

THEME MUSIC. OVER THE MUSIC WE HEAR

EPISODE 10: Animal Control

INT: RECORDING BEGINS. Archives at PAIGE's work. Filled with old school filing cabinets and poorly lit, not that you can hear lighting. PAIGE has hunkered down between two of these cabinets to take her lunch break.

PAIGE

Hey, so things got a little hectic this week, and I haven't had a chance to touch base about mom with Detective Wi- Ben. He called the house a few days ago and left a message saying he's been checking every hardware store all the way down to the Wyoming border in case someone copied mom's keys there. Again, something I hadn't even thought about.

Part of me is hoping he's just being overly cautious, because that would require a lot of foresight and planning on mom's part. Or a lot of foresight and planning on someone *ELSE's* part, which opens up this whole case to the kidnapping angle again. But I need to let that one go, I don't have time to get into that possibility again on my lunch break.

PAIGE takes a bite of a sandwich. While chewing:

PAIGE (cont).

There was some kind of coyote attack out in the park,

PAIGE swallows.

so not only is *dad* neck-deep in paperwork and phone calls with people- various agencies and property owners nearby- but *I'm* dealing with those weird government employees again.

There's been a van parked out front at work for the past four days. I honestly can't tell if these folks are weird and cagey as a *requirement* of the job, or if it's some unfortunate side effect of their work. Like, do they look for people who cosplay the Men in Black on LinkedIn, or were these workers once bubbly characters who slowly lost the ability to express much beyond stoicism and disdain? I try to talk to them every time. All the way back to when I was just

the receptionist and one of them would stand at the front desk and wait for a buddy to come back with whatever they came to collect. I can't get a name cause it's been a rotating cast of about five people in different configurations of who does what when they get here. The first woman I spoke to made it very clear I couldn't ask what they were looking for, so I tried for some more softball questions after that: How's your day been? Up to anything interesting? Got plans for later? Nothing. They give responses but they're always such empty answers I can't keep a conversation going. It's agonizing. I'm not the most extroverted person, but trying-

PAIGE'S cell phone rings. A shuffle as she searches for it in the papers surrounding her. She talks over it.

-to get a conversation going seems better than nothing- hello?

ERIN

Slightly crackly, on the other end of a phone conversation

Hey! How's it going?

PAIGE:

Hi Erin! It's alright, I'm currently curled up in the archives-

ERIN:

Oh, shoot- am I interrupting?

PAIGE:

Ha! Hardly, I'm completely unattended down here.

ERIN:

Hell yeah, rule of the roost or whatever!

PAIGE:

Haha yeah, Jen- my boss- finally had enough of the weird document requests from those government guys I told you about, so I was given a "promotion".

ERIN:

Hey congrats!

PAIGE:

Ah- not so fast! My new job on those days is taking one or two of them back into our registry to pull whatever they need from the databases. So far I've had to look up animal control calls for the past 25 YEARS and comb through them for incidences of coyotes being aggressive.

ERIN:

Oh my god, that sounds like a punishment!

PAIGE:

Well, I thought it would be a massive list and take weeks to check, but coyotes are actually pretty docile scaredy-cats when it comes to humans. Most calls have to do with pets getting eaten or an occasional rabies scare.

ERIN:

Why would anyone need reports on that?

PAIGE:

I dunno, isn't your mom the one who works with animals?

ERIN:

Haha yeah, but I somehow doubt "angry coyotes" feature heavily in her research. That reminds me though-

PAIGE:

Oh, god I'm sorry I'm just going on and on about my stuff-

ERIN:

No it's fine! It's more interesting than pouring coffee.

PAIGE:

That's not true, you have so many great stories from the Doghouse.

ERIN:

I save the best ones for you (*Beat.*) Anyway! I was calling because mom is staying at work for the night again, and since ma is still visiting her sister, I've got the place to myself tonight. I'm gonna order a pizza and probably play mario kart or something, you wanna join? I've invited some other friends as well.

PAIGE:

Oh! Uh yeah, that sounds super fun! Who all's gonna be there?

ERIN:

Just Sofia and Paul from work and then Danielle from school. Do you remember Danielle?

PAIGE:

Ummmm, from our English class? Blonde hair?

ERIN:

Well, it's purple now, but yeah! It should be a good time.

PAIGE:

That sounds great! Should I bring anything, or-?

ERIN:

Just yourself and maybe some snacks if you'd like!

PAIGE:

Ooh, I'll bring the best of the drugstore candy aisle.

ERIN:

That better include sour gummy worms.

PAIGE:

It's not a party without sour gummy worms.

ERIN:

Thank god you agree. Alright, well I'll let you get back to crawling through old records, but feel free to come by as soon as you're done!

PAIGE:

Will do! See ya later!

They both say "bye" and PAIGE hangs up the phone with a beep. A beat passes before she remembers to continue with her story.

Oh right. So, this most recent coyote attack stands out for multiple reasons: the victim is certain the animal was alone, not in a pack or with its own family. Based off descriptions and the nature of injuries, it was also a VERY big coyote or a REALLY small wolf that travelled all the way from Yellowstone or something.

The biggest thing is the reaction the person had to being bitten-- the flesh was showing signs of burns, almost melted in one spot. I only heard about it from dad, but he saw the pictures and didn't eat much dinner that night. I understand why the facility would have a vested interest in environmental impacts that might be related.

Looking for EVERY coyote-related incident for 25 years seems a bit overkill, coyotes don't even live that long. I have no clue what they're gonna do with the information. I don't really know what power or authority they have in general. Do they have any law enforcement abilities, or are they more interested in research and intelligence, kind of like what mom used to work in?

TRANSITION MUSIC begins. We are taken from the present to ABIGAIL's high school experience.

START WEEK TEN:

Reporter Hebertsen here, it was a busy, busy week here at BHS. First is the hard news. The canned food drive ended last week, and we had a decent turn out. It was better last year, but that was before the drought really hit, so I think farming families can't help out so much.

Maggie and I took her truck and drove out to the food bank. They're not doing so great over there, and I honestly didn't like how grateful they were to the school for donations. It'll make a good story for the paper, obviously. That our work did some genuine,

tangible help, I mean. I can make it out to be super positive. But all the corn that people are being paid to grow isn't going to feed people in the area, it's being grown for the government building that uses ethanol nearby. What could the CDC possibly need that much ethanol for? People are going hungry because the government needs power for a publicity event? There might even be farmers who aren't eating because they have to sell all their crop to one place. I'm speculating now, but this doesn't add up at all. I'm going down there after school next week for sure. See if anyone can explain this.

It frankly makes my other news feel exceptionally trivial.

Josh Herrera, the drum major and Sarah Marie's boyfriend? I don't know how long that's actually been official, because she was hanging off him for a while. Anyway, Tommy broke Josh's fingers over the weekend! Apparently Tommy decided not to study music in college, and Josh was teasing him by playing what Tommy called "a song of sevenths"?

Obviously, I don't know what that means, but Tommy explained it's a music theory thing, sort of?... I guess it's a song that never resolves in a satisfying way, and just goes on and on. Well, Josh's piano was right on the other side of Tommy's wall, and Tommy got so sick of it he walked out of his room and closed the piano lid on his brother.

Tommy didn't want to break his hands! But he was laughing when he told me the story, so his remorse doesn't go far. So now Sarah Marie is suuuuuper angry at Tommy for hurting her boyfriend, and isn't too keen on me for liking Tommy so much. It's not a huge deal though, Sarah Marie and I aren't best friends anyway. And I'm allowed to think Tommy is cute! Nothing is gonna happen anyway... END WEEK ten

PAIGE: aww, poor mom. High school crushes are truly the worst-

PAGE TURN

ah shoot there's more?-

Back in the past

SPECIAL NOTES: saw something really strange today. I think. It was an animal, sort of? But if it was just an animal, it's not the likes of one I've ever seen in Montana, anyway. I think it was hurt pretty bad. It ran by the window of the AP Gov classroom, so I only got a

quick look. I nudged Tommy-- who of course drew attention to it for a second, but no one on the other side of the room saw it. Tommy said it was a raccoon or a coyote, so clearly he needs his eyes checked. I don't know how you could mistake those two animals. but it's body wasn't...fluffy? It had fuzz, but it looked wrong. Like, genetic mutant "it's a wonder that raccoon is alive" wrong. There were cuts that looked kind of old cause they weren't bleeding as far as I could see. There were smaller lumps of fur hanging off its back. It was either a really big coyote or a really small wolf. Whatever it was, it needed help.

I asked Jones if I could go to the bathroom, but once he finally understood the sign for it he said class would be over soon enough, even though lunch was half an hour off. He also made sure to mention I'll be more useful in his classroom taking notes for my exams. Typical. I needed a distraction. Jones turned to put in a film, so I passed a note to Tommy. He scanned it, added something, and passed it on to Maggie. And boy did they deliver.

The video Jones was showing was about the Reconstruction Era. Making new amendments and laws after the Civil War. So Tommy got Maggie's attention to provide a truly rousing chorus of what I was later informed was a Schoolhouse Rock song. The one about the bill? It was tangentially related, I suppose. Maggie and Tommy started singing, and Tommy being like he is, well, everyone was joining in pretty soon. I could see Jones shouting at everyone to settle down, when Maggie climbed on her desk. With that huge cast still on all the way past her knee from when she fell last month. She stood above the class and conducted everyone with her crutches. Korey was so shocked, she stopped translating the video entirely. The pandemonium provided perfect cover for me to slip out. I need to buy Maggie coffee for thanks. Or a Nobel Prize.

I got outside with no problem after that. Since Jones' classroom is at the end of the hall, I didn't have to worry about making any other teacher worry about me. Everyone who isn't Jones is really nice and understanding, but sometimes teachers can baby me. I had just made it to the fence near the parking lot when the bell rang. Joys of an open campus: no one could question me.

I tried to run without looking like I was running. Specifically running after an animal. Didn't want to spook the little guy, or get caught looking like a suspicious teen to the houses nearby. Whatever this thing was, it was apparently bigger than I had thought when it

ran past. There were paw prints on the ground where it had trampled over the brush. Tracks the size of my fist at least. This clearly couldn't have been a raccoon, cause its huge paws didn't have thumbs.

That's when I noticed a burning smell.

MYSTERIOUS MUSIC BEGINS, UNDERPINNING THE TENSION.

It was coming from the direction I was headed, so it made the last leg of the trip much faster. It smelled similar to burnt hair, from when I accidentally caught my hair in my birthday candles when I was little. But it was almost a bit more synthetic? I honestly would have thought someone was burning plastic, and when I got to where this thing was, there was something that looked almost like melted plastic, or whatever's inside a lava lamp. I was so distracted by determining this substance, I almost fell in the hole-- no, it was a crater. There was a small clearing of the trees where it looked like everything had been burned away, like an explosion. And that's where the crater was. But I feel like my classmates would have mentioned hearing something like that so close to the school. We'd discussed meteors and the rings of impact in middle school, so that was my first thought, only the trees weren't falling down or looking like they'd been crushed. It was like the explosion happened after it landed.

I couldn't get a closer look, though, because people were already there.

MUSIC SLOWLY BEGINS FADING

I hid behind a bigger tree a little distance away on instinct. I don't know what told me to hide, but being seen by this crew seemed far worse. There were two vans, one had a satellite on top, and the other said it was "animal control", but it didn't have the logo for any local government or humane society around here. Dad said all animal control is dispatched through the Jefferson County Parks Department. We had to call them a few years back when a black bear got lost and found her way into our neighborhood. I don't know why, but my instinct was poachers. We get people who travel up near here when they can't wait for the proper elk season to start. But I didn't see any elk, and no one needs a satellite to go hunting. If they were poaching bigger game, I needed to let dad know so the Parks Department could get on the case. I started studying their faces; in case I had to identify them later.

The people in the vans were struggling with the animal. It looked to be about the size of a german shepherd, or some other big dog. Clearly not a coyote like I'd thought. Maybe more of a black bear? But it was thinner and it had this enormous fuzzy tail that kept waving around, and managed to knock one of the workers right off his feet. Apart from the tail, though, he didn't have much in the way of a pelt. Or even hair at all. It was burned away in lots of places, and he was covered in these greenish looking gashes. Clearly the animal had been here when the explosion took place. It's tail was still smoking when one worker pinned it down and patted out any sparks. That was probably what the burning smell was. I wanted to cry; he looked so scared and hurt and these people were tackling him!

Finally, they found a tranquilizer that seemed to work, and the door to the van with the satellite opened. A man in a full business suit walked out and looked down at the animal. He looked totally out of place in the natural area outside town. He took a few pictures and made a gesture telling everyone to pack it up. One woman with a very tight bun put on big gloves and went to the smoking crater. Those lumps of fur on the creature's back were laying on a pile of grass. PUPS. Apparently he was a she. The momma had been carrying her babies on her back to somewhere she thought would be safe. To her credit, tight bun woman picked them up very gently and made sure they were in a cozy little kennel she brought out. Apparently they weren't old enough to warrant tranquilizing, so three more workers put on gloves to help while Suit Man watched.

The animal control van was gone within a minute, and took the dog creatures with them. I had a bad feeling in my gut about what they were gonna do to her; I obviously don't think they were with the Humane Society.

I couldn't take more than a step towards the crater before the man turned to me. He took a picture of me with the polaroid and smiled.

TENSE MUSIC FADES IN OVER NEXT LINE

He took the picture almost before he'd fully turned around. I think he knew I was there the whole time. I probably made noise in the grass or fallen leaves and didn't know it. Who knows how long every single person had been fully aware of my presence. Clearly I wasn't deemed a threat, because he made no indication he'd ever been made aware of the world outside the clearing. He put the camera down,

still smiling, and made a motion like I should come join him down there. I'm no idiot, I saw the Stranger Danger videos they started showing at school and on kids' shows. I stayed where I was and pointed back to the dog that had been driven off. He laughed and started signing. He just knew I was deaf-- maybe I had habitually started fingerspelling?

MUSIC OUT

His skills were very basic but he was able to say it wasn't a dog, but neither of us had the time to explain what had happened. He told me to go back to my classes and let the adults handle the situation.

Ugh. It may have been a bad idea in hindsight, but I immediately bristled at being talked down to like that. Anyone could see that animal- whatever it was- was hurt bad; what idiot would trust this guy and his poacher goons to really help?

That's when I remembered what Dad had been saying for so long. About how grateful he is I can't always immediately speak what's on my mind. So, for once in my life, I smiled and nodded.

He was about to get back in his van when he turned back and held up the camera again. He was smiling the whole time he said "they would know if I told anyone". I couldn't tell if it was the threat or the patronizing smile that never left his face, but my stomach just about dropped through my feet.

I don't really remember getting back to class. Only that lunch was about to end, and Tommy had picked up my backpack for me. He and Maggie had told Elise what I saw, so they were all super excited to hear if I'd managed to help some little raccoon. I just shook my head; told them it had run off before I could find it. The man's face swam in my vision as they prodded me for answers, but I stayed resolute. I just knew that smile was a thin veneer for something very real.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

Over the music, credits

This episode of Things Unsaid was written by Julia Duffy and directed by J Michael Deangelis. The part of Paige Gilbert was played by Julia Duffy. The part of Erin was played by Isabel Gray.

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[MUSIC FADES]