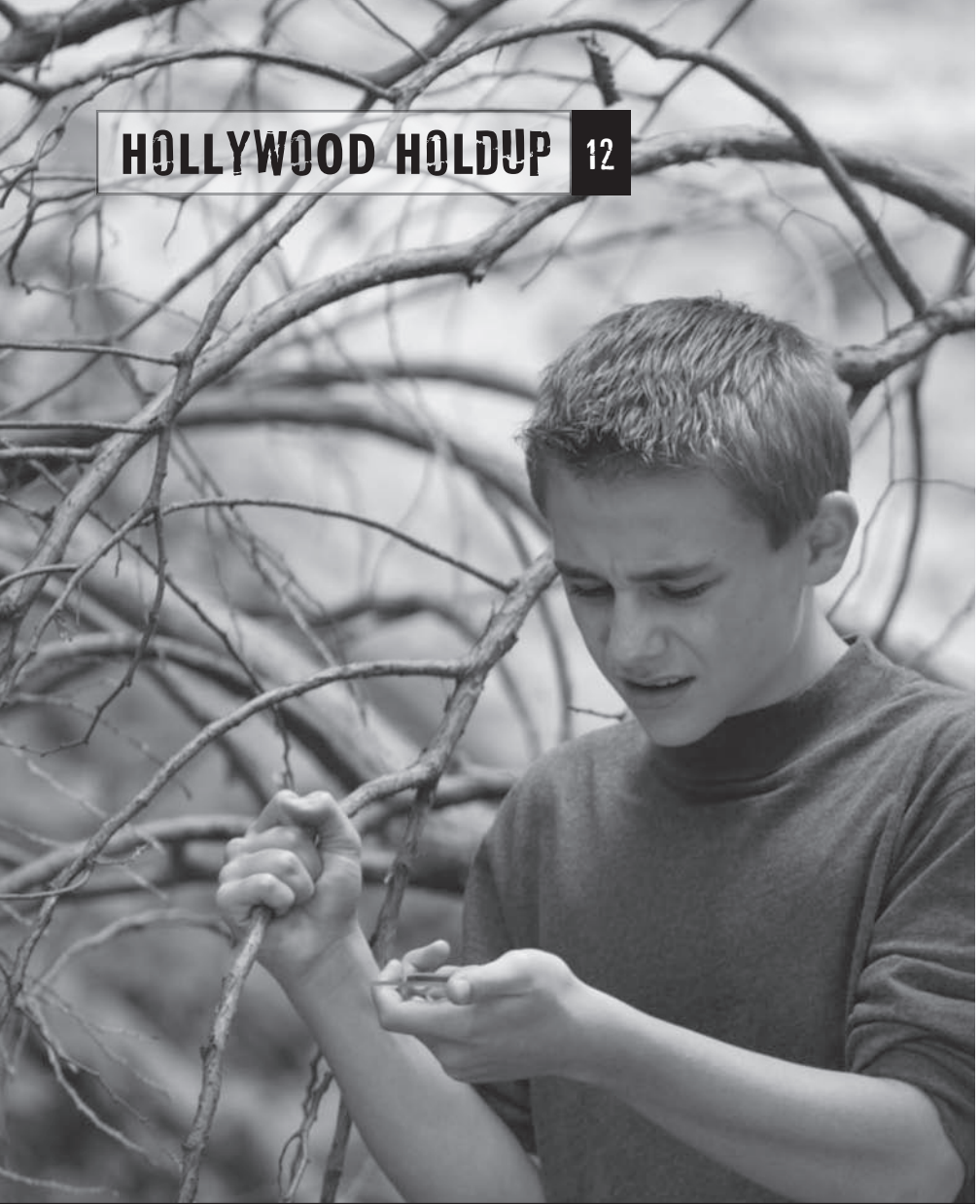


HOLLYWOOD HOLDUP 12



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RED ROCK MYSTERIES

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Hollywood Holdup

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**“I know a dead parrot when I see one,
and I’m looking at one right now. . . .
This is an ex-parrot.”**

Mr. Praline, Dead Parrot Sketch

**“Imagine if birds were tickled by
feathers. You’d see a flock of birds
come by, laughing hysterically.”**

Steven Wright

**“Courage is being SCARED TO
DEATH—but saddling up anyway.”**

John Wayne

**“That’s a SECRET, private world
you’re looking into out there. People do
a lot of things in PRIVATE they couldn’t
possibly explain in public .”**

Det. Lt. Thomas J. Doyle, *Rear Window*

BEFORE



Cassandra sat at the drive-thru window of Taco Town, adjusting her paper hat and wishing she could move the clock forward. She was near the end of her shift, taking orders on the headset and making change, and she just wanted to get home, take off the hot uniform, and watch TV.

She worried she would get so used to saying, “Welcome to Taco Town; I’ll take your order when you’re ready” and “Would you like regular or huge?” that she would find those phrases cropping up in conversations away from the job.

While she was pouring her cereal one morning, her little brother had said, “Aren’t you going to take my order?”

She would have smiled if it hadn’t been so sad. She had become someone who handed people food. This was not what she wanted to be doing 20—or even two—years down the road. But it was a job that was close to home, and it gave her gas money. Her goal was to go to college so she wouldn’t have to sit here every day breathing

exhaust fumes and dealing with the endless cars and people who didn't know what they wanted.

The bell dinged, and she glanced at the monitor. A light-colored sports car. She remembered this guy from just minutes before. "Welcome to Taco Town; I'll take your order when you're ready."

He had begun to speak even before she finished. "—asked for a triple with no guacamole, and there's a ton of guacamole on here. Plus, I got a small drink, and I ordered a huge."

"I'm sorry about that, sir. If you'll pull through, we'll make sure we get that right." She said it with a smile, like her bosses instructed. Even if you were mad enough to spit, put a smile in your voice and talk slowly, and people wouldn't know you were annoyed.

This was the fourth order they'd gotten wrong today, and she couldn't help thinking there would be a fifth.

One mom had ordered three tacos with no shells. She said her kids were allergic to them, but how do you wrap a taco with no shell? They'd done the best they could. Then the lady came through again. She'd ordered a small drink, and they had given her a huge. She handed Cassandra the cup, which she had to throw away, and Cassandra had given her a small—like the woman couldn't drink what she wanted and throw away the rest.

Once a guy had pulled up and held out a vase of flowers. It might have been sweet if it had been her birthday or if she'd known the guy, but she'd told him it was store policy not to accept gifts.

The bell rang again. Finally some space between cars—things were slowing down. A man said something, but it was muffled. He tried again, but she couldn't understand. She told him to drive around.

The monitor showed an old car with big headlights. The picture was fuzzy.

His brakes squeaked as he stopped next to the window—a little too close actually.

“What can I get you—?” Cassandra gasped. Ronald Reagan. Not really Ronald Reagan—it was a wrinkled mask that looked like the old actor—the dead president. She put a hand on the counter and smiled. “You scared me there for a minute.”

The masked man tilted his head, and she could tell from his eyes that something was wrong. When she saw the gun she knew she was right.

“Show me the money,” the guy said. Only it wasn’t his voice. It was coming from a staticky device.

She stared, too shocked to move.

“Show me the money.”

Her training came back to her. She was to try to remember everything she could—how he sounded, words he used, scars, tattoos, hair. If threatened, she was to give the robber what he wanted. It was only money. And the company was insured.

She guessed there was at least \$1,500 in the cash register. Maybe \$2,000. Lots of 10s and 20s.

Her hands shook as she pulled a Taco Town bag from beneath the register and stuffed the money inside.

The man took it with a milky white hand. Then he tossed the bag on the passenger seat, never taking his eyes off her. Blue eyes. Deep blue.

“Don’t hurt me,” she said.

He sped away.

PART 1





CHAPTER 1

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 28

☺ Bryce ☺

I had just finished mowing my last lawn for the fall, which was sad. You start counting on mowing money—then you realize that the snow is right around the corner and the grass is going to turn brown and stop growing. Usually by Halloween we've had at least one snowstorm, but not this year. I wanted snow so we could get a day or two off school, but the more you want something like that, the less likely it becomes.

Ashley, my twin sister, and Dylan, my little brother, were playing pirate and damsel in distress. Dylan swatted at imaginary enemies with his plastic sword, while Ashley screamed and pushed the hair

from her face like some starlet. She wants to be an actress, but she'll never admit it.

Mom watched from the kitchen, a hand over her mouth like she was trying to keep from laughing. Sam, our stepdad, wasn't home from work yet, and Leigh, our stepsister, had just gotten home from having her oil changed. Since she had gotten a car, she'd been gone a lot, mostly with her boyfriend, Randy. She poured some cereal, even though she could see that Mom was making dinner.

The phone rang, and Leigh, Ashley, and I raced for it. With three teenagers that happens a lot. Mom beat us all, but I checked the caller ID to make sure it wasn't for me. It read *Preston*.

"Oh, Jillian, I'm sorry," Mom said. "Was it sudden? . . . I'm so sorry." Mom looked a lot like she had when our dad died back in Illinois.

Mom put a hand over the phone and turned to Leigh, who punched a spoon into her soggy cornflakes. "The Prestons need to go out of town for a few days and need someone to—"

Leigh's eyes got big, and she shook her head. "No way," she whispered. "Dad's taking me to look at schools, remember?"

It sounded like she wouldn't consider helping even if she were going to be in town.



CHAPTER 2

✧ Ashley ✧

Mom took the phone to the next room, and I asked Leigh what was wrong with the Prestons' condo. "Isn't that where you stayed while the rest of us went to the Grand Canyon?"

"Right," Leigh said. "I wouldn't watch that place again for a million dollars. All those animals. All that dog food. Plus the neighbors are weird. That was the worst week of my life. And they didn't pay close to what I expected."

"A million dollars?" Bryce said.

"What's wrong with the neighbors?" I said.

"They share this courtyard, so anytime the dog goes outside he's

trespassing. An old lady next door was nice but quirky. And the Preston kid—his room gave me the willies. I shut the door and went in there only to feed his snake. Gross.”

“What kind of snake?” Bryce said.

“Boa constrictor or something like that. That I had to feed it a rat turned my stomach, and the thing squealed as the snake chased it.”

“Sounds cool,” Bryce said.

“A family of daredevils lives in that complex too.”

“Daredevils?”

“There’re three of them, and they shoot each other with air pistols and ride their bikes around like they’re some motorcycle gang. It was almost as bad as going on vacation with you guys.”

Leigh made it sound like the Preston Prison, but I’d been there with Mom’s book club, and it seemed nice.

Mom stuck her head back in. “Any ideas for someone to watch the place? It’s an emergency.”

Bryce said, “Ashley and I will do it.”

Mom frowned.

“Yeah,” I said. “We could stay there at night and walk to school. Plus there are no classes Friday.”

“No way,” Leigh hissed. “You guys can’t handle all those . . . *creatures!*”

“You’d be surprised,” Bryce said. “Mom, tell her we can come over right now, and she can show us what needs to be done.”