



Courting Greta

By Ramsey Hootman

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Samuel Cooke knows most women wouldn't give him a second glance even if he were the last man on earth. He's the cripple with crutches, the nerdy computer genius every female past puberty feels compelled to mother. So when he leaves his lucrative career to teach programming to high schoolers, romance definitely isn't on his radar.

Perhaps that's why Greta Cassamajor catches him off guard. The sarcastic gym coach with zero sense of humor is no beauty - not even on the inside. But an inexplicably kind act toward Samuel makes him realize she is *interesting*.

Samuel is certain she won't accept his invitation to dinner - so when she does, he's out of his depth. All he knows is that he'll do whatever it takes to keep her as long as he can. Pretending he's got his class under control? Easy. Being vulnerable enough to admit why he ditched his programming career for teaching? Um, no. That would require honesty. And if there's one thing Samuel can't exist without, it's the lies he tells himself.

In this poignant, witty debut, Ramsey Hootman upends traditional romance tropes to weave a charming tale of perseverance, trust, and slightly conditional love.

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Editorial Review

Review

"In this charming, unconventional first novel, an unlikely pair stumbles down a rough road of romance and self-discovery with all the emotional and physical baggage that middle age--and disability--can bring. ...A refreshing, original love story about two socially awkward yet utterly fascinating people. Fans of John Green's quirky lovers in *The Fault in Our Stars* or this year's hot adaptation, Matthew Quirk's *Silver Linings Playbook*, will want to check this one out." -*Library Journal*

"Hootman's terrific debut, a most unlikely romance... [is a] surprisingly sweet, if sometimes bitter, novel." -*Publishers Weekly*

Hootman's terrific debut, a most unlikely romance, involves a 34-year-old crippled computer geek and a middle-aged Sue Sylvester-like gym teacher/basketball coach with a penchant for addressing him as "Mr. Cooke." Samuel Cooke joins a Northern California high school's faculty to teach programming classes after taking a 10% stake in the successful software firm that formerly employed him. Despite being warned against gym teacher Greta Cassamajor, a 46-year-old who towers over and outweighs him, he feels strangely attracted to her. Recognizing Greta's prickly nature and uncompromising attitude, Samuel nonetheless sets out to navigate a relationship with her. He has the outward social graces she lacks, but hidden underneath is fear, anger, and self-pity, particularly over the congenital birth defect that forces him to use elbow crutches and ankle braces. While Samuel faces the school's unprincipled principal, outdated computers, and difficult students, Greta proves remarkably perceptive and caring. By the end of this surprisingly sweet, if sometimes bitter, novel, Samuel has started to appreciate everyone else he has on his side, including his housekeeper, who helps him woo Greta, a nosy fellow teacher, and an old boss who advises him that "in real life, you spend a lot of time on your ass." (Publisher's Weekly)

Samuel is a shy, withdrawn computer programmer in need of a change in his life. He thinks a new town and a teaching job will do the trick, but when he falls for Greta, the school's imposing tomboy gym teacher, he discovers that change can come from unexpected places. In this charming, unconventional first novel, an unlikely pair stumbles down a rough road of romance and self-discovery with all the emotional and physical baggage that middle age -- and disability -- can bring. VERDICT: Hootman gives the readers a refreshing, original love story about two socially awkward yet utterly fascinating people. Fans of John Green's quirky lovers in *The Fault in Our Stars* or this year's hot adaptation, Matthew Quirk's *Silver Linings Playbook*, will want to check this one out; arriving just in time for summer, it will make a perfect beach read. Highly recommended. (Leigh Wright *Library Journal*)

About the Author

Ramsey Hootman grew up in the northern California town of Healdsburg, where her debut novel *Courting Greta* takes place. A former travel writer, she lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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Courting Greta

1



SAMUEL WATCHED HIS BROTHER'S big hands walk over the steering wheel, turning the pickup into the campus parking lot. He should have driven himself. Nobody who saw his prematurely graying hair would mistake him for a teenager, even as small as he was, but being dropped off still felt juvenile. The stupid things he did to make his brother feel useful. Samuel shifted, adjusting his seat belt, and double-checked to make sure the bus schedule was in his pocket.

Chris glanced at him. "You okay?"

Sometimes it seemed like that was all anyone ever asked. Samuel leaned forward, peering through the windshield as the main building came into view. The high school was a single-story building branching off in several directions, barely salvaged from eyesore status by the redwoods towering around it. The hallways looked dark and empty from across the parking lot. "Where is everyone?"

Chris stepped on the clutch and checked his watch. "Maybe class is out?"

"Dammit." Samuel grabbed his brother's wrist, reading the analog upside down before thrusting the muscular arm away: 3:27. "My appointment's in three minutes!"

"Yeah? We're here, aren't we?"

"And what, I'm going to jog across campus and get there in the nick of time?" He twisted, reaching into the extended cab for his elbow crutches. The first one caught and he swore, jerking it free.

"Bro." Chris put one hand on Samuel's shoulder, quieting him, and used the other to free the second aluminum pole. "Relax. It'll be fine, okay? You'll do good."

"Well. And I doubt it." Briefly, Samuel wrestled with the temptation to shove his crutch into his brother's washboard abs; he mastered himself by redirecting the urge into the stubborn cab door. "How long has this stupid handle been broken?"

Chris reached over and shoved the door open.

Samuel closed his eyes. Chris was not a bad person. Yes, he possessed a small lump of lead in lieu of a brain, but he wasn't trying to be a douchebag. Samuel was just nervous. They weren't going to fire him for being a few minutes late. Still, as he swung his legs out of the cab and shouldered his backpack, he couldn't help muttering, "You always make me late."

Chris gave Samuel's arm a rough pat. "I know. Sorry."

Now he felt like a jerk. Probably because he was being one.

"You gonna be all right? Getting home and everything? I can stay another night if you want."

As if he hadn't been living on his own for a decade. "I'll be fine. You should get on the road." Samuel slipped his arms through the cuffs and planted both crutches on the ground before sliding out of the cab. "Thanks for coming up to help." Not that he'd asked.

"No problem. Keep in touch, huh?"

“Sure, sure.” They always went through this routine before getting back to the business of ignoring each other. He cleared his throat. “Drive safely.”

Chris’s reply was interrupted by an eight-bit rendition of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” “Must be Tammy.” He dug through the garbage-littered dash and came up with a cell phone. “Oh, it’s Dad. Here, you can say hi.” He punched a button. “Hey, Dad. Sam and I are—”

Samuel slammed the door. Chris quirked an eyebrow, then shrugged and waved.

In spite of the time, Samuel forced himself to stand on the curb and watch as the battered Ranger pulled away. A gust of autumn wind hit him in the face, and the smell of freshly cut grass slid up his nostrils, sharp as a knife. He drew in a breath and let it out slowly.

When the truck disappeared around the end of the block, Samuel turned away from the curb and started toward the nearest doorway. He frowned, glanced over one shoulder, and realized where he was. “Shit.” Chris had dropped him off in the wrong lot.

Then a bell shrilled, and eight hundred students came pouring out of fifty-odd rooms.

IT TOOK SAMUEL fifteen minutes to hike across campus and all of his upper-body strength to squeeze through the spring-loaded door of the portable office building, but it wasn’t until he’d stepped into his own classroom that he wondered what the hell he had gotten himself into.

The secretary had been nice enough, reassuring him when he showed up breathless, perspiring, and twenty minutes late that “Vince” was still out with the track team. Though the petite brunette was college-age at best, she invited him to “take a seat, dear” and fetched him a paper cup of water from the cooler. Two decades past puberty and every woman on the planet still felt compelled to mother him.

Vince Irving had entered a couple of minutes later, along with a heavy whiff of cologne. He looked more like a football coach than a principal, barrel-chested and clean-shaven, with a windbreaker sporting the school logo over a crisply ironed shirt. “Mr. Cooke!” he’d said, too loudly, and shoved a hand forward.

Oh, look, a walking cliché. Samuel took the proffered hand briefly. “My pleasure, Mr. Irving.” He grabbed his crutches and pushed himself to his feet. “Please, just Samuel.”

“Sam. Vince.”

No, not Sam. Samuel. He clamped his mouth shut on the correction. “Apparently I’ve got a ream of paperwork to fill out?”

Irving shrugged it aside. “Come see Joyce in the next week or two and she’ll get you squared away. Thought you’d be more interested in your classroom, eh?”

A glance at the secretary confirmed she was Joyce. “Sounds good.”

“Toss ’em.” Irving held up a palm and Joyce pitched a ring of keys. “That’s my girl. Back in a few.” He shouldered the door open for Samuel.

Samuel shuffled down the ramp and squeezed to one side, making room for Irving to pass. “Why don’t you

go first?" They weren't going to fit side by side on the narrow sidewalk, and the grass bordering it was a muddy mess. It hadn't rained that much overnight; they were probably still dousing the area with sprinklers.

As the principal ambled toward the main building, he dug a bag of sunflower seeds out of a pocket and dumped a handful in his mouth. Samuel counted the shells that fell to the ground as he trailed behind.

Indoors, the halls were white-tiled and vacant, bearing enough similarity to hospital corridors to be disconcerting, save for the smell of stale sweat and rain. Irving fell back now that there was room, but he left the kind of wide, anxious gap between them that always made Samuel want to say, "Relax; I'm not going to break if you trip me."

"You know," Irving said, "we have full inclusion here."

Wow. "Fascinating." Obviously he was dying to hear about everyone else who happened to have some god-awful condition.

"Yessir." Irving missed the sarcasm completely. "Started in the early nineties." He had switched to spitting the shells into his hand, and he paused to shake the soggy handful into a big gray garbage can. "We're considered very progressive, even by California standards."

Was that why the nearest handicapped spot was half a mile from the office? Samuel needed to change the subject before he said something he couldn't take back. "So . . . she's your daughter, then?"

Irving's bushy white eyebrows went up. "Who?"

Crap. "Um, Joyce?"

He burst into laughter. "Joyce? My daughter?"

"I thought . . ." Samuel had assumed they were related, because otherwise—well, if Rashid, CEO of the software firm Samuel had worked for in L.A., ever addressed any of his female employees as "my girl," he'd have angry lawyers lined up around the block. Maybe Irving and Joyce had worked together a long time, although Joyce was pretty young. Maybe things were just different here.

Irving pulled a wallet out of his back pocket. "These," he announced, "are my girls."

Samuel offered the obligatory murmur of admiration and saw that Irving's family really was quite attractive. He had two cheerful blondes in their twenties, and although his wife was showing her age, she was a dignified, handsome woman. "Nice."

"My pride and joy. Ah, here's your room." Irving jammed the key into the lock, jiggled it, then grabbed the knob and threw his shoulder into lifting the door. "Damn keys have been copied so many times," he explained, stepping inside.

Four rows of outdated computer banks stretched from the front of the room to the back, paired so students sat facing left or right. The right wall was composed entirely of windows, looking out over a concrete courtyard that had been painted by students. The only problem Samuel could see, initially, was the teacher's desk, positioned on the far side of the room. He didn't relish the thought of threading through the mess of chairs and naked cables, but he needed the lesson plans for tomorrow.

He made it to the back of the room without performing a face-plant in front of his new boss and found the promised binder centered neatly on the desk. It bore a sticky note with his name. He lifted the cover—and found a single piece of college-ruled paper. It said, in loopy red handwriting:

Keyboarding, Mon.–Thurs.: Students use typing prog. to improve.

Fri.: Print out stats and give awards (in desk).

Programming: Students researching history of programming. Presentations due next month.

Underneath was a bell schedule and a roll sheet for each class.

“Mrs. Phelps said she’d leave her lesson plans,” he said weakly. They’d spoken on the phone three times before he’d accepted the position, and she’d promised—promised—to leave everything he needed to run the class until Christmas.

Samuel opened the desk drawers one by one, but there were only a few overphotocopied awards with blanks for names and typing speed.

He looked at Irving, willing him to recall that Mrs. Phelps had left a box of supplies in the office. Irving shrugged. “You know how women get when they’re pregnant.”

“I don’t, actually.” Samuel looked out the window, biting the inside of his cheek. Was this some kind of sick joke? What the hell was he going to do? Phelps had said it was easy. Said his programming expertise more than compensated for his expired credential and almost total lack of classroom experience. Clearly the school board had agreed; they’d been thrilled to have someone with his “distinguished résumé.” And he’d believed her. Them. The truth was, he had no clue what he was doing. He’d been depending on those lesson plans to carry him until he figured it out.

And in sixteen hours, he would be standing here in front of thirty-two kids who expected him to be in control.

Irving shifted. “You want some time to . . . ?”

“Nope. I’m done.” Or screwed. One of those. Samuel flipped the binder shut and picked his way back around the edge of the room. He guessed from Irving’s thoughtful frown that the man was wondering why anyone in his right mind would abandon a lucrative career in software design for a low-paying interim position at a public institution. Samuel was beginning to wonder that himself.

Then Irving said, “So what happened? Car accident or something?”

“Excuse me?”

He gestured to Samuel’s lower half—the aluminum elbow crutches and the ankle braces outlined against his pants. “How’d you get hurt?”

Right. Because it simply wasn’t possible to mind one’s own fucking business. It didn’t bother him much if it was a kid asking, or someone with an obvious mental impairment. But any thinking adult ought to understand this wasn’t an appropriate topic for casual chitchat. Granted, Irving reminded him of Chris: about

two hitters short of a lineup.

Still, this was his new boss, so he swallowed the sarcastic comeback and gritted his teeth. “Occult spinal dysraphism.” See if Irving could remember that long enough to Google it. “It’s a congenital birth defect. Disappointing, I know.” That was half the story, but it was all Irving would get. Samuel stumped past him into the hall. Though he had half a mind to keep going, he had known this job wouldn’t be easy. He wasn’t about to throw in the towel over this dumbass. Or lesson plans.

Irving locked up and handed Samuel the key, which he took to mean that the orientation was over. Thank God. His thighs ached from the trek across campus, and all he wanted to do was spend the evening with the most surreal novel he could find in his to-be-read pile. Unfortunately, what he’d actually be doing tonight was poring over the Internet for lesson plans. At least the fiber-optic line had kicked in yesterday; dial-up would have turned this disaster into an emergency of epic proportions.

Irving rubbed his hands together. “How d’you like sports, Sam?” He grinned, revealing a row of broad white incisors so perfect they had to be dentures.

Samuel had a fleeting, irrational vision of his body stretched unconscious across the hall tiles, Irving bending over him, rubbing his hands furiously and yelling, “Clear!”

“Honestly? I make a lousy shortstop.” Samuel shouldn’t have said it, but he was tired and annoyed, and he really, really didn’t like to be called Sam.

He expected Irving to go red and apologize, but the principal just looked puzzled. And then he guffawed. “No, no, I mean watching.” The laugh descended into a chuckle.

Samuel revised his opinion of Irving from “affable cliché” to “unbearable ass.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard we’re famous for our girls’ basketball.”

Samuel hadn’t. Or he’d forgotten. “How could I not?” So long as it brought the conversation to an end.

“Great! We’ve got a home game in twenty minutes. I’ll show you the gym.”

“Um. Yeah. I’d love to, but my brother dropped me off on the way out of town and the last bus on my route comes at five.” Actually six, but he was betting Irving didn’t know that.

“The bus?” Irving gave him a look that said he might be a little daft. “You’re in town, aren’t you? I’ll give you a lift.” He reached out and gripped Samuel’s shoulder with one big hand. “Come on, make your first day at Healdsburg High complete.”

He shrugged out of Irving’s grasp. “Like I said, I’d love to, but seeing as Mrs. Phelps failed to fulfill her obligations, I need the time to plan.”

“Oh.” Irving’s face fell. “Sure, I understand. Gotta make your first day a good one, eh?” He flashed another big smile, but there was something forced in it. As if he was genuinely disappointed by Samuel’s refusal.

Oh, God. He was going to regret saying this. “Some other time?”

Thankfully, an alternate date and time didn't pop out of Irving's mouth. "Sure," he said. "Another time. Take care, hm?"

Samuel nodded and busied himself tucking the key into a pocket, allowing Irving a head start. Now all he had to do was locate the bus stop and he'd be home free. He'd taken a good long look at the map, and now that he had a moment to think, he oriented himself easily. The stop should be out the doors behind him and across the parking lot. It was nice not to have his thoughts interrupted every two seconds.

Nice. To be alone.

Samuel closed his eyes. He was already retreating. Just like his father had said he would.

No.

Irving was annoying, but he wouldn't be the only person at the game. Basketball wasn't Samuel's cup of tea, but so what? At least it wasn't baseball. And how much time did he really need to plan for a subject he could deconstruct in his sleep?

Samuel opened his eyes. Irving hadn't quite reached the doors at the end of the empty hall. He could still fix this.

"Hey, Vince?"

Irving turned.

"Wait up."

THE GYM SMELLED like the hallways, only more so. Parents and older relatives filled the wooden bleachers on the far wall; younger kids shot hoops on the empty court. Standing in the doorway, Samuel flinched when a rogue basketball smacked the wall above his head.

Almost everyone lay on the spectrum between Caucasian pink and Latino brown, with a couple of Asians thrown in for good measure, and for a moment he imagined every eye upon him. Samuel, the one who never went out to lunch with the guys. Who never spoke about his personal life because he didn't have one. Who had refused so many happy-hour invitations his coworkers no longer bothered to ask. What was he doing here, at a basketball game?

It was all in his head, of course. Nobody knew him from Adam. If he was here, at the game, he would be the kind of guy who went to basketball games. Simple as that.

In front of him, Irving lifted his arms and stretched, exuding a kind of paternal aura over what was clearly his domain. He surveyed the gym and then glanced at Samuel. "My brother's in town—supposed to meet me here. I oughta hunt him down before the game starts. You want to come?"

"That's all right, I'll find a seat."

Irving patted Samuel's shoulder for—what, the third time now? "Enjoy the show!"

And then Samuel was alone.

He surveyed the stands. Senior citizens and sulky teens had already taken most of the bottom row, and he had no hope of getting any higher. A smaller set of seats, about five rows high, ran along the wall to the right of the door he had come through, interrupted in the center by the scorekeeper's podium. A few middle-aged men and women sat along the top row, backs against the wall. From the way they chatted, intermittent and casual, he guessed they were his soon-to-be coworkers. Samuel couldn't quite work up the guts to introduce himself, so he shuffled a third of the way down the court and sat in the vacant bottom row, tucking his backpack and crutches behind the bench.

A referee appeared and began shooin' kids off the floor. Shoes squeaked and balls went flying.

Samuel checked his watch and wondered how long the game would take. He wished to God he'd brought his car.

"You can't sit here."

"What?" Samuel blinked and looked up. He was being addressed by a large, blocky woman with a clipboard. Her graying hair was cropped close, and she wore a man's polo shirt tucked into cotton shorts.

"You need to move. My team sits here."

"Oh. Oh, right, sorry." He slipped his backpack on and reached for the crutches. His legs didn't want to move, and he had to shove himself up. Now where was he going to sit?

"Hey."

He looked at the coach.

She gestured to the end of the row. "Just slide down. You won't bother anyone."

He felt a rush of gratitude. "Thanks."

She gave him a curt nod, then hiked up one leg of her shorts and stepped over two rows to the scorekeeper's podium. "Harry," she barked, "get my center's name wrong again, and I will shove that microphone down your throat."

Yikes.

Samuel had just gotten resettled when the locker room doors opened and the girls thundered out. The floor shook as the two teams jogged around the court and started shooting layups. They warmed up for five minutes, and then the game began.

Since basketball seemed to be a Big Deal in his new hometown, Samuel tried to pay attention. It wasn't bad, really. The contest was tense; the teams were well matched, both determined to win. He made it about fifteen minutes before his attention wandered. The people in the stands were much more interesting.

Mothers gripped knees and smiled with clenched jaws; fathers hollered at the refs. The local sportswriter was easy to identify, trying to scribble notes, cheer, and balance his enormous camera all at once. Samuel spent several minutes studying an unshaven man in the first row who was chanting what might have been antiquated cheerleader's rhymes. The aging alumnus wore a fifteen-year-old letterman jacket with pride.

Samuel tried not to stare at the coach, but it was hard to ignore someone just a few feet away, particularly someone so focused. She stood motionless for most of the game, clipboard clutched between her large hands. Her eyes never left the floor except to glance at the board, and every now and then she called out a girl's last name and a command, like "Morales! Out of the key!" She was not ignored. The contrast between her and the visiting team's coach, who paced and shouted and paced some more, was striking.

Irving reappeared at halftime, trailed by his own clone. Irving Two looked a little bulkier, a little older, and a little rougher around the edges, as if he did something physical for a living. Both towered over Samuel, who didn't bother to stand.

The original Irving gave his sibling's shoulder a friendly whack. "Butch, Sam. Sam, my brother. Oh, Butch, did I mention about Mrs. Phelps? Some sort of high-risk pregnancy deal, she's out for the year. Sam here's taking over her keyboarding classes."

"And programming." Samuel's preference would have been programming only. "Nice to meet you."

"So," Irving prompted, "whaddaya think? About our girls?"

It felt like being asked to pass judgment on a child's crayon drawing. Samuel wasn't sure what he was supposed to see. "Well, they're tall." He glanced at the scoreboard. The home team was down by three points. "Looks like they have a chance."

Butch smirked. "If they lose, it won't be her fault." He nodded to the scorekeeper's podium, where the girls' coach was leaning over the table.

"Nguyen," she said loudly. "It's Nguyen. Why is this so difficult for you?"

The man shrugged and mumbled an excuse.

The coach grabbed the pencil out of his hand. "Look. I'm writing it out phonetically, right here so you can see it. W-I-N. Nguyen. Get it right." She snapped the pencil in half, slammed it on the podium, and stomped down to the floor. "Ladies," she called. "Huddle up."

"Wow," said Samuel. She had physical presence and an acid tongue.

Mistaking his admiration for shock, Irving laughed and turned his back on the coach. "She's an old battle-ax," he confided, "but the girls would be nothing without her. You ever have to deal with the woman, my advice is, don't argue."

Butch tucked his meaty hands into the front pocket of his sweatshirt. "Better not to deal with her at all," he muttered. "She'll rip you a new one."

"And Butch would know," Irving said.

Butch gave his brother a shove. "Shut up, Vince."

The coach cast a glance their way, almost as if she had heard. Her face darkened.

Samuel averted his eyes. "Uh, right." The Irving brothers engaged him in a little more obligatory chitchat

and then departed as the third quarter began. “I’d still like that ride,” he called, lest he be forgotten.

Irving tossed a wave over one shoulder.

The second half of the game was tooth-and-nail, and when the final buzzer sounded the home team was down by two points. The girls filed into the locker room, faces showing how much it hurt to come so close.

Samuel scanned the gym for Irving, but he couldn’t spot the principal in the confusion of the emptying stands. He stayed put, figuring he’d have better luck waiting for Irving to find him.

Slowly the crowd dissipated. The players began to emerge from the locker room in twos and threes, sweaty, tired, and defeated. They hugged, slapped shoulders, and parted to return to the unconditional love of their families.

Then the gym was empty. Samuel worried Irving had forgotten him until he heard a telltale bark of laughter beyond the open doors. He glanced at his watch and sighed. Two hours and all he’d accomplished was meeting Irving’s doppelgänger.

“Does this look like a hotel?”

Samuel looked up to find the coach coming out of the locker room, dragging a netted bag of basketballs. She turned to lock the door as Samuel levered himself to his feet.

“Um . . . Irving was supposed to drive me home.” That sounded idiotic. What was he, twelve?

She looked him up and down. Not disdainfully—simply taking him in, sizing him up in a matter-of-fact way. Slight, sharp-featured, and prematurely graying. Oh, and crippled. Couldn’t forget that. Samuel guessed he didn’t make a very impressive show.

Well, so what? So he couldn’t handle the sack of basketballs she hefted over one shoulder. He was neat, he was clean, and he was well shaven. That counted for something, didn’t it? He hoped so, because he didn’t have much else.

“You’re Cooke?” It wasn’t much of a question; she knew exactly who he was.

“Yep.”

She lumbered past him with the slightly hip-centered gait of someone who’d had knee surgery—twice, he saw—throwing extra weight into her stride to compensate for the basketballs. “Irving family’s big on talk,” she said, not entirely in a friendly way. She didn’t seem very friendly on the whole. “I’ll take you.”

He started after her, slowly. His knees were stiff from sitting so long. “Don’t feel like you need to—”

“Don’t start.”

Samuel wondered what he’d done to offend her, then realized she probably wasn’t irritated at him so much as the outcome of the game. He followed her across the court to a low-ceilinged entryway and waited as she unlocked the storeroom door and tossed the basketballs inside.

“Thanks,” he said to her back. When she turned, he added, “Too bad about the game.”

She frowned, and he worried she might be preparing to chew him out, or maybe snap him in half like a pencil. Then she shook her head. “We’ll do better in the finals.” She put a hand out, making the gesture a kind of rough apology. “I’m sure Vince has told you what he thinks of me, but I doubt he mentioned my name.”

“Uh.” Samuel wasn’t often or easily embarrassed, but as her palm closed around his slender fingers, he knew confirmation of her guess was written on his face.

She laughed. “Don’t worry, it’s an even trade. Cassamajor. Everyone calls me Cass.”

“Is your first name too horrible to mention?”

She laughed again. Samuel had a feeling that might be some kind of record for her. “Greta.”

He smiled. “I like it. Greta Cassamajor. Entirely my pleasure.”

She gave him a sideways look, as if trying to decide whether he was for real. Then she shrugged and started for the door, digging in her pocket. Outside, she pulled out a second set of keys and nodded toward the central parking lot. “That way.”

“Right.” Samuel left her to squint at the lock in the waning light, grateful for the head start over the cracked, uneven pavement.

“Irving!” he heard her call. “Cooke’s with me!”

“What?” came the distracted reply. “Oh—give me one minute—”

“Forget it, Vince.” The way she said his name sounded like “asshole.”

A moment later the crunch of gravel signaled Greta’s approach, and Samuel sensed she had to check herself to keep from passing him. She was the kind of woman who functioned on one speed: efficiency. Maybe he couldn’t pace her physically, but he was betting Irving’s intellectual lag was far more irritating.

Greta drove a Suburban. She unlocked the passenger side and let the door swing open. “Need help?” She reached into the seat and shoved a couple of binders out of his way.

“I’ve got it.” He set about to make good on his words as she circled to the driver’s side, but the vehicle was higher than it looked. Or he was more tired than he thought. When she slid in and slammed the door, he wavered dangerously between a crutch lodged against the gearbox and legs that simply would not hold his weight.

Greta stuck the key in the ignition, leaned over, and pulled him in by one arm.

Prior experience dictated there would now be an awkward silence, followed by the hasty initiation of a conversation totally unrelated to his disability. And yes, the car was quiet as she navigated out of the parking lot, but it wasn’t the tense, uncomfortable silence he was used to. Greta wasn’t embarrassed; she was genuinely indifferent.

Which wasn't exactly heartening, either.

"Right or left?" She was about to turn out of the lot.

Samuel looked both ways. "Uh . . ."

Greta gave him a withering look. "You don't know."

Samuel swallowed. He'd only known the woman a few minutes, but he was already quite certain he didn't want to end up on the short list with the brothers Irving. "Hey, I've only been in town a week." The excuse sounded lame even to him. "There's some supermarket down the street . . . Amsted, Almsbed?"

"Anstead's." She turned right. "What street?"

Samuel knew that one. "Four-forty-two North." He was rather proud of having discovered the little two-bedroom, slab-floor bungalow. Because of the lack of foundation, he didn't even need a ramp to get in. It didn't have a dishwasher, either, but he'd arranged for a part-time housekeeper to worry about that. All things considered, it was perfect—almost worth the arm and a leg it had cost to buy. Though Healdsburg didn't look like much, the tiny wine-country town was apparently a weekend haven for wealthy San Franciscans.

Greta knew her way around; she found the street without a single wrong turn and pulled up next to the curb when he said "here" as though she hadn't needed the verbal cue. She yanked the emergency brake and opened her door.

"I can—" She was already halfway around the car. Although getting down was much simpler than going up, Samuel let her manhandle him to the ground. He didn't thank her this time; she didn't seem to require affirmation.

"Well." He shrugged his sleeves down. "Would you like to come in for, um, a cup of coffee, or . . . something?" It seemed like a neighborly thing to offer.

Her eyebrows went up. "Coffee? This late? No."

"Oh." Probably for the best, given that his coffeemaker was in a box somewhere in his living room. "Right." There was silence. This time it was awkward. "So, have you been teaching here for long?"

"Yes."

He waited. She didn't elaborate. "I'm, um, not a teacher. I mean, I wasn't. I was programmer at this place in L.A. We made architectural design software for large-scale projects. Stadiums, skyscrapers—" Like she cared.

"So why are you here?"

Was that a question or a challenge? "I, well—" He wished he'd prepared an answer in advance. "There was this accident." Oh, genius. Use Irving's idiot assumption. Playing the tragic-accident card will win everyone's respect. "Uh, that's not why I'm—I mean, I wasn't hurt, but I kept thinking, if I had died, what had I ever done that was worthwhile?" Better. "So I came up with some innovative stuff, big deal. I get a

footnote in Wikipedia. Meanwhile, my life is twelve-hour days and takeout on the way home. So I thought, you know, teaching.”

The corner of her mouth twitched. Barely. Suddenly he felt very silly and naive.

“Stupid, right? But I did get my credential in college, and—there were supposed to be lesson plans. But there aren’t, and I honestly have no idea what I’m doing, and . . .” And tomorrow was going to be a complete disaster. What did he expect her to do? He had gotten himself into this hole, and he would have to dig his way out. She didn’t give a damn, she just wanted to drop him off and go home. “I . . . whatever. Thanks for the ride.”

They looked at each other in the half-light.

This was the point when Samuel sort of expected her to leave. He cleared his throat and tried again. “I doubt we’ll be seeing much of each other, so—”

“Not unless you have a problem with my players. Half of them are in your sixth period.”

Samuel frowned. Why would that mean there would be . . . unless she wanted him to— “You need me to let them off for games?” Great, his first day—no, his minus-one day, and already he was being confronted with a major ethical dilemma. Standing on the sidewalk in front of his house at night in the almost rain.

“Don’t be an idiot,” she snapped. “I expect you to give them makeup work. Playing sports is a privilege, not an excuse.”

Whew. “I agree.” He hadn’t imagined the basketball coach would share his opinion.

“Good.” She started around her car. “Some advice for tomorrow and the rest of the year. Don’t trust your students.” She gave him a thin, joyless smile as she opened the driver’s-side door. “Even the good ones don’t see us as human. Good night, Mr. Cooke.”

“Good night, uh—” Did she expect him to call her Ms. Cassamajor? The formality seemed right in her mouth but strange coming out of his. Just Cass seemed weird, too. In the end the problem solved itself: she got into her car and shut the door.

Samuel waved and started up the front walk, puzzling over her warning. Were the little buggers going to trip him in the halls? Steal his keys? Surely they weren’t that low. Were they? Great, something new to worry about.

He didn’t hurry getting his keys out, but when he stepped inside and turned to close the door, he wished he had. Greta’s car was just pulling away.

At least she hadn’t called him “dear.”

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