

Six-Armed Robbery
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Who don't hear will feel.

—Caribbean grannies everywhere

If you stop to think about it, this whole mess was Sister Alice's idea to begin with. Well. Not the robberies themselves. That idea came straight from Nessa and D and me. Our part in this wasn't exactly small, and I've never denied that. It's just that, when you hear Sister Alice talking about *distress* and *anguish* and all those other phrases she's been throwing around, it might not be such a terrible thing to remember it was something she said that inspired it. Like that poster she has in her office...you know, the one that says you have to take full responsibility for the seeds you plant?

That's not what it says? Seriously?

Okay, scratch that, then. The point is, I never would've even thought about the robberies...and I really hesitate to call them *armed*...if it hadn't been for Sister Alice's words. I know that's a big accusation. But once you hear the whole story, I bet you'll agree.

The robberies never would've happened if it hadn't been for Sister Alice's *actions*, either. When my mom sent me down here to spend the summer with her Auntie Jeanette, I knew exactly what I was getting into. I haven't lived here since I was three, but there's plenty I remember...like Auntie Jeannette's little red house with her big backyard full of fruit trees. Like chasing iguanas and catching crabs at the beach. Like all the time she spends at church. I knew this wasn't going to be the glamorous summer all my Raleigh friends imagined when I told them I was spending six weeks in St. Thomas...but I knew I'd get lots of beach time, and the plan I

had to make a little money before the start of eighth grade was the kind of thing I could do anywhere as long as I had my computer with me. I know Sister Alice might have a different opinion, but there's really nothing *wrong* about being hired to write essays about the parts of a cell or Revolutionary War heroes for kids in the class below me. People get paid for things they write for other people all the time. I looked it up online—it's called ghostwriting, and it's perfectly legal.

...It's called *cheating* in middle school? Is that written down somewhere?

Um, let's debate that another time. Thing is, because word of my essay-writing service had gotten lots of attention around school, I had a ton of jobs lined up for next year—and my aunt's choir practices and dinners at the church were the perfect time to work on them. They were getting ready for the Joyful Noise Caribbean Choir Competition in August, and even though Auntie Jeanette said never to repeat this, Sister Alice was really hellbent on winning. Since Sister Alice is the choir director, she wanted them to have an early dinner before practice every weekday evening. Like I said, it wasn't glamorous, and between us, the singing was a lot less *joyful* and a lot more *noise*, if you know what I mean. But three full hours with my computer in the back of the church, with a belly full of stew chicken and potato stuffing and all the other good meals Auntie Jeanette and her choir friends brought? It felt...cozy and calm, and that golden hour light fading into evening blues helped me to focus and write.

I'd taken a tiny break from an essay about the Boston Tea Party one Tuesday, and I didn't even notice the choir was on their own break until Sister Alice swooped down and snatched the computer right off my lap.

“You back here playin’ games, young lady?” she’d snapped, and then her beady eyes nearly bulged right out of her head when she saw exactly *what* I was playing. “Jeanette! Are you *aware* of deh nonsense your niece is engaged in back here?”

The *nonsense* was, um, an online game. Maybe you’ve heard of it— ‘A Mercenary Habit’? Yeah, it’s the one all over the news about the nun catching car thieves in the streets of Chicago with an assault rifle. I don’t know why everyone’s so upset about it...doesn’t it just, like, teach kids that stealing is wrong and that nuns can kick butt when they need to? Both are important lessons, if you ask me. Sister Alice didn’t think so. She held up her computer for my aunt and all the other choir members to see.

“I had no idea,” Auntie Jeanette gasped, which was enough to make me feel terrible. Auntie J’s the best, and what she doesn’t understand about technology she makes up for with what she *does* understand about throwing down in the kitchen.

“This is what idle time creates,” Sister Alice said. Most of those other mean old ladies in the choir nodded and clucked their disappointment. “Dangerous distractions and inappropriate interests. Iss a good thing I noticed.”

I began to explain this was just a teensy little lapse in judgment, but she wasn’t even listening. She just plowed on ahead about the evils of video games and unregulated free time in that *voice* of hers.

...yes, it kinda *does* sound like a parrot with a head cold. Exactly. But, um, those are your words, not mine.

In any case, the evening ended with Sister Alice convincing Auntie Jeanette to let her keep my computer locked away in the church office for the rest of the summer. It was bad enough that I wasn’t going to get to play the nun game, but what it *really* meant was that I

couldn't write those essays I was charging \$20 bucks apiece for. Even worse? She'd found me another 'job' to do during those choir practices, although I'm using that word really loosely. You get paid for a job. This was more like...involuntary servitude, and yeah, I already learned in social studies class what those words *really* mean. Turns out Sister Alice had a few thousand books in the school library next to the church that needed new plastic covers, stickers on the spine, and a stamp in the front cover. She could've paid some of the teachers, like Auntie Jeanette, to do this, like she was paying a whole lot of the other ones to teach summer school for high-schoolers on academic probation all day. But she had a different idea in mind...one that wouldn't cost her any money at all. I think you can see where I'm going with this. Instead of spending my summer writing sentences, I'd be spending my summer *serving* one.

Sister Alice convinced Auntie J that working in the library all day would help me grow in character, and that clearing the dishes and straightening up after their choir practice dinners would help me grow in virtue. I tried to explain to my aunt that I'd done enough growing—I'm one of the tallest kids in my whole grade—but I wasn't the one she wound up listening to. I started my work at the library the very next day.

There was *one* good thing that came out of this, though. Two, really, because if I hadn't been assigned to books and busgirl duty, I would never have met Nessa and D. It was them I noticed first when I walked into the library on my first day, not the piles of books behind the table where they sat. Nessa's the same honey brown as I am and almost as tall, and we learned pretty quickly that we both liked car thief video games and heist movies. D was—different. A lot shorter than me, and Nessa, too. Deep brown complexion and eyes that reminded me of the ocean, not because they were anywhere even close to blue, but because they were gentle and

warm. Everything about him was gentle and warm. Well. Mostly. Because D could be pretty hardcore, too, if the moment called for it.

I mean, yeah, maybe I thought he was cute. Or...maybe I *will*, in a couple of years. This summer, it wasn't like that for us. We were just friends. Special friends, the three of us. Because once we'd known each other for a few days, we became a trio.

Turns out Nessa's situation wasn't all that different from mine. She'd gotten roped into the library chore after her grandmother spilled to Sister Alice that Nessa's stepmother was letting her work a few hours—with pay—at her beauty supply store. "Sister Alice told Granny that a girl my age should be surrounded by Whitman and Walker instead of wigs and weaves," Nessa grumbled to me the day after we'd met. And D? He was one of Sister Alice's victims, too. She'd snatched something of his at a choir rehearsal also—a handheld gaming system—and one of the game chips fell down into an air conditioning vent behind a pew. It was her fault, but Sister Alice convinced D's grandmother he didn't need to replace it—that D didn't need gaming as much as he needed godliness. Yeah, she liked her alliteration, for sure.

Having a common enemy helped us bond. Like I said, it made us a trio. But once we heard Sister Alice and her friends at dinner one night...once we had that *idea*...we became something more. We became a crew.

The idea came to us about four days after I'd started working in the library—meaning four long days of stamping, stickering, and plastic-wrapping hundreds of books—but it didn't actually come to us *in* the library. We were on meal clean-up duty, scraping plates and bringing dishes and pans back to the church social hall kitchen to clean. Nessa and I were wiping down folding tables while the choir members talked.

“—that’s why she isn’t here tonight,” old Mrs. Braithwaite was saying to the crowd of ladies gathered around the fruit punch table. “Six iguanas on deh terrace! Said she chased dem with a broom an’ all, but she was so shaken afterwards, she didn’t think she could sing tonight.”

“Lord sen’ help,” Mrs. Warner sighed. “Glad it was Glenda and not me. Those *disgustin’* creatures...I can’t even get mehself near them.”

“I don’t mind iguanas,” Auntie Jeanette spoke up, “but don’t let me see a gecko. Or—good Lord, those big grasshoppers? The way they jump? May as well call deh priest for my Las’ Rites.”

“That’s how I am about frogs. And they jump even higher,” Ms. Flores shuddered. “I can’t stand to even *look* at any amphibian. Jus’ causes all deh bile to rise in my throat.”

“It had four cockroaches got into meh car one evening after a rain,” Mrs. Chesterfield announced. “I pulled off the road and walked two miles home along Mafolie Road. I decided the car was theirs for the night.”

“That’s absolute nonsense,” Sister Alice declared, snapping her fingers at me for a refill of her tea. “You’d think someone would be able to rob you blind just by waving some kind of insect in your direction.”

“Oh, you could certainly rob me with a roach,” Mrs. Chesterfield chuckled. “I’d fight a robber with a gun or a knife. I’d throw meh whole purse at a robber with a cockroach.”

“Or a frog,” Ms. Flores added, and all the other ladies chimed in with their agreement.

“Ridiculous,” Sister Alice said. “I could understand, perhaps, a *gungolo*. Those things deserve their space. But all those other creatures you mentioned? They jus’ need a simple reminder about the natural order of things. That there’s a hierarchy. That they’re at the bottom.

They need to realize their place in the world and who's actually in charge." I handed back her cup of tea, and she raised her eyebrows at me. "Kind of like children."

She left a pile of dirty dishes for us to clean that evening, but that's not what I was thinking about when I went back to the church hall kitchen with Nessa and D. And it wasn't until I was certain that we were alone that I actually let the idea out.

"Did you hear what they just said?" I asked D as we scrubbed a lasagna pan.

"When they were talking about all the kids in summer school this year?" D asked.

"No, not that. About the bugs and the lizards."

"Yeah, they're scared," Nessa snickered. "Like a roach or a li'l lizard could do anything to them."

"That's what I mean," I said. "They're all terrified of these little creatures that *look* scary but can't actually hurt them. So scared that they'd leave their car on the side of the road and walk home. Or even..."

D paused in the middle of washing a pan and looked at me, but Nessa's the one who spoke first. "What are you thinking?"

"She's thinking about that other thing Sister Alice said," D said before I could answer. There was a slow nod. He understood. "About being robbed with a roach."

"Think about it," I told them, dropping the plate I was holding and climbing onto the counter next to the sink for a seat. "Sister Alice has my computer, and now I can't make money the way I planned to this summer. Nessa—you were supposed to work in your stepmother's beauty supply store, but Sister Alice butted in and you're not getting paid, either. And D, it's not like she's ever going to pay to replace your game."

“Now we doin’ all *this* for free,” Nessa grumbled. “And it’s not like any of the others spoke up for us.”

“Exactly,” I said. I felt something rising in my chest and my cheeks, something warm and crackling like electricity or—soda bubbles, you know, when you drink it too fast. Whatever it was, I felt it behind every word I spoke. There was no way I could hold them back at that point. “I’m not scared of any of those animals. You?”

Two head shakes, both no. “I didn’t think so,” I continued. “Remember what Sister Alice said about the ‘natural order of things’? Knowing who’s actually in charge? My science teacher told us that there are something like 2 *billion* bugs on this planet for every human. They could crush us all if they wanted to. If they knew how to organize.” I paused and fixed them both with a stare. “If they had a plan.”

“You got a plan?” Nessa asked. Her eyes got wide and bright, like they did whenever she started talking about a good car heist game, and her smile matched.

“She’s got a plan.” D’s voice was quiet, as usual, and it was hard to read his face at first. He said nothing for a few moments, and then, finally— “No one touches our own grandmothers—or your Auntie Jeanette. That’s my only rule.” He nodded. “But I’m in.”

I guess you can figure out what happened next. Nessa and D and I got our plan straight—planned everything down to the last second, which we’d need to do in order to pull it off. After that, we started our preparations. Over the next week, we spent our free time sneaking around and collecting as much wriggly wildlife as we could. Roaches, lizards, grasshoppers...D even found an iguana he was able to smuggle into an old dog crate he had at home. His parents have tons of hibiscus bushes and a huge mango tree, so the iguana was happy to lounge around in the crate as long as D had some ripe fruits and flowers for him. Nessa talked her little brother

into walking up from the house to help us, and just like the iguana, he was happy to help as long as he got paid in mangoes. The two of them raided their older brothers' closets. Nessa searched the discard bin at her stepmother's store for supplies. It was all coming together. I just had...one lingering little question, and I asked D about it one afternoon while we were catching tiny lizards hiding in the cracks throughout the old blue-stone wall behind the church.

"What's a *gunlo*?" I asked.

He'd just pulled a newt out from its little hole and put it gently in the bin I was holding.

"A what?"

"Maybe I'm not saying it right," I muttered. "Sister Alice didn't seem to be scared of frogs or roaches or lizards, but there's one creature she talked about, and she...sounded different when she did. She called it a *gunlo*."

"*Gungolo*," D corrected me. He wasn't laughing when he did. D never laughed at me—at least, not for things like that. "They're like slimy black millipedes. Not too big, maybe deh size of your finger. You've seen them around your house, I bet."

"I have," I said slowly, thinking I'd seen several since I'd landed on-island a few weeks earlier. "I never thought about picking one up or anything, but—"

"Don't." D stopped his search and turned to me. His brown eyes were deep and...*intense*, like a sandstorm. "Look, everything we've caught? They ain' fun to look at, but they're not dangerous. A gungolo is."

"Seriously?" I shook my head at him. "If it's what I'm thinking about, they look like slimy licorice cheese puffs. And if *that's* the one thing Sister Alice is scared of..."

"I know what you're thinking," he said quietly, "but you have to leave those alone. You have to promise, all right?"

So I did. I promised. Not because I actually was scared of something that looked like a dark chocolate gummy worm, but because D asked me to. And for a crew to really work together well, there has to be trust.

The next night, we put our plan into action. Nessa, D, and I robbed the sopranos of Sister Alice's choir of all the money they had in their purses. And no, we didn't rob them with weapons. We robbed them with roaches.

And toads. And lizards. And D's big ol' iguana.

I got Mrs. Flores first, right when she was squeezing out of her car at the far end of the parking lot. With a fat frog in each of my hands and faking a voice that made it sound like I had a third one in my throat, I told her to throw all her money in my direction or I'd let the amphibians jump. I swear she called on six generations of New Testament ancestry before she flung three twenties at me and ran away.

Nessa got Mrs. Chesterfield out on the front road at the same time—told her she'd let all the cockroaches out of their jar if she didn't see the green. Mrs. Chesterfield had a fifty and a twenty on her that day.

D didn't get quite so lucky with Mrs. Warner and the iguana. She only had thirty dollars tucked away inside a compartment in her car. But I heard her scream all the way from the back parking lot. A scream like that, the whole island probably heard it.

By the time everyone had collected themselves and reported what had happened and gave the three of us in the library a second thought, Nessa, D and I were settled back down at our tables, working on those books just like we were supposed to be.

...How did we do it? Good question. Normally I'd keep something like this to myself, but I guess I don't really have a choice, and I don't mind sharing. It was a pretty good idea, if I say so myself.

Like I told you earlier—timing was everything. The robberies needed to happen right after the big kids in summer school got dismissed for the evening. It was easy to slip out of the library and disappear into the crowded hallways, especially since Nessa and I are so tall...and with the old school uniforms and backpacks the two of them found in their older brothers' closets, we blended right in. We kept wigs from Nessa's stepmother's store and some masks we made with old t-shirts in our backpacks. We pulled them on once the high-schoolers were gone. Our marks only saw tall kids in long pants and polo shirts, with wild wigs and a mask hiding everything except the eyes.

Of course, Sister Alice held a meeting with all the summer school kids the next day, but without any evidence, what could she do? She did stop and glare at the three of us in the library after the meeting. D asked in his sweetest voice whether there was anything he could help her with...and even though she looked as murderous as the nun in my game for a couple of seconds, she said nothing at all before she stormed off.

Even so, we waited another week before we struck the altos. Everyone had been rattled for a day or two after our first hit, but that had slowly faded away into...geez, what's the word? Yes—*complacency*. They forgot to be on guard, and that's exactly when we got them again. Mrs. Bryan with big grasshoppers. Old Ms. Baptiste with an extra-large coqui frog Nessa caught on the side of her cistern. Mrs. Aquino with three hairy-legged flying roaches that even gave *me* a bit of a chill. But by the end of that run, we'd earned an additional \$96.

We also earned ourselves a visit from Sister Alice. By the time she'd made it to the library after the second hit, Nessa, D and I were back in our regular clothes doing our regular job. She growled something and raged through the room, looking under tables and behind bookshelves. The evidence had already been chucked back into our bags and sent home with Nessa's little brother, and the best part about using natural weapons was that we could release them right back into the wild after the job was done. There wasn't anything left for her to find.

"I know allyou did this," she hissed after searching the entire room. "Don't know how, but I know it was you."

"Did what?" Nessa asked innocently as D shrugged.

"We don't know what you're talking about, Sister Alice," I followed up.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about." She placed her hands on her wide hips and fixed me with a horrible stare. "*You* know. Pride goeth before a fall, and I expect you're about to take a mighty big tumble."

I probably should've kept quiet. Probably should've just listened and nodded, like D and Nessa did. But I felt that thing inside my chest and my cheeks again—that crackle of energy like a light switch with bad wires, and what *actually* took a tumble were those words, falling out of my mouth. "Oh, I don't know, Sister Alice. I'm pretty sure-footed," I answered. "Like I learned from my Sunday School teacher— 'whoever walks in confidence walks securely'."

"That's not the way that proverb goes," Sister Alice snapped, "and while we're talking about ol' time sayings, maybe you've lived away long enough to forget this cornerstone of West Indian wisdom." She took a step closer to me and twisted her face into a frown angrier than a trapped wasp. " 'Who don't hear will feel'. Those who don't heed advice will face unpleasant

consequences. Don't ignore that, young lady. I've taught generations of students. I know this is one piece of prudence that never...*ever*...fails."

D and Nessa tried to make me feel better after she was gone. Nessa called me a badass for speaking back like that, and D said I was braver in that moment than he ever would be. It was another moment I should've just been happy to live in—something I should've moved on from. But I didn't. I just couldn't let it go.

So much so that, after a long night with almost no sleep, I decided to break my promise to D.

The next day was Saturday, a day with no library duty *and* no choir practice. My auntie always used that free afternoon to go grocery shopping, and I'd learned from her a few weeks earlier that Sister Alice used that time to do paperwork in her office. As soon as Auntie J left, I grabbed my wig and my mask—along with a few little *friends* from the yard outside—and took the back roads to the church. The school gates were closed but not locked, and nobody was around to see me pull on my disguise and hide my face. Then I pushed open Sister Alice's office door, ready to hear her scream.

Only she didn't. She didn't even seem surprised. She turned to see me standing in her doorway, and all she did was sigh. There was kind of an annoyed little shrug as she tossed the papers she was holding on top of her desk. "I was expecting you a li'l earlier," she said. "You almos' missed me. I usually go home for a cup of bush tea before evening mass."

I have to admit her calmness, her...*nonchalance*, if that's the right word...threw me off a bit. I didn't know how to answer that, and I saw a mean smile crack on her lips. "I should call Jeanette right now for you," she said, folding her arms over her chest.

I'll also admit I was surprised here, too—that she knew exactly who I was. Maybe that's why I didn't even bother to argue the point. "You won't, though," I said instead.

"No? Perhaps iss because I should be calling the *police*. You and your friends stole 250 dollars."

"256, actually." I tried my best to make my voice sound as strong as hers. "But I'm willing to give it back."

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Yup," I said. This is when I pulled my mask and wig off. "I'll give back everything I took if you do, too. Give me my computer, buy D his game, and give Nessa a chance to do something she *really* wants to do this summer."

Sister Alice stepped around her massive desk. "*Spare deh rod an' spoil deh child*," she muttered under her breath. "Listen, young lady, I have friends in *very* high places. But I'm willing to go easy on you, maybe march you home right now with a notebook to copy the entire book of Proverbs...*twice*. Clearly you have a lot to learn about pride. What makes you think I would cater to any of your demands?"

I cracked my own smile. "These do," I answered, and reached into my pockets for the gungolos I'd gathered from Auntie Jeanette's bougainvillea plants. Two in one hand, three in the other. They were sticky and wriggly, but the shock on Sister Alice's face was worth it.

"Put those down." Her voice wasn't shaky or thin—it was every bit the opposite. "I'm very serious, child. Step outside and put them on the ground."

I felt tingly and bubbly all over again. "These little millipedes? Do they scare you?"

"They should scare you," she answered. "Didn't Jeanette or Vanessa or Deuteronomy explain to you what those can do?"

Curiosity about the answer to her question won out over the shock of hearing D's real name, but it was a close race. "All they said was to leave them alone."

"As they should've. Every child growing up on this island knows they can spit in your eye. Some children insist that it's...urination, but that's—"

"—ridiculous," I finished for her. "All of it. We studied millipedes in science class this year." I brought my left hand up to my face for a closer look at the wormlike creatures. "One thing I know for sure, Sister Alice, is that they definitely can't spit in anyone's eye."

Well. I'm sure you know exactly what happened next. I guess you heard it from Sister Alice, though, because it was kind of a blur for me. Literally. I brought my hand up to my face and the next thing I knew, everything above my neck felt like it was melting, and I couldn't see *anything*. There was a lot of screaming and a trip to the hospital, and a few days full of medicines and bandages on my eyes. It was on one of those days when D came to visit, and he quietly explained that the species of millipedes in the Virgin Islands...unlike the ones I see sometimes in Raleigh...can spray toxins up to eight feet away. And yeah, the doctor explained that the acid in those toxins is strong enough to blind, so I'm lucky the ER staff acted quickly. Lucky the choir ladies accepted my apology. Lucky Auntie Jeanette only spent a day or two being shocked and disappointed before she finally believed how sorry I was, and forgave me with a long hug and some fresh johnnycakes. Auntie J really is the best ever.

I'll be honest, though. When Sister Alice told me she had friends in high places, I didn't think she meant a former student who's a whole *police captain* now. I thought she meant...um, a more heavenly connection. I know she wanted you to talk to me about laws and rules...and maybe pride, too, but I've learned my lesson, and I've got burn scabs to prove it. Feel free to tell me anyway, since you probably already planned to—

I'm sorry? You *weren't* planning to talk to me about any of those things?

Well—yeah, I'll be back next year. D might be taller by then, and Nessa and I are both excited about 'A Mercenary Habit 2' coming out. And yes, I'm interested in the Junior Police Corps you mentioned. I can see myself as a detective or lieutenant too, one day. Oh, I agree—it's definitely better to have this mind of mine working on your side than on the other.

Not sure you meant that as a compliment, but I'll take it.

In the meantime, I hope you'll excuse me. I've got this notebook, and a whole lot of proverbs to copy.

END