?"

Logan vocalized a sigh as he handed Pops the handbook contracts. De Francisci treated us as mangy, flea-covered jersey dogs, and I bet the hounds would be more part of the family than we were if they'd had any.

I started to leave in disgust when my cousin winked, shook his head slow, pointed behind him while Mom and Pops held a tense conversation in Italian as they signed the paperwork. An excited thrill bounced my insides. *What?* I mouthed.

You'll see, he eyebrow-hitched twice and grinned.

As I took the blue Sharpie Pops de Francisci held out, Logan said, "We didn't get punished at school, though," before he bent to sign. His back and right hip facing me, three hard copies of Bobby's *Hot Legs* rags lay tucked in his dirty khakis, I puckered a tiny whistle in surprise and my eyebrows shot up on this bold *avere cognizioni* move.

"It is time you two learned a sense of responsibility. The Hackensack incident, and not bringing home my property today, didn't deepen your ethics, apparently. And you both damaged vending machines and your uniforms during your scuffle I must pay for? As is old country tradition in *Italia*, you will give restitution." Pops de Francisci rocked himself on his jumbo stability ball. His suede construction boots, ingrained with rich earth and red mud, were in stark contrast to the gleaming hardwoods they sat on.

Although I gave a pleading gaze to Mom, her soft expression read *There is nothing I can do*. She busied herself at the fax with the signed paperwork, and Logan glared at Pops. "Responsibility, huh? Are the older kids paying rent?"

"What is spoken within these walls stays here," de Francisci said over the fax machine's feed roller, "and what I discuss with my other children is not your concern."

In other words—no.

The upshot: the job might serve perfect cover to hide from whoever had Logan and me in their sights, and we could poke around on the low to find out our history. The downside: turd detail, tolerating flies, animals birthing or mating, getting peed on, bruised from bites or kicks, *and* using our income to pay for the privilege of sleeping under a roof in a home we felt alienated in.

Aw, hell.

Contemplating if working in the stables was worth it, a thought struck when spotting Logan's name. Done in uncertain scrawl under mine on the contracts, I looked his way. He didn't meet my eyes.

Mom de Francisci approached and her left hand cupped my chin and her fingers brushed Logan's cheek with her right. Her touch lay cool as her light jade eyes were alight with compassion. "Are you sure you are not hungry?"

Logan's gaze stayed downcast. "Ate something at Jay Vincent's."

"Would you like a pack for your eye, *amore mio*?" Mom asked me.

"I'm okay."

"Well, I hope you boys remembered your manners," she said.

"We did." The familiar overwhelm of being an outsider swept away the closeness I'd felt with Nana Grace. But I shoved my cynicism aside; Mom de Francisci always attempted to bond emotionally with us. Her citrusy scent and sweetness in stroking my chin carried memories of a wicked bout of the flu when I was fourteen, or when I got pretty banged up falling from the big kid swings in Fort Greene Park when I was six. Maybe she was torn up inside over things as much as I was.

Pops's six-seven frame towered us. "To your studies, boys, have showers, then to bed."

Mom kissed my cheek, held me a nanosecond longer than usual, did the same for Logan. "Yes, sir," I said. My cousin pushed me ahead as we left the home office.

"*Santa Maria, madre di Dio*, that filth is in my house, why?" Mom de Francisci asked loud after a harsh gasp.

Hand on the outside knob, I bit my cheeks to keep from laughing at the de Franciscis' horrified expressions.

"Just thought you should see what *Bobby's* paychecks were payin' for, including his phone app y'all don't know about," Logan said, his tone relaxed. Three Business Reply Mail inserts fluttered to the hardwoods when the magazines he tossed landed on Pops's RGB keyboard. "Check the label when the subscription began and the phone bill. Maybe stick your other kid for rent, too, huh? G'night."

My grin copied the lit New Year's Eve ball in Times Square as I playfully punched Logan's shoulder. While Bobby dried dishes with second-oldest sister Michaela, Mom de Francisci roared, "*Giovanni Roberto, YOU COME HERE THIS INSTANT!*"

"Karma's come a-callin'," I singsonged to Bobby's deer-in-headlights expression, giving his finger salute back.

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Towel swaddling my midsection, I entered the bedroom Logan and I shared with de Francisci's middle kid. In between readying for bed and school prep tomorrow, we gave Bobby the business over his sound ass-chewing from Mom de Francisci as Ray Charles crooned "Busted" at full volume from Logan's phone. Fed up in mid-song, Bobby slammed Junior's bedroom door to complete his homework.

"Am I . . . why . . . you ran away?" I donned clean socks and fresh boxer briefs. "And are you sure our mothers were—"

"Murdered hookers, yeah," Logan said quiet from inside the Lightning McQueen hoodie I'd given him last Christmas. "You were a small part of my reasons I took off. No worries, though. We're cool."

I sat on my bed, knuckled away sudden rain, took a few deep breaths. A shaky whimper escaped anyway.

After jerking the sweatshirt down, Logan eased himself on my bunk, finger-combed his damp curls. "Gramps, you gotta cut that out."

I slid on navy blue sweats, closed my forensics book with my foot. "Cut out what?"

"Dude, don't front. The first two times I bolted, hell, I bawled like a little kid."

"That's you, not me."

"Man, whatever."

Through the near-closed bedroom door, a golden strand of the hall's ceiling light fell on a pile of dirty clothes, an open book facedown, and a barelegged, unshoed Barbie of Carina's poking from under Bobby's unmade bed. Night air from the room's half-open window turned the curtains into a bride's veil caught in a breeze. Was I ready to learn what my heart ached for years to understand?

Logan cried? Over what?

Maybe me. Maybe for our dead moms. And yeah . . . I think I was ready to handle this.

On this realization, every muscle within tensed in terror.

"The big thing you gotta do for both of us is quit lyin' to yourself." Logan gripped my right hand with both of his. I didn't pull it away.

"What'd you learn the third time you were gone?"

"How our mothers died and other things. Mostly I was concentratin' keeping my tail alive to not let shit bother me." He chuckled soft. "Still . . . somebody told me what I'd always known about you, about us. I just really need to hear you say it."

The childish scrawls in the leprechaun card were similar to the hesitant stops in Logan's signature on the paperwork. "Bazooka Jo."

"Right on."

"Are you absolutely *sure* somebody wants us dead?"

"Yeah, I am."

"And you'll tell me everything when the time's right."

"Two for two, dude."

Although acceptance over his secrecy poked deeper roots, panic made me pull my blanket over me. “But *why*?”

“Over who wants us gone?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve no damn idea.”

A half minute slid past. “Do you know who our mothers’ sperm donor was? Or were?”

“No clue . . . but I aim to find out.”

“You *want* to know?”

“Oh, yeah.” Steel filled Logan’s voice. “Oh, yeah.”

Ice encased my heart, scared he’d confirm what my instincts constantly told me. “Why?” I said again.

“To even the score, Casper.”

Shower sounds drifted from the main bathroom while oldest sister Pia read Carina, Marciano, and Luigi a bedtime story. Mom de Francisci exchanged goodnights with us again, clicked out the hall light, pulled our bedroom door closed after giving her youngest sweet dreams kisses. These acts, so everyday to our lives now turned upside down almost fifteen hours ago, became sacred. I shivered again.

“It wasn’t only about the fight, man. I called you a vag because you pissed me off.” Logan’s grip to my hand deepened, mine followed. “It’s bad enough Mom and Pops’re jivin’ us like they breathe. But I can’t hack it when you do that, too.”

“Like hell.”

“You were waterworks ready a shitload of times today and even before.” His tone was as quiet as the darkness. “Somethin’ inside told you things were never right around here for years, and it kept comin’ out the only way your heart could deal. That ain’t no accident, dude.”

Logan understood so much more than I gave him props for, and I didn’t see that . . . or I chose not to. *Why* I didn’t was the question I couldn’t face. Jesus, being pushed past my comfort zone like this sure sucked goat’s nuts. Pulling my blanket-covered left knee to my chest, I leaned against the wall, damp hair brushing my neck, and, with hitching gasps, I finally let tears slide from under my closed lids.

“So . . . you nailed that audition.”

Odd that wasn’t a big deal now. “Uh-huh.”

“That was me you heard rootin’ for ya.” Logan squeezed two of my fingers. The space between us sat close enough that, were we each other’s opposite sex, we’d be making out probably. “Gramps, you are *damn* good.”

My free hand picked at a partially torn STP sticker on the top bunk’s underside. “Thanks,” I whispered.

“You never shared how you felt about things, thought about things. I know I fucked up plenty for you to distrust me when I shoulda stuck up for you more.” Logan bent to snatch a tissue from its box, wedged it under my right knee, held my right hand in both of his again. His voice cracked when he went on. “But you shut me out

emotionally so many times. Me running away didn't help with that, I s'pose. I swear, though, hand to God, whoever's after us ain't gonna succeed. We gotta catch each other's 6, man, and not just on this. On *life*. We're all we've got left. I don't want to lose you, man . . . or ever lose that with you."

The spiked ball in my windpipe swelled. If I kept my eyes closed, it almost felt like nothing changed at all. "You . . . mean that?"

"I don't have-have one . . ." Logan's hold became a vise. I returned the squeeze, feeling his emotion in his teary words. "I don't have one single memory ever telling you before that I love you, Casper. So I'm sayin' it now." His voice broke. "I love you, dude. I really do. I need you, too. And I know I always will."

Damn. Guys tighter than us seldom said that, if ever. Maybe they didn't have to. Dragonfly wings beat in my chest and my palms grew sweaty, the feelings similar in being with a female I'd make love to and would spend my life with, if given the chance.

Did my festering, ongoing anger and hurt stem from yearning for a biologic mother's love I never experienced, love I'd never known? Had being in Nana Grace's presence forced a needed crack to my emotional bulwark?

Possibly.

Now knowing I'm a son of a prostitute, could that be why I was lonely for deep, unconditional acceptance . . . even of myself?

Absolutely.

"I really love you, Logan. I'm always gonna need you, too."

He pulled me in a hug, and our silent tears wet one another's shirt collars. When the rain dried after some minutes, we felt dodgy and awkward, and laughed as if somebody walked in on us, but I sensed a shift words weren't necessary for. We *were* all we had, and I wouldn't sacrifice that, no matter the cost. Possible our mothers had thought the same for their brief survival.

"Gotta hit the books." He cleared his throat, left my bunk to shut the window over Bobby's bed. Reading lights blazed on when he flipped one of two wall switches by the room's main door.

"Same." I wiped under my eyes and missed the tissue pitch to the room's overflowing wastebasket. Throat hurting from the needed cry, my vocal chords played tricks with me. "Need help?"

"Nah, I'm good." Logan's pitch curved a wide left, then he climbed the ladder to his bed. "Gotta study Yamaha engine parts to rebuild a bike carburetor from scratch. Serio hinted huge today he'd drop two pop quizzes a week on chop engines during the term, and never on the same day twice."

Within five minutes, the top bunk creaked intermittently as Logan verbally memorized his notes on index cards. Trig book propped open on my knees, Boney James's downloaded sax waisted in my ears. On a notebook's back page while thinking over a particularly tricky math question, I jotted down thoughts of the fit-looking silvery white-haired dude knowing who I was today and the fleeting, skittish look in Pops de

Francisci's eyes tonight in mentioning Pedregon's name and who his Nana was, determined to tell these details to the guys tomorrow.

Most of my homework done and teeth brushed, I doused the lights at near one a.m. A couple of things dawned as my cousin's deep breathing and Bobby's light snoring permeated the stillness: Logan and I hadn't seen one another during our conversation, and I sensed he might be ashamed and afraid I'd bust his balls for the dyslexia he thought I knew nothing about. His secret would stay tight with me until the moment presented itself to talk about it—in this life, or if our murderer succeeded, in the next.

I shifted to my right side. For the first time in recent memory, I felt lighter, my heart resolved in what we both had to do.

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An imagination too vast for conventional media and fueled by her father's cold case homicide, Missye K. Clarke loves mapping her Casebooks and Threesome of Magic Mysteries, drafting haikus, and finding rare, original plots and storylines to craft flash fiction. The transplanted New Yorker, and creator of Maroon The Sleuth Books LLC imprint, resides in central Pennsylvania with her husband and son, a senior-but-still-rumbustious Australian cattle dog, a "Jackson 5" clutch of cats, and an occasional groundhog drop-in. Keep up with Ms. Clarke's (Mis)adventures at @MaroonTheSleuth on gab.com or email her at maroonsclues@gmail.com to stay in touch. JERSEY DOGS is available on Amazon, BN, iTunes, Kobo, Scribd, and most fine e-retailers near you.