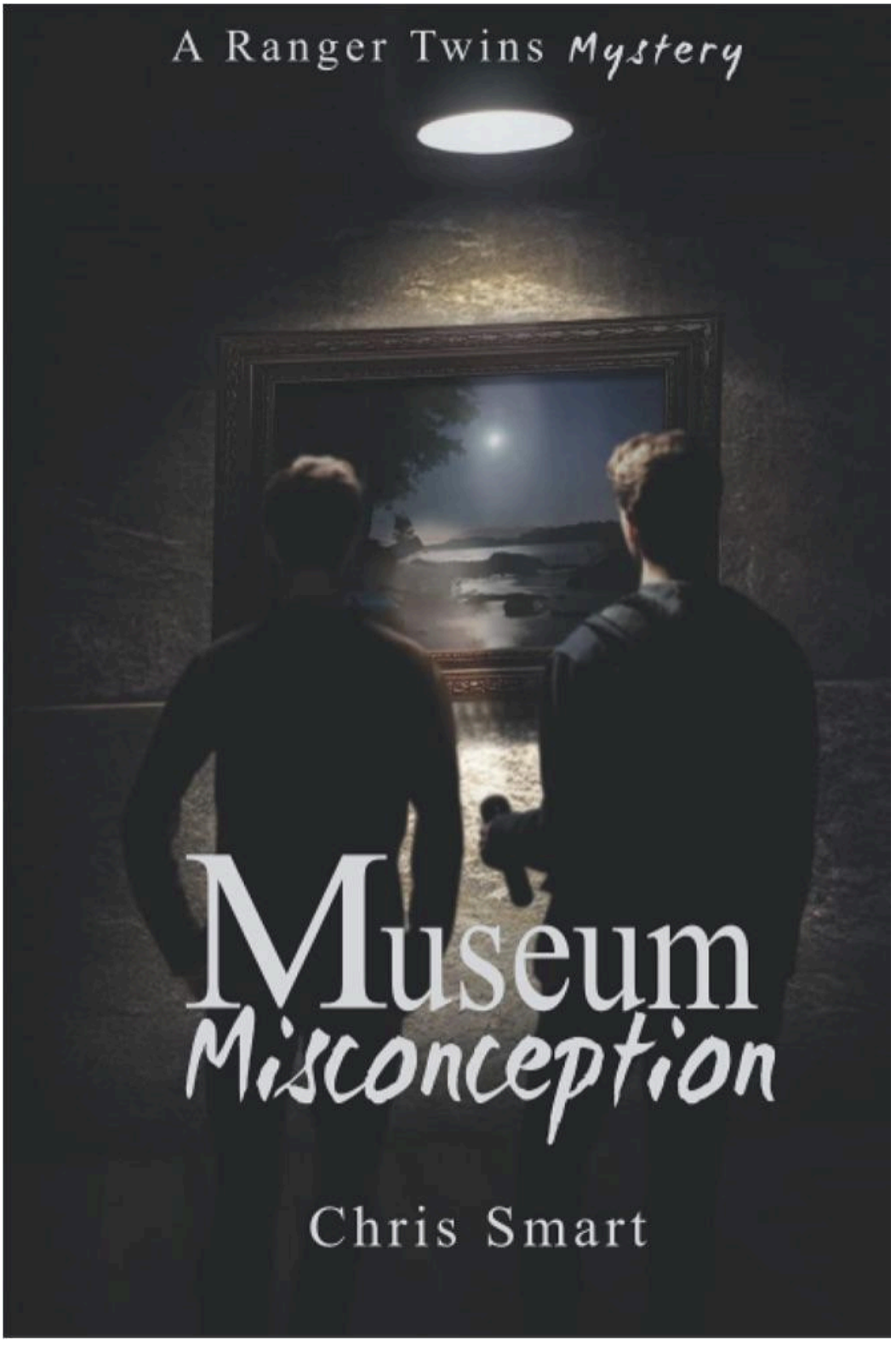

A Ranger Twins Mystery
Museum
Misconception
Chris Smart

Prologue



Detective Ranger's eyes opened with a start. He inhaled sharply, his gaze sweeping the dark room, searching for the thing that woke him. After seeing nothing, he let his eyelids droop back down; but sleeping was now out of the question. He was poised, like a jungle cat about to pounce on its prey, ears listening intently. *Creak.* There. That was it, somewhere below his bedroom, someone was moving.

Or it's just the house settling, he thought to himself. No. He had heard this stupid house all the time; that was something different—something alien. Darrell slipped out from under the covers of his bed. Reaching blindly toward his nightstand, he gripped the drawer handle and pulled sharply. It stuck for a moment before giving way with the sound of grinding metal. His eyes fell on the spot where the drawer was, though he could see nothing in the darkness. He reached in where he knew the flashlight rested.

His fingers closed on a small, cold, metal cylinder with rubber on one end. *Click*. The room was immediately flooded with light, casting eerie shadows on the walls. The familiar sight of his room did nothing to calm his unease. Resting inside the top drawer, was the small gun safe that housed his handgun and its fully-loaded magazine. He reached for the gun, deciding that if worse came to worst, it would be better to be prepared.

Holding the flashlight in one hand and the gun in the other, he stood up, eyeing the door cautiously. He had been trained to expect trouble around every bend, danger behind any possible hiding place. For all he knew, the intruder in question could be right behind the door. Rounding from the heels of his feet to his toes, he silently traversed the expanse of the room. The lush, gray carpet masked what little sound he made. Even if the intruder had been in the room with Darrell, he would never have heard the detective coming.

With the hand that held the flashlight, he reached toward the brass knob, grasping it tightly. He wrenched back on the door, flinging it open. Darrell leveled his gun at the spot where the average person's heart would be. But the hallway was completely empty. He scanned the walls and floor, looking for any evidence of anything unusual. Down the hall, there were three more doors, two leading into the twins' bedroom, and the other to a bathroom. All the doors were shut, just how he'd left them earlier that night. But something was wrong—out of place. On a hunch, he clicked off the flashlight.

"Bingo," he whispered so quietly that it was barely audible.

Without the glow of his flashlight, the hallway should've been pitch-black. Instead, the smallest amount of luminance paraded up the stairs at the very end of the corridor. Gun still at the ready, he cautiously moved toward the stairs, stopping only once he reached the top step. The stairs wrapped around at the bottom, before leading into the entry hall. There was too little light coming up for it to be those lights. Someone must be in another room.

It was either the office or the living room, though Darrell would put his money on the office. That's where most of the valuables downstairs were hidden. Plus, if someone wanted to gain access to a computer, that's where his was. He tiptoed down the steps, quiet as a mouse. The detective rounded the bend, and sure enough, his hunch was right. Even with the door closed, light was pouring out of the crack between the maple wood of the door, and the polished wood of floor panels. Edging toward the door, he slid the safety off his weapon. Darrell stretched his hand to the handle, closing his fingers around it. In one swift motion, he yanked down on the office doorknob and flung it open forcefully.

"Freeze!" he barked. Eyes widening, Detective Ranger stopped dead in his tracks. Inside the office, hunched over the desk, peering back at their father with horrified expressions on their faces, were his six-year-old twins. They froze. At least, *one* of them did. The other regained composure and looked at Darrell.

"Dad! What are you doing up?" the younger of the two demanded as if he were the parent with the right to be there.

"I should ask you the same question, Dylan," he retorted.

Dylan looked as though he were about to speak, but Derek, his older brother, leaned in and whispered something in his ear. Dylan paused; his face scrunched up as he was trying to process whatever information he'd just received. Then his face lit up as if he had just remembered where his favorite toy was.

"We peed the filth," he declared, his back straightened. The look on his face was deadly serious. Darrell laughed so loud it could have woken the dead.

"I think you mean 'we plead the fifth'," he said. The detective set the gun on the nearest available surface, and he strode over to his boys. Then he noticed for the first time what was in their hands: case files, or more accurately, the one that belonged to his latest investigation. Darrell and the rest of the Wood Stack police were part of a manhunt concerning an art thief who'd made away with a quarter-million-dollar painting. Unfortunately, so far, all leads had been dead ends.

"What are you doing with that, Derek?" he asked curiously.

"Nothing… it was supposed to be a surprise…" his voice trailed off.

"Let me see," the detective said softly. Derek handed him the file, and Darrell inspected its contents. Everything was accounted for, as far as he could tell anyway. But now, there were phrases scribbled in blue and red crayon.

"Boys, you can't use Daddy's files as coloring books. I need this for work tomorrow."

Derek looked like he wanted to protest but stopped. Dylan was not so silent.

"We didn't use them as coloring books! We were helping you catch this chin–crinimal."

"Criminal?"

"Yeah! Here, look at our notes," Dylan urged, pointing to the scribblings. Darrell stared at the notes, a look of surprise and pride on his face. Some of the notes concerning the victim's report, crime scene photos, and even some police officer statements were actually very interesting. The observations were astounding, some of the details even Darrell had found himself when he poured over it, and the conclusions were just as profound. How his six-year-old twins had done this was far beyond him.

“You two noticed all this?”

“No,” Derek said sheepishly. “We aren’t done yet, there is still some more to add.”

Darrell looked back at the reports, though there were numerous scribbles, he couldn’t make out much.

“Tell you what, boys. You tell me what you found tomorrow after I get home from work, and then I’ll take you out for ice cream.”

“Yay!” they exclaimed in unison.

“Okay, my little monsters, off to bed with you. I don’t want Mrs. Maxwell to have to deal with two cranky kids when she babysits you tomorrow.”

They ran up and gave him a hug, then disappeared up the stairs on their way back to their room. Darrell now stood alone in the office, his eyes canvassing the room, looking for anything else the kids might’ve touched. Everything was in order. Darrell walked back to where he had put the gun, ejected the magazine and turned off the lights on his way out. He really needed to remember to lock his office.

Chapter 1



Six Years Later

Dylan Ranger hugged his blanket, clinging to the last semblance of sleep that lingered in the light of the morning. Usually, he was eager to be up early; but there were always exceptions. Today, for instance, he felt drowsy from the lack of sleep the night before. There had been an exciting notion that kept him and his twin brother awake until at least midnight. They had been talking in hushed whispers until Dylan had drifted off to sleep. But now, he hardly cared about whatever it had been. Sleep was a necessity.

He rolled over in his bed, only to be met with the sunshine greeting him from beyond the window. He clenched his eyes shut, but it was no use. His brain was now functioning at full capacity, jumpstarted by the face-full of sunlight. It was only then that Dylan remembered the big event occurring that day: The twin's twelfth birthday. He bolted upright, tossing his covers aside.

His keen eyes took in every excruciating detail of the room before him. The first thing that met his gaze was the navy-blue walls of his half of the large rectangle. This was in complete contrast to the orange wall that proclaimed the beginning of his brother's side of the expanse. The lush, gray carpet that ran the length of the room stretched all the way over to Derek's bed, where a seemingly lifeless form could be seen among the covers. This was no surprise, as Dylan almost always met the day before his brother did.

His own books were crammed together on the shelf next to his nightstand, which sported a desk lamp and an alarm clock. His dresser was on the opposite end of the room, near his door. A thin layer of dust had settled over the wooden wardrobe, and rather than cleaning it off, Dylan had simply drawn a smiley face into it. Most of Dylan's half of the

room was spotless, except for the occasional book left unattended or a discarded sweatshirt.

Derek's half once again contrasted this, with his many items strewn about haphazardly. His dresser had clothes leaking out of it, and his bookshelf had lost most of its occupants to the floor long ago.

Dylan slid out from under his covers, allowing his feet to meet the floor as he silently traversed into Derek's territory. The twins were best friends, so this wasn't any kind of problem. In fact, the boys themselves had been the ones to petition for staying in the same room. However, Derek was a different person in the morning. A dangerous person. This was the cause for Dylan's caution as he closed the distance between himself and his stagnant counterpart. One wrong move would lead to an unsavory demise at the hands of the monster that lay dormant.

Once Dylan was within reach of Derek, he gently let his fingers rest on what he assumed was his brother's shoulder beneath the covers.

"Derek," Dylan said gently, trying his best to wake the slumbering dragon without facing its wrath. "Derek, it's time to get up. It's our birthday. I bet Mom is making a special breakfast."

The groan that met these words was hardly human, but on the bright side, it wasn't the angry howl Dylan was expecting. And it meant his brother was alive at least—something that could not have been confirmed by a mere glance. Dylan gently shook his sibling, getting another grunt as a response. The move was dangerous, but necessary if he wanted Derek up any time in the next hour. With another thirty seconds of tapping his brother's arm, Dylan grew impatient. There was one sure-fire way to get his brother up. But it was risky. And if he wasn't fast enough, he would run the chance of losing life or limb in the endeavor.

"Derek! It's time to get up! It's the apocalypse!" Dylan shouted the words nearly into his brother's ear and immediately jumped back. This turned out to be a wise decision, as Derek's motionless body erupted into chaos at the sound of Dylan's remark. A pillow was swung with ferocity at the place where the young boy had been previously positioned. Once Derek's squinting eyes picked out Dylan in the room, he flung the fluffy projectile at the trespasser. Dylan tried to side-step but was still grazed as it flew by.

Now on his feet, Derek shuffled forward with such speed that Dylan had to turn tail and run to avoid him. Once he was on his own half, the boy opted for a tactical retreat out of the room. The more distance between himself and his attacker, the higher chance he would survive.

“I love you too!” Dylan threw over his shoulder as he fled the scene of the crime, making a beeline for the stairs. He doubted whether Derek would dare follow in his half-woken state. Dylan was out the door and down the hall in the blink of an eye. Not daring to steal a look behind him, he hopped down the stairs two at a time, pulling up short only as his feet met the last step before the hardwood floor of the entryway. He paused for a mere moment to decide whether the cool wood was worth the extra distance. After deciding slight discomfort was better than meeting death face to face, Dylan allowed his feet to contact the chilly floor and ran toward the kitchen. He stopped his retreat when the sweet aroma of French toast met his nose.

He turned the corner into the kitchen and was greeted with the sight of his mother fixing the savory breakfast item, along with eggs, hash browns, and a skillet of sausage. She was wearing a purple shirt, with gray pants that stretched down to meet her black shoes. Her brunette hair was tied back in a temporary bun as she worked on the meal. She smiled when she met his gaze.

“Good morning, sunshine. How did my birthday boy sleep?”

“Not great,” Dylan admitted. “But that was out of excitement.”

“I can imagine. We have a big day planned,” she said as she flipped a piece of toast on the stove-top. “I heard you wake up your brother, how did that go?”

Dylan smirked. “It was a dangerous operation, but at least we had no casualties.”

“Well, that’s good,” she replied. “It’d be a shame if we were down to one birthday boy for the party.”

Dylan knew she was joking about the party. The twins hadn’t had a birthday celebration since they had turned seven. Not that this was a bad thing—the twins preferred having smaller gatherings with just their parents and a couple close family-friends.

“Where’s Dad?” Dylan asked. Before he got her response, the sound of Derek pounding down the stairs resonated throughout the kitchen. A

moment later, the boy appeared. He wore a white shirt and had basketball shorts hanging below his knees. His dirty blonde hair was up in a tangle, and his blue eyes scowled in Dylan's direction. Dylan imagined himself to appear similar to Derek, seeing as they were identical in nearly every way. The only difference was their clothes, as Dylan had on a green shirt and was wearing camouflage pajama bottoms.

"You're a jerk," Derek grumbled as he walked toward the fridge to presumably retrieve the jug of orange juice that resided within.

"You're welcome for getting you up in time for breakfast," Dylan replied before turning back to his mom. "So, where is Dad?"

"He's out in the garage," she said as she stirred the scrambled eggs. "He's finally getting around to working on the hatchback."

Derek's whole body seemed to straighten up at the mention of the car, his eyes opening wide from a full squint. "That means we're doing something in town for our birthday," he said groggily as he poured himself a glass of juice.

Mom turned to him, her eyes studying his face intently. "I didn't say that."

"You don't have to," he replied as he took a sip of the liquid. "Dad had the part to fix it for the past month and a half, but he kept putting it off. The only reason he'd do it now was if he needed the car for something, and not all of us fit in his truck. Ergo, we're all heading somewhere, presumably somewhere in town."

The town to which Derek kept referring was Wood Stack, California. The Ranger household was located at the end of a mile-long service road that led straight back into the small destination. Dylan felt the excitement ripple throughout his whole body. This was big news if Derek was right. The twins hadn't been back into Wood Stack since they had turned seven years old. He whirled to see if his mother was going to confirm the educated guess.

She stared at Derek, a smile creeping onto her exasperated face. "I don't understand how you can do that."

"First of all," Dad said as he entered the kitchen from the garage, "Who says 'ergo' these days? And secondly, it runs in the family. We're going to have a pair of second-generation detectives at the WSPD in a few years."

That was definitely the boys' hope. Both Dylan and Derek had started exhibiting skills recently that could prove useful in becoming good investigators somewhere down the line. Even if it wasn't even possible for them to join the police force yet, they both did their best to hone their abilities while they were still young.

"So, Julie," Dad went on, "you haven't spoiled any surprises yet, have you?"
Mom rolled her eyes. "I haven't told them anything, but there's also not much I can do to stop them from spoiling it themselves nowadays."

Their father turned his gaze to Dylan and Derek.

"Got any ideas so far, besides that we may be going to town?"

Derek seemed to internally ponder the question, while Dylan jumped to doing what he did best: snooping. His eyes skipped over his father's gray t-shirt and brown work pants, moving to his black boots and then back to his dirty-blond hair that mingled with the gray atop his father's head. No clues there, but Dylan wasn't expecting any. He moved his gaze over to the kitchen table behind his dad, only to spot a pamphlet sitting before his mom's chair. Even from ten feet away and the text being upside-down, he could make out the words on the sheet of paper: "Wood Stack Museum of History". *Bingo*.

"We're going to the museum in town," he blurted. His dad nodded approvingly, while his mom and Derek turned to him with questioning looks.

"How'd you guess that?" Derek asked.

"Mom left her pamphlet on the table," Dylan replied. "If they're going to quiz us, they shouldn't leave the clues smack-dab in the open for us to find."

"Definitely your sons, Darrell," Mom said to Dad, who shrugged.

"I'm not sure this can be entirely blamed on me. You're pretty sharp yourself," he said to her as he draped an arm over her shoulder. She rolled her eyes.

"How about we just eat before anyone spoils any more surprises."

Dylan could definitely get on board with that suggestion. Mom and the twins sat down at the table as Dad swung by the kitchen and grabbed the food. He portioned it out until there was nothing left and quickly prayed

before digging in. Everything tasted wonderful, and it took almost no time at all for the boys to inhale their food, clearing their plates in the process.

“Can we go get ready to leave?” Derek asked as he stood up, plate in hand. Dylan followed suit, eagerly awaiting a response.

“Sure. The sooner you’re ready to go, the sooner we get to leave,” Dad said. The boys erupted into motion, dumping their stuff off in the dishwasher and sprinted for the stairs before their father even finished his sentence. Once they were back in their room, Derek shut the accordion-style divider that cut the space in half. Their parents had installed it in the twins’ room so that they could share the space while still having the ability to provide privacy. As Dylan changed into khaki shorts and a navy-blue shirt, his mind raced with possibilities. Even though a museum didn’t sound like all that much fun, he was willing to set that aside for the fact that they were finally heading back to town!

He raced through his morning routine in record time. He had never gotten dressed, brushed his teeth, styled his hair, and flown down the stairs so fast. Derek bounded down behind him, and they waited in the entry hall. Dad came past them, apparently only having finished breakfast. He made a passing comment about making them wait an extra fifteen minutes if the twins didn’t brush their teeth correctly.

After another round of dental cleaning and flossing for good measure this time, the twins returned to their post by the front door. Mom and Dad were apparently less excited with the idea of going to town, evident by the fact that it took them nearly ten whole minutes to get ready! After that painful amount of time passed by, and the Ranger family was all at the bottom of the stairs, they made their way to the garage.

Dylan and Derek piled into the hatch-back, excitedly awaiting a trip they hadn’t taken in nearly five years. Dad got into the driver’s seat, and Mom joined him on the passenger side. Once everyone was buckled, Dad turned the key in the ignition. The engine turned over a couple times before roaring to life.

“I told you I could fix it,” Dad said to Mom.

She cocked an eyebrow. “I never said you couldn’t. I said it would take forever. And it did.”

“Get ready, boys,” Dad said, ignoring the comment and turning back to face them. “Your birthday-adventure is about to begin.”

Chapter 2



The trees slowly rolled across the window that separated Derek from the outside world. He quickly glanced at the speedometer and scowled as the needle steadied its pace around the fifteen-line. The mile-long access road that led from the Ranger's house out to Wood Stack would not be a long trip, but even five minutes felt too long to him. After waiting years for this exact moment, how could he be forced to wait even a second longer?

Town. The word was so simple, and yet it carried the weight of a mythical place. This was due to Derek only catching glimpses of it deep within his memory. It was a flash of a building here, a flicker of a restaurant there. The only full thing he could recall was what the inside of the police station looked like, as he had spent many days visiting his father there. But besides those few things, Wood Stack felt completely foreign to him.

At least Dylan could look back through his photographic memory and see the area in his mind's eye, but Derek didn't have such a luxury. And what made it chip away at him even more was the fact that it was so close, yet also just out of reach. One mile. The only thing that separated him from Wood Stack was a single mile of walking distance. It seemed like such a meager obstacle to bar access to the town. But to a boy who was eleven yesterday, and who had his mother's watchful eye on him most hours of the day, apparently it had been enough to separate the two.

But things were about to change. Mom was starting a new job soon, which meant that the boys were going to be left on their own at home starting next week. This presented the twins with a new prospect: the ability to leave the house unsupervised. Just the thought of it got Derek excited. Then he was yanked rudely from his thoughts as Dylan yelled into his ear.

“Look! There it is!”

Derek leaned over and stared out his brother’s window, gaping at the sight that greeted him. The forest that surrounded the Ranger residence on all sides began to thin out as they drove forward, revealing glimpses of the community that lay beyond. More and more of the place became visible as the trees became fewer and farther between. Before long, Derek could get a truly good view of the town that had occupied his day dreams for so long.

The road rounded a lazy corner, revealing where the gravel-stretch met up with the asphalt of the town’s streets. A waist-high wall made of red brick stood on either side of the road, with a metal mailbox bolted to one side. On the opposite side of the street, Derek spotted houses of varying sizes and colors nestled together. Green grass announced the outside territory of each residence, meeting up with the public sidewalks that granted a path for neighbors to greet each other. It all seemed like a far cry from the lone house that the boys were currently leaving behind.

Dad turned onto the main road and drove the car through the suburban streets. Both Dylan and Derek remained silent, apparently wishing to simply take in the scenery. The older of the twins could barely breathe it all in. His mind was still racing from that fact that they were actually in Wood Stack again.

After a short while, Derek noticed a pattern with the houses, recognizing reoccurring themes that managed to jump from home to home. Dylan leaned obnoxiously over him to get a

better view of the community, but Derek hardly cared as he himself continued to gape. As the car moved forward, the houses started spreading thin, opening up the space for little restaurants, a public library, movie theater, and so on. Derek wondered if any of these places were on the agenda today. Or maybe the museum would take up all their time. Admittedly, Derek wasn't too fond of the idea of spending his birthday in a museum, but even that was better than being cooped up in that house a second longer.

"There's a park on this side," Dylan exclaimed, now looking out his own window once again. Derek leaned over to see the sidewalk skip across a well-trimmed field that had bushes and shrubs separating the pathway from the greenspace. Further along, the sidewalk turned to a bridge that arched over a small creek, and beyond that, sat a playground that Derek vaguely recognized.

"And a skatepark," Dad mentioned, pointing as he drove. Derek let his eyes dance this way and that until he spotted the concrete structures. It, like the playground, seemed empty.

"Where is everyone?" Dylan asked.

"School isn't out until the end of the week," Mom replied. "There will be plenty of kids around once it is."

"Are we going to the museum?" Derek asked.

Dad shook his head from the driver's seat. "Not yet. That's planned for a little later."

"Where are we going then?"

"For now, we figured it'd be good to just drive around a bit," Mom said. "It'll be good for you guys to get familiar with the area if—"

"Careful, Julie," Dad cut her off, "You've been so good at not spoiling anything yet; we don't want to start now." He was probably wise to do so. Mom was awesome at a lot of things but

keeping birthday secrets wasn't one of them. For one, she always hid the boys' presents in the same spot. Every single year. For both their birthday and Christmas. She also had a tendency to let secrets slip out.

Even though Derek tried not to, his mind immediately jumped on her statement, trying to figure out where her words would have gone next. Why would they want the kids to get familiar with the area? The obvious answer was so that the twins wouldn't get lost while moving around the place, but Derek couldn't imagine that to be the case.

The Ranger family drove around in the car a little longer, showing off a plethora of different areas within the town. Dad acted as tour guide, pointing out things that the twins might be interested in: the middle school, high school, arcade, laser tag, book stores, ice cream shops, diners, restaurants, etc. Once they moved out of the commercial area, he drove over to where the industrial area could be spotted. The quaint strip malls and grocery stores turned to brick and concrete buildings, and the roads started getting rougher from heavier wear-and-tear.

Moving on from there, Dad led the family all throughout the town, taking a path where they could see most of the sights that he knew they'd be interested in. After about an hour of driving around, he slowed in front of the only road that led out of town. He told them about the bridge that allowed access out of the area.

Derek was confused. He knew his father hadn't showed them the whole town, but even from what he gathered, it seemed significantly smaller than he remembered from when he was a kid. Then again, he had memories of walking around, not driving. He also used to be a fair amount smaller than he was now. That could be to blame.

"I think that's just about everything we wanted to show you for now," Dad said.

“Are we going to the museum now?” Dylan asked.

Mom shook her head. “Your dad forgot to mention one last pitstop we’re going to make before we head there.”

“Where?”

“The Wood Stack Police Department.”

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