



Seductive Suspect

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: When Veronica Campbell agrees to take her sister's place at a murder mystery weekend getaway, she has no idea what's in store. The events at the mountaintop lodge get off to a good start, especially when she meets Adam, the handsome man staying in the room next door. By the end of the first night, however, the role-playing games take a dark turn when one of the participants is killed for real.

Violent storms and sabotaged cars trap the guests at the lodge with no escape. Frightened and surrounded by strangers, she not only has to stay on guard against the danger lurking in every corner, but fight her attraction to her sexy neighbor.

One by one, the number of guests dwindles as the murderer strikes. The longer they survive, the more Veronica worries she's falling for Adam. Can she trust him, or has she wound up in the arms of a killer?

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The cashier looked me over from head to toe when I approached his counter inside the gas station. “You heading up to the lodge in the mountains this weekend?”

“Yes, I am.” I fished my wallet out of my purse. “How did you know?”

“You’re not one of the locals. It’s a small town, but we get a lot of people like you stopping by to fill up before the last leg of their trip.” He took the bills from me. “The lodge is nice. Haven’t been there for a few years, though.”

Tired of both the small talk and the long drive, I simply said, “Glad to hear it.”

One by one, he pulled nickels out of the register drawer. “I bet you’re doing one of those murder mystery games.”

“Yes.” I stifled a sigh.

“I’d tell you to relax and have some fun, but you’d better be on your guard!” He let out a raucous laugh and passed me the handful of money. “But seriously, we’re in for some bad thunderstorms this weekend. Be careful up there.”

I turned around to leave. “Thanks.”

“I hope you catch the killer,” he called after me, still chuckling.

Outside, I climbed back into my car and peered through the windshield. Dull, gray clouds hung heavy in the sky. I took a swig of coffee from my travel mug and pulled out of the parking lot, hoping to arrive at the lodge before the rain started to fall.

The tree-lined road took me away from the outskirts of town into the mountains. As I followed its winding path, I recalled the conversation with my sister Trina that had led me out to the middle of nowhere.

“Come on, Veronica, it’ll be fun,” she’d said over the phone several days earlier. “And it would be a shame to let the free ticket go to waste.”

“Are you sure this isn’t a scam, or somebody trying to sell timeshares or something?”

“Everything’s legit, I promise. I checked out their website and, when I asked around, it turns out one of my coworkers did a similar event there a couple years ago.” She sounded a little too eager, but otherwise sincere. “And I already replied saying I’d go, so someone has to be there in my spot.”

An exasperated noise escaped my mouth. “Remind me again why you can’t attend?”

Trina giggled. “Shane invited me to his beach house this weekend, and of course I couldn’t refuse.” She paused. “Well, to be honest, I totally forgot I had this mystery thing coming up at the same time.”

I rolled my eyes. “Shane? What happened to Jacob?”

“Jacob? We broke up weeks ago. I thought I told you.” Before I could answer, she resumed her mission of convincing me to take her place. “Anyway, you should go. You’d enjoy a nice, relaxing getaway in the mountains.”

“I have been busy with work lately...”

“See? It’ll be perfect!” she squealed. “And it’s not like you have anything better to do.”

I shook my head. “Trina, insulting someone is not the best way to get them to do what you want.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant the whole mystery theme sounds exciting, and it’s something different from what you usually do in your spare time, and—”

“Fine.” I cut off her attempts at backpedaling. “I’ll go.”

“Yay! I’ll drop off the envelope with the directions and stuff sometime tomorrow afternoon.” Papers rustled in the background. “Even if acting out the mystery is, like, super cheesy, I bet you’ll be great. You might even solve it. You were always so good at crossword puzzles and things like that.”

“Yeah, I’m sure being able to fill in crossword puzzles is going to help.”

The car bounced when I drove over a narrow wooden bridge. The lush scenery reminded me of how I hadn’t taken a break from my job as a graphic designer in a long time. I had to admit it was nice to be out enjoying natural beauty for a change, instead of staring at my computer screen for hours on end.

Beneath me, a bubbling stream rushed over pearly stones and pebbles. The road wound around the mountain, taking me higher and higher. About halfway up, the GPS lost its signal, but the paved path only led in one direction.

Steering along the narrow curves, I thought more about my exchange with Trina. I hated when she was right, but she might have had a point. Devoting myself to my freelance business left little time for anything else. Some days I had to force myself away from the computer just to get out of the house for a few minutes.

I sighed and rolled my eyes again in the empty car. Somehow, Trina never seemed concerned about work, and bills, and the other mundane responsibilities of adulthood.

Growing up, she'd always been the fun, carefree one, while I'd been labeled the "serious" sister. Since I was taking her place anyway, maybe this weekend would give me the opportunity to be more gregarious and sociable for a change. After all, it wasn't like I'd see any of the other participants again after the festivities were over. I resolved to consider it one of the many aspects of roleplaying I'd agreed to as part of the mystery.

At long last, the trees thinned out, and I reached the top of the mountain. A sprawling wooden building with sloped roofs greeted me. Lights shone in the windows on both stories, and a wide staircase led to a set of doors. I steered around the circular drive, past an illuminated fountain, and parked at the end of a row of cars to the side of the lodge. Maybe this won't be so bad .

The first droplets of rain splattered against the ground. I exited the car and lifted my suitcase out of the trunk. Extending the handle, I dragged it over the cobblestones and rushed toward the steps. Before I reached the doors, they opened for me, revealing a silver-haired gentleman in a black and gray suit. "Miss Campbell, I presume?"

Thunder rumbled somewhere in the distance. I brushed the raindrops off my jacket and hurried inside. "Yes. How did you know my name?"

"You're the last guest to arrive." Back stiff, he bowed, then straightened. "My name is Victor. I am pleased to be of service to you this weekend. If there's anything you require, do not hesitate to ask."

"Thanks. Nice to meet you."

He gestured behind him to a young woman wearing a frilly maid's uniform. "And this is Babette. She is also here to attend to the needs of you and the other guests."

Babette stopped swirling her pink feather duster over a table and grinned at me.

“Bonjour, mademoiselle!” she said in a terrible French accent.

I rescinded my previous thoughts about possibly enjoying this trip.

Victor picked up my suitcase. “The others are dressing and preparing for dinner. Allow me to show you to your room so you may do the same.”

He led me through the foyer. My sneakers squeaked on the floorboards as I looked around. Wood paneling stretched up to the high ceiling, and an elaborate crystal chandelier hung above me. Bronze statues lined either side of the room, each in the shape of a different animal. To the right, someone was working in what I assumed to be the kitchen or dining room. More doors led out from the open space, but I followed my guide to the staircase.

A U-shaped landing overlooked the foyer. Victor stopped in front of the fifth door and pulled a key out of his pocket. After turning it in the lock, he handed it to me. “Dinner will be served in the dining room in approximately half an hour.” He set the suitcase down next to the bed. “I hope you find your accommodations satisfactory.”

Once he left, I investigated my assigned quarters. The king-size bed stood in the center of the room, adorned with an array of pillows and a hunter-green quilt. Matching dressers and an antique chair added to the lodge’s rustic ambience. A quick glance showed no TVs, radios, or phones.

I peeked into the bathroom and found nothing out of the ordinary. “Good thing I don’t have to share with anyone,” I muttered.

Lastly, a glass door led out to a wide balcony edging the upper level of the lodge. Through the adjacent windows, the treetops of the surrounding forest stretched toward the sky. I anticipated taking in the view after the storms cleared.

Unzipping my suitcase, I retrieved the envelope of materials Trina had given me. Costumes weren't required—thank goodness—but the brochure suggested guests bring semiformal attire. I hung my clothes in the closet to get any wrinkles out and opened the drawer beneath the mirror.

A set of laminated cards lay inside, which I'd expected. I read the top one to learn what role I'd be playing in this mystery. "Stella Harrington, a young, vivacious heiress who's always ready to spend her family's money on her next adventure." Not the most creative description, but it could be worse. I flipped through the cards and perused the rest of the information I needed for the first night.

Once I'd memorized the facts and tidbits, I quickly unpacked the rest of my belongings. Standing in front of the mirror, I brushed out my light-brown hair before twisting and clipping it into a simple updo and applied a little makeup. I didn't know if my efforts were enough to transform me into a wealthy heiress, but they'd have to do.

I pulled off my jeans, zippered sweatshirt, and T-shirt, and grabbed a purple cocktail dress from the closet. Silver jewelry and a pair of black heels completed the outfit, and I was ready to go. Slipping the room key into my clutch, I opened the door and set out for the dining room.

Out on the landing, I found my next-door neighbor leaving at the same time. A man in a navy-blue suit dropped his own key into his pocket and turned around. Upon seeing me, a smile spread across his face. "Well, hello there." Deep-set hazel eyes looked me up and down. "And whom do I have the pleasure of meeting outside my room on this lovely, if stormy, evening?"

I lifted my chin to meet his gaze, since he stood much taller than me. "Stella Harrington," I said, extending my hand. "You might have heard of my father, the oil tycoon."

“The name sounds somewhat familiar.” He wrapped his fingers around mine. “I’m Colonel Mandrake. I returned from a tour overseas not long ago.”

“Oh?” I raised an eyebrow. “You seem a little young to be a colonel.”

Chuckling, he winked at me. “I’m very ambitious and talented.”

I realized he hadn’t let go of me yet, and my cheeks flushed. “I can imagine.”

He laughed again. “I’m sure we’ll have plenty of opportunities to tell each other about our escapades this weekend. Or at least I hope so.” Releasing my hand, he offered me his arm instead. “May I escort you to the dining room, Miss Harrington?”

This whole situation had already proved to be as campy as I’d expected. But he was cute, with his dark hair and dimples, and I figured I should try to have fun. “I’d be honored, Colonel.”

I held onto his elbow and we descended the staircase together. Inside the dining room, I realized for the second time that day I was the last to arrive. Three men and three women sat at the long table, and they each turned to look at us when we entered. The “colonel” and I sat next to each other in the two empty seats marked with cards bearing our aliases’ names. No one spoke, and I wondered if everyone else felt the same skepticism I did.

Victor strode through a swinging door carrying a tray of covered plates. “Ah, good, you’re all here.” Babette appeared behind him to help distribute the dishes, along with an older woman in a white apron. “Ruth, our cook, has prepared an excellent meal for you tonight. Perhaps you can get to know each other while you eat.”

Everyone glanced around, still saying nothing.

Victor's bright smile never wavered. "Mr. Steele, why don't you tell us about your latest film project out in Hollywood? I'm sure it's fascinating."

Someone at the other end of the table cleared his throat and started talking about the fictional movie his character directed. While listening for any important bits, I took the opportunity to study the other people I'd be spending the weekend with. Mr. Steele was a clean-cut, average-looking guy who played his role well enough. Next to him sat a thin, lanky man with shaggy hair whose hunched posture prevented me from getting a good look at his face and made me wonder what he was hiding. The third male guest towered over the people around him with his bulky frame. Light hair, buzzed short, contrasted with ruddy cheeks, and he gulped his drink in between asking loud, enthusiastic questions.

Victor set a plate down in front of me and whisked away the lid to reveal prime rib with mashed potatoes and mixed vegetables. Not bad at all. I cut into my meat and turned my focus to the women at the table.

The mousy woman across from me nibbled at a green bean. Maybe she looks more like a rabbit, I thought, especially with the fur collar on her dress. A redhead in a tight blouse, whose vivid hair color most likely came from a bottle, took a sip of wine, her lashes fluttering behind black rimmed glasses. The last guest sat with her back stiff and hands folded as she waited for her food. Her long blonde ponytail and pert nose gave off the impression of cheery youth, but something about her posture and how she stared at each person who spoke told me she had no interest in making friends. Whatever the reward for solving the mystery, she came here to win.

We gradually slipped into our assigned roles during our meal. I answered any questions posed to me with an airy giggle and a tale of Stella's latest caper. I didn't know if it was possible to fly over the entire state of Nebraska in a hot air balloon, but it sounded fun when I said it, and no one doubted me. Whenever a lull in the conversation slowed down our game, Victor interjected to keep us going.

I tried to take note of everything I heard and get a clearer image of the characters around me, paying more attention to the stories they told instead of keeping their aliases straight. Ponytail alluded to being some sort of anthropologist or explorer. Shaggy portrayed a reclusive writer venturing out of his home for the first time in years. Big Guy seemed eager to share everything about his fictitious life, while Rabbit and Redhead acted more reticent and coy.

Once everyone finished dinner, the three staff members led us to a large room in the rear of the lodge. The vast library rivaled the size of my apartment. Leather armchairs and sofas formed a sitting area in one half near tall bookcases, and the other side held a pool table and an ornate chess set. The sound of a torrential downpour sluiced through the heavy curtains. In the dining room, the house had muffled the thunder, but here, it rattled the windows and floor like we were in the center of the storm.

“Please, make yourselves comfortable,” Victor said. “I will need some time to prepare this evening’s organized activities, but Babette is available to serve you in the meantime.”

Carrying my wineglass, I took a seat on one of the couches. Colonel Mandrake sat beside me, leaving no more than a few inches between us. Rabbit, Shaggy, and Ponytail joined us, each selecting one of the armchairs, while the others ambled over to the pool table.

Another boom of thunder caused the overhead lights to flicker.

Rabbit glanced upward, and her nose twitched. “That’s not good,” she murmured.

On the opposite side of the room, Big Guy let out a roar of laughter. “Hope this place has plenty of flashlights. Though I bet I can beat all of you in the dark!”

Ponytail sniffed. “In the jungles of Africa, we didn’t even have electricity.”

I had to admire her commitment to not breaking character. “Africa is one area of the world I haven’t been to yet,” I said. “Maybe I’ll ask my father to organize a safari for me sometime soon.”

She shot me a withering look. “It’s no place for trifling games. Don’t you think you’d have more fun somewhere else?”

“Hey, now.” The colonel leaned forward. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting to expand your horizons, see new things.”

“I’m glad someone understands.” I turned toward him, assuming he’d offer more enjoyable conversation than the humorless Ponytail. “And what about you, Colonel? I’m sure you’ve seen all sorts of exciting places during your service.”

He chuckled. “Always searching for your next thrill, aren’t you, Miss Harrington?”

I crossed my legs and inched closer to him. “You already know me so well.”

“And I can’t wait to learn more.” He patted my knee, letting his hand linger for a moment.

Ponytail rolled her eyes but said nothing further.

Babette approached our little group and stood in front of Shaggy. “Another glass of cabernet sauvignon, monsieur?”

His gaze traveled from her stiletto heels, over her fishnet stockings, up to the hem of her short, fluffy skirt. I tried not to giggle at how she mangled the pronunciation of the wine.

“Sure, thanks,” he said. “I mean, merci .”

The billiard balls clattered together, followed by a whoop of victory. “Told you I’d win!” Big Guy grinned. “All right, who’s in for the next round?”

“I’ll play.” Ponytail stood up and beckoned to Rabbit. “Come on, let’s go.”

Before I continued my flirtatious game with the colonel, I saw I’d reached the bottom of my glass of cabernet. I searched for Babette, but she stood on the far side of the room, delivering a drink to Mr. Steele. “I guess I need to get my own refill.” I pushed up off the sofa. “Can I get you anything while I’m over there?”

He rose to his feet. “I should be the one fetching you a drink.”

“I don’t mind.”

Those charming dimples appeared again. “I’ll go with you anyway. Might as well see the whole selection of what they’re offering here.”

Various bottles lined a narrow table in the far corner. I approached it, nearing the center of the room. A loud clap of thunder and lightning shook the floorboards beneath my feet. The lights extinguished completely, plunging us into darkness.

A chorus of surprised cries filled the air. The room was pitch black, and I couldn’t even see my hand in front of my face. I groped around in an attempt to get my bearings. When I shuffled forward, my hip collided with something heavy and stationary, and I recoiled. The pool table?

A deafening pop exploded somewhere to the right of me, accompanied by a flash of light. Wincing, I covered my ears. More confused chatter set the room abuzz.

“What was that?”

“Ow! Get off my foot!”

“Everyone, stay calm! Don’t move!”

I remained in place, one hand on the pool table, and no one bumped into me. Efforts to discern the individual voices proved futile since I hadn’t known these people long enough. Recalling the different characters I’d met, I wondered if the blackout was somehow part of the planned events. Could this be the beginning of the mystery?

A single, wan beam appeared near the door, illuminating Victor’s head and shoulders. He’d found at least one flashlight on the premises after all. “Ladies and gentlemen, please stay where you are. I hope this power outage is temporary, but in the case of—”

The lights came back on before he finished the sentence. Everyone cheered, but an ear-piercing scream cut through the hubbub. I jerked toward its source and gasped.

Mr. Steele lay face down beside the pool table. A small hole marred the back of his blazer. As we all gaped at him, a dark red puddle slowly seeped out from beneath his body. Several feet away from his head, a gun rested on the floor.

Victor hurried over, nudging people aside until he saw what had captivated our attention. Shock and concern washed over his face. “Oh my...” Regaining his composure, he cleared his throat and straightened. “My dear guests, in light of recent occurrences, I think it would be best if you all retired to your rooms for the night.”

“Now?” Big Guy shook his head. “The party’s just getting started!”

“Please.” Victor stepped back and gestured toward the door. “The storm may cause us to lose power again and, due to these other...unexpected circumstances, you need to return to your rooms. Now.”

His tone left no room for argument. We shuffled out of the library into the foyer in one huddled clump. As we moved up the staircase, murmurs rumbled around me about how the mystery portion of our weekend had started, amidst speculation about what clues we'd receive the following day. I agreed with those who admired how realistic the murder scene appeared and the perfect coordination with the thunderstorm's effects. Whoever had outlined and orchestrated our little story, they'd done a good job of surprising us and piquing our interest.

On the landing, we parted ways, and I headed toward my room. Colonel Mandrake guided me to my door, his hand at the small of my back. "I very much enjoyed meeting you tonight, Miss Harrington." He smiled at me. "Sleep well."

I said my goodnights and slipped inside my room, cheeks warm. The evening had been pleasant, even fun, though shorter than predicted, like Big Guy had complained. At least I'd had a good time, and I anticipated the rest of my stay at the lodge.

Even after I took off my dress, the colonel's touch lingered on my skin. At this point, I found him as intriguing as the unfolding mystery and couldn't wait to learn more about him. Hopefully I'd get the chance to know the real him, and not just the character he portrayed.

While I changed into my pajamas and prepared for bed, I contemplated the evening's events and tried to piece together some clues. Nothing in the characters' backgrounds stood out to me yet, and my efforts to remember who stood where when the lights went out fell short. "I'm sure we'll learn more in the morning," I mumbled, climbing into bed.

After setting the alarm clock so I'd have time to shower before breakfast, I switched off the lamp on the nightstand. With a lengthy yawn, I snuggled under the covers, tired from the day of travel and subsequent activities. I waited to drift off to sleep, but something tugged at the back of my mind.

For some reason, I kept thinking about Victor's expression when he first saw Mr. Steele lying on the floor.

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I exited the bathroom to the relentless rhythm of rain pelting the balcony outside my window. Despite the gray clouds and downpour, I saw the tall evergreens and rolling hills surrounding the building. The lodge appeared to be the sole structure in the area, the perfect choice for a secluded weekend escape.

At least the thunder and lightning had let up overnight, I mused while drying my hair with a towel. If I was lucky, I'd get to take in the beautiful view in the sunshine before leaving. The dreary weather did little to dampen my spirits, and I looked forward to getting back to the mystery with the other guests.

Specifically Colonel Mandrake, if I was being honest with myself.

Once dry, I contemplated the contents of my wardrobe, but a shriek ripped through the quiet morning, followed by a thud. Pulling the bathrobe tighter around my body, I hurried to the door. When I opened it, a half dozen guests stood in their doorways. We looked around at each other, confusion displayed on every face.

Big Guy walked over to the railing and peered over the side. "Holy crap!"

I tiptoed closer to him, pulse racing, anxious about what I'd find. Though I didn't want to look, I forced myself.

Below us, Ponytail's body sprawled across the floor. Her limbs stuck out at unnatural angles, and her head didn't seem aligned with her back and shoulders. Big Guy ran down the staircase, his footsteps thudding on each step as he approached her. She didn't move.

A pit of dread formed in my stomach. The rest of us followed him. Victor came into the foyer, his jacket unbuttoned and his bow tie unfastened. Babette and Ruth entered after him. The former clutched her feather duster, while the latter carried a teacup and saucer.

Big Guy dropped to one knee and gave Ponytail a gentle nudge. Nothing. He leaned over her, bringing his ear to her mouth. His brow creased, and he pressed two fingers beneath her jawbone.

The color drained from his face, and he sat back on his heels. “She’s dead. I mean, really dead .”

The pit grew larger. All the unkind things I’d thought about her the previous night came back to haunt me.

Victor rubbed his temples with his thumb and forefinger. “Let’s go into the dining room. Obviously, there are some...issues we need to discuss.”

I plodded across the foyer in my bare feet, trying not to look at Ponytail’s face when I passed her. Due to her position, I caught a glimpse of her lifeless eyes, and nausea churned in the back of my throat. I jerked away and focused on the giant animal sculptures to the other side. Realization dawned on me. Mr. Steele’s shooting in the library hadn’t been staged. A shiver rolled down my spine, and I tugged at the collar of my robe.

We sat in the same seats we’d been assigned at dinner. Ruth and Babette took the two vacant chairs. Some of the guests were dressed for the day, while others wore pajamas or a robe like me. Regardless of how we appeared, we were all wide awake by now.

Victor paced back and forth by the head of the table. “I didn’t want to alarm anyone

last night, but I'm sure it's clear by now Mr. Steele is also dead. I tried calling for help, but it seems the storm has knocked out the phone lines." He wrung his hands in front of him. "And cell phone reception has always been spotty up here, even in the best of conditions."

Those who carried their cell phones took them out to check their service and put them away just as quickly.

"I've been doing this for years," he continued. "Nothing like this has ever happened, I assure you."

"So, what can we do?" Rabbit's nose crinkled. "Sit around and wait for someone else to die?"

The murmurs around the table indicated she'd said what we'd all been thinking.

"I hope not!" He stopped pacing and pushed open the door to the foyer. "First things first. I have a list in my room of everyone who is supposed to be here, their real names. I think we need to forget about the aliases and roleplaying and learn who we really are."

He left the room. No one spoke. I cursed Trina for getting me into such a predicament, and then froze. Her name was going to be on the list, not mine. If that didn't make me the most suspicious person sitting at the table... I shook my head and tried to figure out the best approach. Should I pretend to be Trina or come clean?

While I mulled over my options, Victor returned with a piece of paper and a pencil. "Mr. Steele's real name was Jeremy Keyes, and Miss Taylor was played by Mary Stone." He glanced up from his list at the rest of us. "Perhaps, in addition to telling everyone who you are, you should discuss the circumstances that brought you here this weekend, or if you knew any of the others before last night. I have little

information on the person who booked the block of tickets with me now, but some of you may be able to shed some light on what happened before we arrived.”

Ruth sipped her tea and set the cup and saucer on the table. “Victor and I have worked for the same company for years, though this is the first time we were scheduled to be here on the same weekend. We hadn’t met in person before last night.” Frowning, she toyed with the strap of her apron. “Like him, I’ve never experienced anything like this.”

“Well, this is my first time working this job,” Babette said without any trace of an accent. “I thought it would be a fun way to earn some money while classes are done for the summer.” She shrugged. “Also, my name’s not Babette. It’s Brittany. And I’m not really French.”

“No shit,” someone muttered.

She narrowed her eyes but didn’t respond.

Silence descended upon the room once more. It seemed nobody wanted to be the first to volunteer any information. Brittany swatted Shaggy’s shoulder with her feather duster, and he jumped. “Oh! Um...” He scratched the back of his head. “My real name is Dylan Rutter. Someone contacted me via my blog and then sent me the details and everything for this weekend.”

Big Guy raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t you think it was strange?”

“Not really. People send me free stuff to promote on my site and gaming channel all the time.” He smirked. “Maybe you’ve heard of me, The Savage Sniper?”

Everyone stared blankly at him.

“Whatever. It pays the bills. And, like I said, free stuff.”

The eyebrow arched higher. “You get money out of all that?”

He chuckled. “Yeah.”

“Money is not the important part,” Victor said. “Do you remember anything about the person who contacted you?”

Dylan pulled out his phone and ran his finger over the screen. “I can’t access my email, and I don’t remember the name off the top of my head.”

“For what it’s worth, my story’s similar,” Redhead said. “I’m a librarian, and someone emailed me with a proposal for a project to get the community involved in local history, or something along those lines. He—or she, I don’t remember the name offhand, either—invited me here for a fun mystery weekend and said we’d discuss further details on Sunday night.”

Victor tapped his pencil against the list. “I’m sorry, your name?”

“Oh, right. I’m Laura Hendricks.” She twirled a lock of bright red hair around one finger. “I did some research, about the company coordinating these events here and what goes in to plotting the mysteries. Everything sounded good, so I said I’d come.”

Rabbit, next in line on the other side of the table, took her cue. “My name is Isabel Avery, and I’m a paralegal. We finished up a big case at work, and my boss said I could use a little vacation with all the hours I put in, so she got me the ticket.”

“Mine came through my office, too.”

My ears perked up when the man formerly known as Colonel Mandrake spoke. I

wanted to learn more about him, and then felt foolish when I remembered our horrifying circumstances. While our flirtations had been fun, I had much more pressing matters to worry about now.

“I’m Adam Christensen. I work in marketing, and my ticket came from a former client. I assumed it was a gift to thank me for my work, or at least that’s how it appeared.” He drummed his fingers on the table. “With everything I’ve seen and learned, I’m not sure what to believe anymore.”

Big Guy leaned back in his seat and propped one foot on the opposite knee. “Well, I don’t really have anything earth-shattering to add. Same thing all of you said, some sort of promotion or community event thing, where someone wanted to highlight the employees at my hospital and all the hard work we do.” The chair creaked as he rocked back and forth. “I won a ticket for this weekend, and another nurse up on the cardiac floor is coming next week, I think.”

Dylan snorted. “You’re a nurse?”

He fixed him in a steely glare. “Yeah, I am, in the ER. So what?”

Victor consulted his paperwork. “I take it you’re Paul Sullivan?”

“Yup.”

Only one person remained. Me. Swallowing hard, I prepared to confess. “I, uh, have to come clean about something. I realize this might look bad, but we’re all being honest here, right?” I fidgeted in my chair. “The last name on your list is probably Katrina Campbell. I’m not Katrina. I’m her sister, Veronica.”

A half dozen accusatory stares burned into me.

“I know how suspicious this must sound.” My shoulders hunched, and I tried to shrink into a little ball. “Something came up, and she couldn’t make it here this weekend, so she asked me to take her place. I swear I had nothing to do with people dying .”

Isabel sniffed. “A likely story.”

I needed to defend myself before everyone in the room labeled me a murderer. “You know, I didn’t have to say anything.” Straightening, I tried to appear more assertive. “If I’d pretended to be Trina, no one would have known the difference. Why would I be telling you this if I had something to hide?”

“She has a point,” Adam said.

I flashed him a grateful smile.

“Thank you for coming forward.” Victor’s pencil scratched across the page. “I take it none of you knew each other before last night?”

All of us exchanged wordless glances. A few people shrugged.

“That’s what I expected.” He looked at the list again. “My records indicate a person by the name of J.D. Smith booked the block of tickets for this weekend. Does the name sound familiar to anyone?”

Dylan nodded. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s the guy who contacted me.”

“Or woman.” Laura leaned forward, propping her chin up on one hand. “But it’s probably an alias, anyway.”

Paul sighed and sat up, the legs of his chair slamming against the floor. “I don’t mean

to be rude, but why are we sitting around discussing this? If there is some crazy killer on the loose, then why are we still here?"

"Though the lightning seems to have ceased for now, I don't know how safe the roads are in this weather." Victor gestured toward the door. "If you wish to leave, I won't stop you."

Dylan crossed his arms over his chest. "But if you do leave, it'll look kind of fishy."

"Hey, if you're the guilty one, don't try to project that onto me." Paul stood and reached into his pocket. "A little rain never bothered me. If the phones aren't working, then I can drive to the nearest police station and tell them what's going on."

"Sure, dude. Whatever."

Adam slid his chair back. "I'll go with you."

"Thanks, but no thanks." He shook his head. "No offense, but I don't trust any of you. I'd rather go by myself."

"He's right," Victor said after Paul strode out the door. "While we're here together, everyone needs to be careful. Lock your door whenever you're in your room. Try not to be alone with another person. Take every precaution you can think of to keep yourself safe."

Isabel frowned. "Are we going to sit here in our pajamas until help arrives?"

"The lodge and all its amenities are available to you. Just..." Victor's brow creased and he rubbed the side of his head. "Like I said, be careful."

Since I'd grown tired of being scrutinized while wearing nothing but a bathrobe, I

pushed away from the table and stood. “I’m going to get dressed. If anyone else is going back upstairs, we can travel together and hope for the best.”

Isabel and Dylan followed me. I opened the door and was greeted once again by Mary’s cold, dead eyes. My stomach churned, but before the wave of revulsion fully settled, the front door to the lodge opened with a bang. I yelped in surprise.

Paul stepped inside, his clothes drenched. He shut the door, and a puddle formed beneath him, the edge creeping toward us across the wooden tiles. He wiped the moisture from his face with both hands and grimaced.

“My car won’t start.”

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While I changed out of my bathrobe into more appropriate clothing, I reviewed what I had learned about the other guests. Last night had been a game, but now my life depended on these details. I concentrated on remembering their real names and thought about the stories they'd told. Nothing stood out to me as unusual or questionable. All of us seemed like normal, professional thirtysomethings who'd accepted the opportunity to get away for the weekend and have some fun.

Except one of us was a murderer.

Since I no longer played the role of a rich heiress, I didn't spend much time on my hair and makeup. I threw on slacks and a plain green blouse and left my room. When I got to the top of the stairs, Adam came through the front door. After he hung up his wet coat on a hook beside an enormous bronze bear, I met his gaze from across the foyer. He shook his head, answering my unasked question. I'd had a feeling none of our cars were currently operable.

Descending the steps, I noted someone had moved Mary's body. I breathed a sigh of relief, and then felt another pang of guilt over her death.

Adam met me near the entrance to the dining room. "Whoever's doing this thought of everything," he said. "The weather is bad luck, but they definitely had a plan to keep us trapped here for as long as possible."

I nodded. "I'm not going to even bother checking my car. And I'll bet whoever is behind this sabotaged their own vehicle, too."

"You're probably right." Facing me, he reached for my shoulder, his fingertips

brushing my sleeve. “Are you okay? You looked a little green this morning after...what happened.”

“I won’t lie, I am a bit rattled.” I exhaled. “But no more or less than anyone else, I’m sure, save for the obvious exceptions. Thanks, though.”

A spread of fruits, bagels, and pastries greeted us when we entered, along with most of the other guests. Ruth came through the kitchen door, carrying a tray of croissants.

“Why don’t you sit and eat with us?” Isabel said. “Brittany and Victor, too. With everything going on, you shouldn’t be expected to wait on us.”

“How very kind of you.” She set the tray on the table and smoothed her apron. “Let me get another cup of tea, and I’ll be right in. Can I get anyone some tea or coffee?”

“I’ll take a cup of coffee,” Dylan said. “Cream, two sugars.”

Laura made a disgusted noise. “We just said she doesn’t have to wait on us. You can’t fix your own coffee?”

“She offered!”

Though I agreed with Laura, I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to add to the argument or call more attention to myself.

Paul bounded through the door, dressed in a dry set of clothes, and plopped in his chair. “What did I miss?”

“Not much.” Laura rolled her eyes.

We engaged in bland small talk while we ate breakfast. Paul asked Isabel if her firm

ever handled medical malpractice cases and got a curt negative reply. Questions about Dylan's website received a similar response. When Ruth returned, followed by the other staff members, Laura inquired about their history working at the lodge. The rest of us picked at our meals and made vague complaints about the weather. My stomach hadn't settled yet, but I choked down half a bagel and a glass of orange juice.

Once everyone had finished eating, Victor ushered us into the library, where we sat on the sofas and armchairs. The open curtains offered a view of the surrounding forest. The thick green foliage and swaying branches appeared so serene, I almost forgot what had transpired in this room the previous night. Jeremy's body had also been taken elsewhere, and a rug covered the bloodstains. I briefly wondered about any evidence that may have been disturbed and then remembered we were stuck here by ourselves.

"I must say, I don't know what our best course of action is." The butler stroked his chin. "Like I said earlier, we need to be careful. But before I leave you to your own devices, it might be worthwhile to review any information we have about these unfortunate deaths."

"What, you think whoever's the killer is going to confess right now?" Dylan scoffed.

"Probably not. However, we might be able to eliminate some people from suspicion, or remember details pointing to a particular person." Victor's jaw tightened. "If we can solve the mystery, perhaps we can band together and stop this dangerous criminal."

Adam leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "It's not like we have anything better to do. And I, for one, would like to walk out of here alive." He tapped his fingers together. "Where do we start?"

“Let’s work backward,” he said. “Did anyone hear anything out of the ordinary this morning?”

Dylan shrugged. “Just a scream and Mary’s body hitting the ground.”

Across from him, Laura shook her head, her eyes narrowing. If she was the killer, I had a pretty good idea who her next victim might be.

“Which room was she in?” Paul asked. “I mean, who was closest to her?”

“The one in between Isabel’s and mine,” Laura said. “Not like it matters. We don’t know exactly where she went over the railing, and we all came out of our rooms at about the same time.”

I needed to contribute something to our brainstorming session before I got accused of wrongdoing again. “What about physical capability? Is there anybody we can rule out there?”

Dylan gave Paul a pointed look. “I’m sure some of us would have an easier time than others.”

“And I’m sure you wouldn’t have had to strain yourself too much,” he shot back. “My guess is anyone could have pushed her over if they caught her by surprise.”

“What about us?” Brittany gestured between her and Ruth. “We were downstairs. I was getting dressed when it happened.”

“Along with everybody else,” I said.

“But I was! I swear!”

Ruth touched her arm. “Everyone is going to say the same thing, dear. I’m afraid it doesn’t mean much.”

“I really don’t know whether or not you could have gotten back downstairs without anyone seeing you,” Paul said. “So, for now, you’re still suspects like the rest of us.”

Isabel slumped in her armchair. “We’re getting nowhere.”

“Okay, what about Jeremy’s death?” Adam sat back on his end of the sofa. “We were all in here when the power went out, yes?”

“Not me,” Ruth said. “I was cleaning up in the kitchen. Though you only have my word.”

Paul glanced at her. “For the sake of argument, it’s possible you might have slipped in and out of the room, although maybe not likely.”

She nodded. “That’s fair. I understand what a difficult situation this is, and I won’t blame you if you don’t trust me yet.”

“The rest of us were definitely in here. But where ?” Laura waved toward the pool table. “I’d finished up a game with Jeremy and Paul, and Mary and Isabel had come over to play the next round.” She bit her lower lip. “I think I stood on the opposite side of the table from Jeremy when the lights went out, but I’m not positive. And I don’t remember where everyone else was.”

Dylan pointed at Adam and me. “Those two left me here by myself to go get a drink together.” I blushed, but he glared at Paul. “But if you want to believe I fired a gun from across the room with fatal precision, go right ahead.”

“I had my hands full with a tray of glasses when the gun went off,” Brittany said. “So

I couldn't have done it."

"The lights were out for a while." Isabel spoke slowly, as if addressing a child. "You had plenty of time to find a safe place for it."

"But I didn't!"

Ruth put her teacup down and reached for the maid's arm again, this time with a little more force. Catching Brittany's gaze, she shook her head and put one finger up to her lips.

Paul reclined in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head. "Anything else we didn't cover?"

I picked at a loose thread on my sleeve and wondered how he appeared so relaxed. "What else is there? The only thing we established is everyone here had the opportunity to kill both Jeremy and Mary." A clammy feeling spread over my skin. "Isabel's right. We've gotten nowhere."

Nobody spoke up to argue with me.

Victor ran his hand through his hair and looked through the window at the steady downpour. "Then all we can do is wait."

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Time dragged at an agonizing pace. I selected a book from one of the shelves and mindlessly flipped through it, the words failing to capture my attention. The others busied themselves with the pool table and a deck of cards someone found in a drawer, but little conversation occurred. I assumed their thoughts sounded similar to mine. Which one of us is a killer? Who will be the next victim?

Adam shuffled the deck on the coffee table, not far from where I sat in an armchair. “So, Isabel, what kind of law does your firm practice?”

“Personal injury,” she said.

He dealt the cards. “That must be interesting.”

“Sometimes.”

Sighing, he picked up his pile of cards. “I’m just trying to make conversation to pass the time. If we’re all stuck here, I figured we might as well get to know each other.”

Her shoulders hunched as she examined the hand he’d dealt her. “Sorry, but I don’t really want to get to know anyone who might be a criminal or a murderer.”

“Fair enough.” He turned his attention to the maid, who had also joined in the game. “Brittany, what are you studying in school?”

She lowered her hands, inadvertently offering the others a glimpse of her cards. “The basics for right now. I haven’t chosen a major yet.”

“You’ve got time, I’m sure.” Adam picked up a card from the deck and put it back down. “Any ideas so far? What are you interested in?”

Blushing, she shrugged.

This was painful to watch and listen to. Before I could come to Adam’s rescue, Ruth, who had been watching the billiards games and sipping her tea, stood. “I should clean up from breakfast and get started on lunch.”

I needed a distraction. “I’ll help, if you don’t mind.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“I’ll come, too.” Laura returned her pool cue to the rack. “I don’t think these guys can handle losing to me again.”

Adam set his cards on the table. “I’ll join you.” He grinned at me. “The more, the merrier, right?”

Those dimples made my heart flutter, but I didn’t respond.

The tension eased out of Ruth’s shoulders. “I suppose more hands will help the work go faster. Let’s go into the kitchen, and I’ll tell you what you can do.”

We followed her out of the library to the door at the back of the foyer. She opened the dishwasher and directed us to bring in the plates and glasses from the dining room. Laura moved all the leftover food to one tray while Adam and I carried in the used dishes and cutlery. Although we worked in silence, I felt better being productive.

“A nice, hot meal will improve everyone’s spirits, especially with this terrible weather,” Ruth said once we finished. “I’ll get the water boiling for some pasta.” She

pointed to Laura. “Then you’ll help me with the sauce.”

“Sounds good to me.”

She turned to Adam and me. “You’ll find lettuce and other vegetables in the refrigerator. Can you two get started on the salad?”

He nodded. “Sure thing!”

Ruth showed me where to find the necessary equipment before rounding up the ingredients for her main course. I pulled a large bowl and some cutting boards out of the cabinets, and Adam returned with the produce he’d taken from the fridge. When he slid a long, sharp knife from a block on the counter, I flinched, but he grabbed a cucumber from his pile and started slicing it.

Exhaling, I reached for a second knife and a bunch of tomatoes. We settled into a steady rhythm of chopping and dicing.

“You know,” he said, “I wanted to tell you before, but not in front of the others...”

I swallowed. “What?”

“I think it was very brave of you to confess you weren’t who you appeared to be. Or were supposed to be. Or whatever it is.”

I pushed the first sliced tomato to one side and picked up another. “Well, thanks, I guess.”

“I don’t know what I would have done in your situation. This is all so crazy, it’s hard to know who or what to believe.” His gaze flicked up at me for a moment before returning to his cutting board. “Some of the others might have found your story

suspicious, but you just appeared more honest to me.”

The knife clacked against the wooden surface. I didn’t answer.

He cut a few more pieces before looking at me again. A trace of a smile teased the corners of his mouth. “I suppose it’s too much to ask for you to trust me now.”

“Yup.” I pretended to focus on slicing the tomato into equal-sized wedges. “I don’t trust anyone. I want to get out of here alive.”

“Understandable.” Adam glanced at where Ruth and Laura stood by the stove and lowered his voice. “Putting aside the fact you haven’t ruled me out as a suspect, what’s your read on the others?”

“You mean do I think those two are poisoning the pasta right now?”

He laughed. “I’m curious whether your perceptions are similar to mine or not.”

I pondered his question and cut into a third tomato. “That’s the thing. Nobody stands out to me as having the potential to be a cold-blooded murderer. All the other guests seem like regular, everyday people. People I might run into anywhere and not give it a second thought.”

“I agree.” He peeked over his shoulder again. “So, what about the staff?”

“What, you think Brittany’s ditzy comments are an act and she’s secretly plotting to kill us all?”

A grin spread across his face. “Maybe. She could even actually be French, for all we know.”

I put down the knife and raised an eyebrow. “Are you serious?”

“No.” His smile disappeared and he resumed chopping the cucumbers. “What about Victor? He seems to know the most about this place and would have the easiest time carrying out his plans. Besides, don’t these stories always end with ‘the butler did it’?”

I shook my head. “I saw his reaction when the lights came back on and Jeremy was dead. He appeared genuinely shocked.”

“Okay. So that leaves the other guests.” Adam moved his cutting board over and opened a bag of pre-cut lettuce. “If you had to guess, who would it be?” The corners of his mouth turned up, and I saw a hint of dimples. “I promise my feelings won’t be hurt if it’s me.”

I tore open a second bag and contemplated everything I’d seen and learned about my companions. “Dylan’s kind of a jerk, but it doesn’t necessarily mean he’s violent, right?”

“Like would The Savage Sniper, or whatever his internet name is, grow tired of mowing down faceless enemies in a game and want to experience the rush of a real-life kill?” He shrugged. “It’s possible.”

“Anything’s possible, as we’ve established.” I emptied the lettuce into the salad bowl. “Who’s your pick, if you had to narrow it down to one person?”

“It’s a tough decision, I won’t lie.” He used the flat end of his knife to scrape the sliced cucumbers on top of the lettuce. “But I’ll play along and say, if I had to choose, I’d go with Paul. He’s no stranger to death, working in the medical field, and I’m sure he’s seen plenty of gunshot wounds in the ER. Plus, I doubt it would have been much of a struggle for him to toss Mary over the railing.”

“Those are good points.” I added my tomatoes to the salad. “But he seems so nice.”

“Doesn’t everybody?” Adam chuckled. “Maybe with the exception of Dylan, as you’ve already noted.”

“Like Isabel’s been saying, we’re basically back at square one.” A chilling idea pierced my thoughts. “What if it’s not one of us?”

Confusion furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“Have you been inside every room in this place? I haven’t.” My palms grew clammy, and I spoke in a whisper. “What if there’s someone else here in the lodge? Someone hiding, watching, waiting...”

“I suppose we can’t ignore that theory.” He set his knife on the cutting board. “Should we mention it to the others?”

“I don’t know. If there is another person here, I don’t want to tip them off. And if the killer is, in fact, one of us, then I don’t want the rest of us to let our guard down.”

“Makes sense to me.” His charming smile reappeared. “We’ll keep it between us for now.”

My cheeks flooded with warmth, and I turned my attention back to the salad. “I’ll see if I can find some dressing. Anything else you think should go in here?”

“Might as well keep it simple.”

I crossed the room to open the refrigerator and study the shelves. “How does balsamic vinaigrette sound?”

“Perfect.” Adam held the bowl while I poured the dressing in, and then gave it a good shake. “I think our salad is a success,” he said. “I’ll clean up over here if you want to go see how they’re doing with the pasta.”

When Ruth deemed the sauce seasoned to her liking, she summoned the others from the library. We took our places at the dining room table. Some of the tension had lessened since the morning meal, and the conversation didn’t feel as forced. Were it not for the two missing guests, I’d almost believe we had come here under the original premise of a fun get-together. My stomach had stopped twisting in knots, and the food tasted delicious.

Spearing a slice of cucumber, Adam leaned toward me. “We do make a pretty good salad,” he whispered, as if hearing my thoughts.

“The best.” I did the same and popped it into my mouth.

Paul took a swig of water and set his glass down with a bang. “Hey, Victor, I have a question for you.”

“Yes?”

“What was supposed to happen last night and today?” He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “I mean, with the game and the mystery and the characters and everything.”

“Oh, that.” Victor nodded toward his colleague. “Later in the evening, Ruth would have been discovered as our ‘victim.’ Pretending to be killed the first night frees up the chef on duty to work in the kitchen uninterrupted.” He chuckled. “For the rest of the weekend, we suspend our disbelief when the wonderful meals turn up on the table, ready to go.”

“You’re too kind.” Ruth refolded her napkin beside her plate. “Though I wish the

circumstances were different, it has been nice spending time with other people here for a change.”

“Afterward,” Victor continued, “I set up clues and puzzles for the guests to solve throughout the day. Most people claim to have fun when they’re here.”

“Gotcha.” Paul propped his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “Are they usually successful?”

“If a group is struggling, I can help guide them in the right direction. One way or another, the mystery is always solved by the last day.” He tugged at his bowtie and frowned. “Now, unfortunately, it seems we’re playing a new game, and I’m not sure of the rules.”

Once we finished eating, Isabel, Paul, and Brittany volunteered to help clear the table and assist Ruth in getting the dinner preparations underway. Back in the library, I accepted Adam’s invitation to join his game of gin rummy. I sat beside him on the couch like I had the previous night, and Dylan and Laura took the armchairs across from us. He shuffled the deck and dealt the first hand. I marveled at how easy it was to pretend we didn’t have a killer in our midst.

After I lost the fifth hand in a row, the others returned from the kitchen. “The ham’s going to take a couple hours,” Isabel said, sitting in the chair next to Laura. “Ruth said she’d keep an eye on it. Mind if I join you in the meantime?”

“Not at all.” Adam collected the cards. “I’ll deal you in.”

The rain continued its steady assault outside the window, yet the driving rhythm didn’t seem so ominous anymore. Under different circumstances, I saw how the lodge would provide the perfect cozy weekend getaway. The pleasant atmosphere lulled me into a state of serenity, and I wondered if we’d been overestimating the threat of

danger. Two people were dead, but since we'd discussed the murders and were being more cautious, would the killer really risk striking again?

"Maybe this place isn't so bad," I said. "I'll admit I was skeptical at first, but I bet the regular mystery weekends were a lot of fun."

"I know what you mean." Isabel picked up a card and exchanged it with one in her hand. "Sometimes, it's easy to forget how...you know..."

I made another attempt at amiable conversation, hoping I'd fare better than Adam had earlier in the day. "Do you coordinate a lot of community programs at your library?" I asked Laura.

"Oh, tons." She rifled through her hand. "Gone are the days of simply checking out books and putting them back in the right places. We try to make the library an inviting, exciting place for everyone." After exchanging a card, she adjusted her glasses. "It's nice, because I do like meeting new people. Just in...safer circumstances."

"Same here." Adam picked up the card she'd put down. "We're lucky, we don't have a lot of problem clients. Some can be a little difficult at times, but it's great going into work and seeing different faces every day. Keeps things interesting."

I studied my cards as I waited for my turn. "Most of my communication with clients is done via email from my apartment. Don't make fun of me, but this is the most human interaction I've had in a long time."

"I would never dream of doing such a thing." Adam flashed me a smile before finishing his turn. "Besides, it sounds like Dylan works the same way."

"Hmm?" He glanced up through the strands of hair that had fallen over his brow.

“Oh, yeah, I guess.”

“I deal more with paperwork than people,” Isabel said. “But I don’t mind it.”

I pulled a card out of my hand. “There’s a happy balance for everyone somewhere.”

We switched over to poker, where I proceeded to lose worse than I had before. I enjoyed the light competition and friendly chatter, however, and continued to play. Late in the afternoon, Victor set up the bar with Paul’s help. Despite our insistence otherwise, Brittany volunteered to serve us. I remembered I’d never gotten my second glass of wine the previous night and decided I felt comfortable enough around my companions to have a drink. “It might help improve my card game skills,” I joked.

Adam chuckled. “Mine would get worse.”

Brittany brought over a tray of filled glasses, and I continued my struggle to wind up with anything higher than one pair. Victor turned on the lights when the room grew dark and closed the heavy shades, muffling the sounds of the storm outside.

After folding his hand, Dylan laid his cards on the table and looked around. “Hey, whatever happened to dinner?”

Laura pursed her lips. “If you’re so concerned, why don’t you go into the kitchen and check?”

“I’m just saying.” He pushed his hair out of his eyes and jerked his thumb toward Isabel. “Didn’t she tell us it would only be about two hours?”

“So it’s taking a little longer.” She put down three cards. “I’m sure you won’t starve, even if someone isn’t waiting on you hand and foot.”

“Whatever.” Slouched in his seat, he picked at his shoelaces while we kept playing.

After I lost yet again, a funny feeling crept over me. “You don’t think there’s anything wrong, do you?”

“Wrong?” Isabel’s nose scrunched up. “How so?”

“It’s most likely nothing.” I shook my head. “We ate around five o’clock last night, and now it’s after six. But the ham’s probably taking longer than expected.”

Anxious glances were exchanged around the table. “Maybe one of us should check on things in the kitchen,” Laura said, setting down her wineglass.

Dylan stood. “I guess I’ll go. You did say it was my turn, right?”

He mumbled something to Victor on his way out of the room. Hands trembling, I put down my drink. Adam collected my cards, his hand brushing against mine. “Should I deal you in for the next round?” he asked.

I shook my head.

My worst suspicions were confirmed when Dylan reappeared in the doorway. “Uh...Paul?” he called out. Eyes wide, he ran his fingers through his messy hair. “I think you should come in here.”

I rose from my seat, and the others did the same. Although I could guess what had happened, I needed to see for myself. Moving together, we trudged out of the library and into the kitchen.

Ruth sat on a stool beside one of the counters, her upper body slumped against the smooth granite. The ham sat in a tray next to the oven, covered in a slimy sheen from

being out of the refrigerator for too long.

Bending his knees, Paul touched the cook's shoulder and peered at her face. As he had earlier in the day with Mary, he checked for a pulse, but we all knew what the answer would be.

"Shit," he said, straightening.

"I swear I found her like this when I got here." Dylan crossed his arms over his chest. "You can tell by the state of our unfinished dinner."

Laura looked at him with disdain. "Is food really all you can think about right now?"

"Don't try to pin this on me!" He returned her angry glare. "You were in here with her before lunch!"

Isabel closed her eyes and rubbed the sides of her head. "All of us were in here at one point or another. Or at least most of us."

"Great," he snapped. "That's helpful."

"Stop fighting." Adam put his hands up. "It's not contributing anything useful." He turned to Paul. "How did she die?"

"Oh." He shrugged. "Good question."

I looked around the room, searching for clues. My gaze rested upon a kettle at the front of the stove. I walked toward the counter, trying to keep a safe distance from Ruth's body, and gestured toward her empty cup and saucer. "The tea," I whispered. "She'd been drinking it all day."

“But she made it herself,” Brittany said.

Paul opened and closed some of the cabinets, rummaging through the shelves. “Someone could have tampered with it this morning, or last night, or even when we arrived.” He pulled out a plain metal tin and opened it to reveal a pile of unmarked tea bags. Pulling one out of the box, he held it up, gave it a sniff, and frowned. “I’ll be honest, I don’t know what I’m looking for here.”

“Don’t touch it, just to be on the safe side,” Victor said.

Paul shoved the tin back into the cabinet and slammed the door. “It doesn’t matter, anyway. She’s definitely dead.”

We stared at each other, fear and distrust washing over the faces of everyone in the room. My previous feelings of contentment vanished as I was confronted with a reminder of our predicament.

No one was safe.

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We sat around the table, picking at lukewarm leftovers from lunch. I reviewed what I remembered about the comings and goings of the others in an effort to narrow down the pool of suspects, but came up emptyhanded. I didn't even know what Ruth had been poisoned with, or how long the toxins took to have an effect, or any other useful information. Trina would be disappointed to hear how inefficient I was at finding clues and solving the mystery.

If I got the chance to tell her.

Paul dropped his fork on his plate with a clang. "So, we're going to sit here in silence all night?"

Laura tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. "What else is there to say?"

"Anything." He started tapping the fork on the edge of the plate, and then switched to spinning the stem of his water glass when Isabel shot him a dirty look. "We can talk about the shitty weather, rehash how we got here, debate social issues...all of those sound better than watching the clock, waiting for the next calamity."

"Some of us don't mind a little quiet," Isabel said.

Laura pursed her lips. "And it's hard to concentrate on something other than the latest victim you just took to her room."

Dylan rolled his eyes. "Engaging in conversation, however banal, isn't going to make her any dead."

Her glare threatened to bore a hole through him. “Do you have any respect for anyone besides yourself?”

“Right now? Not really.”

“Charming.” She flicked her crimson hair back over her shoulder and took a sip of water. “Too bad you’re not a tea drinker,” she muttered.

His lip curled up in a smug half-smile. “Was that an admission of guilt I heard?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

Next to me, Adam rubbed his forehead. “So much for attempts at conversation.”

We decided to retire early for the second night in a row. “Let’s plan to meet at the stairs at eight o’clock tomorrow morning,” Victor said before we left the dining room. “Under no circumstances should you open your door to anyone before then.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. Once inside my room, I wedged a chair underneath the doorknob and gave it a good shake to test its stability. Looking back over my shoulder, I remembered the second door to the balcony. Constructed mostly of glass, it wouldn’t keep out a determined intruder. I slid one of the heavy wooden dressers in front of it, hoping it would provide a deterrent to anyone trying to kill me, or at least produce enough noise to wake me up in such an event.

I changed into my pajamas and brushed my teeth in the bathroom. Sitting on the closed toilet, I propped my elbows on my knees and buried my head in my hands. Last night, I’d been excited about the burgeoning mystery at the lodge. Now, I worried I might be the next victim in this real-life story of danger and death.

Exhaling, I stood and exited to the bedroom. I repeated my prior routine of turning

off the lamp and yanking the covers up to my chin. Before I settled against the pillows, movement outside the window caught my eye.

A high-pitched gasp squeaked past my lips and I froze. Squinting into the darkness, I wondered if fear had caused me to imagine things. A minute passed, and the shadows shifted again. Someone lurked on the balcony.

I debated the best course of action. Part of me wanted to hide under the quilt and act like I hadn't seen anything—or pretend this entire trip was nothing more than a bad dream—but I knew I'd never fall asleep if I didn't investigate. Keeping the light off, I hunched over and crept toward the window.

The rain had stopped, leaving moonlit puddles across the balcony's polished surface. A tall figure leaned against the railing, staring out into the forest. Even with his back to me and the dim lighting, there was no mistaking the man's identity. Adam .

I watched him, but other than the natural rise and fall of his shoulders, he didn't move. Again, I struggled with what to do. Part of me knew I should ignore him and go back to bed, that I shouldn't trust anyone. But, on the other hand, he didn't appear to be plotting anything nefarious at the moment. And it wasn't like I'd get much sleep, anyway.

Flicking open the latches, I raised the window. "Adam?" I whispered through the screen. "What are you doing?"

He stiffened when I called his name, then relaxed. "Hey there." He turned around and smiled. "I came out to get some fresh air. Being cooped up inside for so long doesn't help anything."

"I understand."

Extending one hand, he took a few steps toward my room. “Care to join me?”

His enticing grin was difficult to resist. The way the silvery light illuminated how his snug white undershirt clung to his lean frame added to the temptation. I glanced at the pile of furniture I’d used to barricade the door and shook my head. “I’d like to...but I can’t yet. I mean, I’m sure you wouldn’t fling me off the balcony or anything, but I don’t want to take any chances.” I bit my lower lip. “I’m sorry.”

“No worries.” His expression remained pleasant. “Sorry if I disturbed you. I’ll go back inside soon.”

Despite not feeling fully comfortable around him, I didn’t want him to leave. “You’re not bothering me, and I don’t mean to kick you out of a shared space. In fact...” My pulse raced, and I took a deep breath. “If you want to stay out there and talk for a little while, I wouldn’t mind.”

Adam chuckled and ran a hand through his dark hair. “Sure. What do you want to talk about?”

I let out a long groan. “Anything outside of this horrible place.”

“Well, with you here, it’s not so bad.” His eyes twinkled in the moonlight. “But I know what you mean. I need the diversion, too.”

“Yes, a diversion. Exactly.”

“If it’s all right with you, I’d rather not discuss the weather, either.” He tapped the edge of one puddle with the toe of his shoe, causing it to splatter. “You know, it occurred to me earlier when we were all going around the table telling our stories, you didn’t say much about yourself. You talked about your sister instead.”

“Trina’s more exciting than I am.” I rolled my eyes. “And she’d be the first one to tell you.”

“I find that hard to believe. Besides, she’s not here right now.” Adam inched closer to the window. “We’ll start off with the boring stuff. What do you do when you’re not stuck in a lavish, yet deadly, mountaintop lodge?”

I hooked my foot around one of the chairs by the door and dragged it closer to kneel on it. “I’m a graphic designer, freelance. So I mostly sit in front of a computer all day.”

“Ah, an impressive blend of art and technology. See, I knew you were remarkable.” He rubbed his chin. “Whenever we get out of here, I should get your contact information. We’re always looking for good contractors at my firm.”

“I try not to mix business with pleasure.” As soon as the words slipped out, I clapped my hand over my mouth. “Oh my god. Will you listen to me? Three people are dead, for all I know you’re the one who killed them, and I’m still trying to flirt with you.”

He burst out laughing. His genuine delight both helped me to feel better and sent a rush of heat to my cheeks. “Like I haven’t been doing the same thing. Though I’m determined to find a way to prove my innocence to you.”

“We do need the distraction.” I frowned. “And I thought we weren’t talking about... that .”

“Right, right. So, back to the more mundane topics.” His warm smile continued to put me at ease. “Do I get to ask where you’re from? Or is that too personal?”

I shrugged. “It probably doesn’t matter much at this point. Right now, I just have a small apartment in Maple Creek, one of the many suburbs outside the city. It took me

about three hours to drive up here.”

“I might know where that is. I moved to Springvale almost two years ago now.” His brow furrowed. “I think it’s about thirty miles away or so, but I’m not positive. I’m not familiar with all the ins and outs of the area yet.”

“Sounds about right. I have a general idea of where it is, though I’ve never been there.”

“I guess we’re just far enough apart that our paths wouldn’t have crossed otherwise. Which reminds me...” Staring down, he kicked at the floor of the balcony again. “I was thinking about something else you said earlier.”

“Oh?”

“The comment you made about how everyone seems so normal, like you might have met them anywhere else in your life and not thought anything of it.” He peered up at me through his dark lashes. “We’re being honest with each other, and who knows what tomorrow’s going to bring, so I wanted to tell you I wish I could have met you under different circumstances.”

I hoped the shadows camouflaged my furious blushing. “I’ll admit I was annoyed with Trina for cajoling me into coming here, and I didn’t have very high hopes for having fun this weekend. But I did feel more optimistic when I first ran into you out on the landing.” When he lifted his head to meet my gaze, I smiled. “And your company has let me calm down a little tonight. Thank you.”

Adam waved his hand nonchalantly. “The pleasure is all mine.”

Scooting forward in the chair, I rested my arms on the windowsill. “Tell me more about these ‘different circumstances.’ You’ve succeeded in charming me here, but

what if we were somewhere else?”

“Let’s see.” He closed the gap between us and slouched against the wall outside my window. “We’d start off simple, nothing like this place. Do you drink coffee?”

“As if my life depended on it some days.” I cringed. “That’s probably not very funny right now.”

He grinned. “I’d rather be laughing than the alternative.”

“Fair enough. Keep going.”

“Coffee it is, then. We’d get you away from your computer and meet up at my favorite café on a sunny day. I’m tired of all this rain,” he said, tilting his head toward the sky. “I wouldn’t order for you because I’m not stupid enough to mess with someone else’s coffee, but I would be a gentleman and insist on paying.”

“Smart and chivalrous.” I propped my chin up on my forearms. “So far, so good.”

“After getting our beverages and maybe a snack or two, we’d sit at the table in the corner.” He swiveled toward me, leaning on one shoulder. “We’d start talking, just like this, and before we knew it, hours would pass by and it would be dark outside.”

“Uh-oh.” I raised one eyebrow and pretended to be concerned. “Then what?”

Adam rubbed the back of his head. I’d appreciated the way he looked in his well-fitting suit the previous night, yet I also enjoyed this version of him, with his tousled hair and the thin layer of stubble that had sprouted on his cheeks and chin. Jeans and a T-shirt worked well on him, too. While he contemplated the next part of his story, I tried to remind myself of all the reasons why I shouldn’t trust him, regardless of any attraction I felt. This is just for fun. He could be dangerous. Keep your distance. You

have to get out of here alive...

“We’d continue our conversation because why should a minor thing like the sunset ruin our good time?” His voice snapped me out of my reverie. “Of course we’d order more coffee and food, so the staff wouldn’t get annoyed. But when our next round comes, the server tells us open mic night is starting soon, and the room might get too loud for us.”

“Ooh, a plot twist.”

He nodded. “We decide to stick around, listen to some of the local talent, and eventually switch over to drinking cappuccino. They serve it with those sticks of colored rock candy to swirl around.”

“A nice touch.” My eyelids drooped, and I laid my head on one hand. “Are the musicians any good?”

“No, most of them are terrible.” I laughed, and he went on. “But when some young kid sings everything he’s learned about love over the only four chords he knows how to play, I reach across the table and take your hand. Even if the song sucks, the sentiments behind it are nice, and it’ll give us something to talk about on our next date.”

I tried to hide my smile behind my arm. “Oh, so there’s definitely going to be a second date? Aren’t we confident.”

“You know what they say—always leave them wanting more. By the time we part ways, you won’t be able to resist.” Adam pushed away from the wall. “And, on that note, I think I should say goodnight now. You look like you’re finally ready to fall asleep, and we need to be alert tomorrow.”

A yawn slipped past my lips despite my efforts to hold it back. “You’re probably right on all counts.” I stood up and moved the chair away. “Thanks again for helping me keep my mind off less pleasant subjects.”

“Likewise.” He tapped the windowsill and gave me a little wave before stepping back in the direction of his room. “Sleep well, Veronica. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I closed and locked the window, double checking the latches to ensure they were secure. Before climbing back into bed, I did the same for my makeshift barricades in front of both doors. Wrapping myself in the covers, I reclined against the pillows and tried to think of cozy cups of coffee instead of poisoned teabags.

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I woke early after a night of restless sleep. When I glanced at the clock, I saw I still had time before we were due to meet for breakfast. Grabbing a pencil and notepad from the drawer, I sat on the bed and tried to organize my thoughts in an effort to find some clues.

I made a list of everyone's names and jotted down a few notes about what I knew about them, along with my general impressions. Dylan didn't seem to care what anyone else thought of him, but would the killer come across as so flippant and rude? Or would they be more likely to act outgoing and approachable, like Paul? Was Victor's professional demeanor a cover-up for brutal crimes, or was the flaky Brittany secretly a criminal mastermind?

As I'd said to Adam, no one stood out to me as a prime suspect. I flipped over the piece of paper and sketched the layout of both floors of the lodge. If I couldn't figure out who, maybe I could determine how one of the murders occurred. I labeled each bedroom on the second floor with the occupant's name, going in order. Isabel, Mary, Laura, Veronica, Adam, Jeremy, Paul, Dylan . Someone had caught Mary alone the previous morning, but had it been one of her neighbors or one of the men closer to the staircase? Would someone like Paul or Dylan have been able to get back to his room after throwing her to her death without the rest of us hearing anything? Or could he have lured her closer to him?

Frustrated, I turned my attention to Ruth's murder. The staff's rooms were on the lower level of the lodge, giving Victor and Brittany easier access to the kitchen and everything inside. I also assumed the two of them had arrived before any of the guests, making it easier for them to tamper with the tea and otherwise plot out their crimes. But on the other hand, just because they had more opportunities didn't mean I

could rule anyone else out.

I groaned and rubbed my eyes. I'd accomplished nothing more on my own than we had as a group. In fact, that's all any of us had accomplished: nothing. So far, the killer had done a spectacular job of covering their tracks. If there were any clues left behind, no one had stumbled across them yet.

Peeling off my pajamas, I went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. As I stepped beneath the spray, more pleasant thoughts entered my mind. Though I hadn't been able to eliminate Adam from the pool of suspects, my heart wanted to believe he had nothing to do with the gruesome deaths. Despite my instincts and better judgment, I enjoyed his lingering glances and flirty touches. I hated to admit it, but it had been a long time since I'd been on the receiving end of such attention, never mind from anyone worthwhile.

As I dried off, I attempted to focus on more important matters. I needed to be vigilant and aware of my surroundings. If I survived long enough to get off this mountain, I could worry about Adam and his dimples then.

At eight o'clock on the dot, I opened the door a crack and peeked out onto the landing. No dead bodies. The day was off to a good start. I stuck my head farther out and found Laura doing the same from the room next to me. "Good morning," she said.

"Morning." I didn't move.

One by one, the other doors opened. Through the bars of the railing, I saw Victor cross the foyer to the bottom of the staircase. Brittany followed soon after, heels clicking on the parquet floor. Everyone had survived the night.

We left our rooms and gathered downstairs. "Looks like the sun's trying to come

out,” Paul said. “I’m going to walk down the road a bit and see what’s going on while it’s dry outside. If nothing else, maybe I can at least get a cell signal to call for help.”

Dylan snorted. “Sure you’re not trying to escape, leaving us here to explain your victims?”

“Positive.” He headed for the front door. “Save some breakfast for me.”

Dylan had a tendency to rub me the wrong way, but I wondered if he had a point. What was Paul doing whenever he left the house? Had Adam’s speculation been correct? I rubbed my temples. Trying to decide who to trust threatened to give me a headache, especially since I was used to dealing with prospective clients and other strangers via email from the safety of my own home.

“I’ll get out the bagels and stuff from yesterday,” Laura said. “If anyone—or any two or more people, I should say—wants to give me a hand, I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“I’ll come with you,” Isabel said.

“I will, too.” Victor straightened his bowtie. “Like many of you, I’m starting to feel a bit restless.”

The rest of us sat in our usual spots around the dining room table and attempted some trivial conversation. I hadn’t said anything to Adam yet, or even looked at him. Thinking about our conversation through the window last night made my cheeks warm. If we were somewhere, anywhere else, would he be interested in me? Or was he just being nice by distracting me when I asked?

Was he a murderer?

Laura and Isabel came through the swinging door to the kitchen, each carrying a tray

of food. Victor entered after them, holding a pitcher of orange juice in one hand and a pot of coffee in the other. “While obviously not super fresh,” Isabel said, “the bread and pastries should be okay.” She set down her tray in the center of the table and picked up a croissant. “Some of them might taste a little stale by tomorrow, though, assuming we’re still here. But I think I saw some eggs in the refrigerator.”

“I doubt we’ll starve.” Adam reached for a cheese Danish.

Brittany collected the coffee cups on her side of the table and stood up to fill them. “You don’t have to do that,” Laura said.

“I don’t mind.” She took the pot and began to pour. “Like Victor, I need to do something before I go crazy in here.”

She wasn’t alone, I mused. With the possibility of another long day looming ahead of us, I also needed a way to keep my mind off of our perilous situation.

“Okay, then.” Laura adjusted her glasses. “But I don’t think any of us would mind if you and Victor changed out of your uniforms. We’re all in this together, remember? You don’t have to serve us.”

Brittany shrugged and smoothed her poufy skirt. “Since we weren’t supposed to be here this long, I didn’t bring any other clothes with me.”

Dylan smirked. “How about your pajamas?”

A sheepish grin spread across her reddening face. “I, uh, don’t wear anything when I go to sleep.”

He leaned toward her, his gaze drifting somewhere south of her flushed cheeks and neck. “Oh?”

I jumped in before Laura's glower somehow caused him to spontaneously combust. "I know our packets suggested semiformal clothing, but if people want to dress more casually, it's fine with me."

"Same here," Adam added.

"I don't care, either." Laura reached for the collar of her blouse and tugged at the crisp fabric. "I just have my normal work clothes, but at this point, I think it's fine if people want to be more comfortable." She shot Dylan another withering glare. "And no, I will not be running around here in my pajamas."

"Too bad," he said. "You'd probably have an easier time running from the killer than in those tight little skirts of yours."

She slammed her butter knife down on her plate. "You really are a pig, you know?"

"Can't blame a guy for looking." He jerked his head in my direction. "Besides, these two have been making lovey-dovey eyes at each other all weekend and no one's complained."

"Hey, wait a second," Adam said while I shrank back in my seat, hoping my face hadn't turned scarlet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please!" Victor placed his palms on the table and leaned forward, inserting himself between Laura and Dylan. "Arguing with each other will only make things worse. If we—"

The door opened with a bang, and Paul bounded across the threshold. "All right, here's the story," he said. Everyone turned toward him, and I silently thanked him for the interruption. "I didn't get very far because there are trees down all over the place. Big ones, too. We're lucky to even have power here."

Isabel sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Terrific.”

“It gets worse.” Paul scratched the back of his head. “I got as close as possible to the edge of the mountain to see what else I could find. You know the cute little bridge over the stream we all drove over to get here?” He paused for a second, then continued before anyone answered. “The stream’s more like a river now. The bridge is completely washed out.”

A chill rolled over me, and I hunched in my chair even more. “So...we’re stuck here.”

He turned up his hands in apology. “For a while longer, I would say.”

Adam tapped his fingers on the edge of his plate. “Then what do we do now?”

Isabel cleared her throat. “Laura and I were talking in the kitchen about our situation, and the best way to stay alive and everything.” She glanced around the table, her nose twitching. “I know it’s a long shot, but don’t you think there’s a possibility there might be someone else in the lodge? I mean, other than all of us sitting here now?”

I nudged Adam’s arm, then yanked my hand away, my cheeks still hot. “We thought of the same thing yesterday,” I said. “Maybe the killer isn’t one of us.”

“I don’t see how someone else could have gone unnoticed.” Victor frowned. “Although the building is quite large.”

Laura’s eyebrows arched. “But it’s possible , right? Did you check every single room when you got here?”

“No,” he admitted.

“If we’re not getting out of here any time soon,” she said, “I don’t want to feel like we’re missing something obvious.”

Dylan crossed his arms. “So, you want to search this place top to bottom because you believe you’re going to find some psycho killer and convince him to stop murdering us?”

Her gray eyes narrowed behind her thick glasses. “Do you have something better to do today?”

“Anything sounds better than your game of hide and seek with a person who doesn’t even exist.”

“You guys can sit here sniping at each other all day,” Paul said. “Me, I’m going to do something productive. Like seeing if I can find a cell signal somewhere on this damned mountain, assuming the storm didn’t knock out all the local towers.”

Victor nodded. “Good idea. Though we established, while you were gone, not everyone has the appropriate attire to go exploring amidst the trees.” He scratched his chin. “Perhaps we should split into groups. Some of us can try to call for help outside, while the others search the inside of the lodge for any...unknown guests. If we stay in our larger groups, we should be safe.”

“Works for me,” Laura said. “I guess Brittany and I are definitely staying indoors.”

Isabel wrinkled her nose again. “I’d prefer not to get all muddy, if it’s okay with the others.”

The idea of escaping the lodge and its horrors, even if only for an hour or so, appealed to me. “I don’t mind the mud and pine needles and whatnot.” I turned to Paul. “Let me run upstairs to grab my sneakers and phone, and I’ll come with you.”

“I keep a pair of rubber boots here in case I need to do any outdoor maintenance,” Victor said. “I might be able to get farther outside in them.”

Adam shrugged. “I don’t have a preference.” He looked at Dylan. “What about you? If we want to keep our ‘teams’ even, I’ll go with one group and you can go with the other.”

“Poking around in every little dark corner with her or traipsing through the woods, swatting away the bugs?” He made a disgusted face. “What great options.”

Sighing, Adam reached into his pocket and fished out a quarter. “Let’s keep this simple. Heads, I’ll be the one to stay inside; tails, you stay here.”

“Whatever, man.”

We watched the coin flip through the air, and I held my breath. I struggled to decide if I wanted Adam on my team or if I was better off keeping my distance from him. The quarter landed on the table, and he bent over to examine it.

“I’ll be enjoying the great outdoors while you help out in here,” he said.

Dylan rolled his eyes. “Lucky me.”

Laura pursed her lips, but didn’t say anything.

I had enough to worry about without having to deal with the petty squabbles of the others. “Let me get changed and I’ll meet you outside.” Abandoning the remains of my breakfast, I stood and left the room.

I exited the lodge and walked past the fountain, fresh air filling my lungs. Murky clouds hung heavy overhead, threatening more rain, but it felt good to finally get outside and pretend there weren't three dead bodies in the building behind me. Paul and Victor stood at the end of the row of parked cars, the latter wearing a pair of bright orange galoshes with his usual suit. I grinned at the absurd sight, and my mood continued to improve.

Adam joined us a minute later, having also changed into more suitable clothing. "So, Victor," he said, "what do you know about these woods?"

"Not much, I'm afraid." Victor wrung his hands in front of his chest. "I always dissuaded the guests from venturing too far from the lodge, for liability purposes."

Paul tapped his cell phone against his palm. "Okay, here's what I'm thinking." He looked at each of us in turn. "If we split up, there's a better chance of someone finding a signal and being able to make a call. Each of us can take a separate direction, and we can plan to meet back here in about half an hour."

My jaw dropped. "Split up? Are you kidding?" I shook my head, my eyes wide. "No way. It's bad enough I could fall off a cliff or get mauled by a bear in the woods. If one of you is the murderer, I don't want to be an easy target, without any witnesses."

"She has a valid point," Adam said.

He let out a puff of air. "Fine. What if we split into pairs, then?" I opened my mouth to protest, but Paul put up a hand to stop me. "Wait, hear me out. I do think it's important to cover as much ground as possible before the rain starts up again, which might be any minute now."

A glance toward the sky supported his prediction.

“And if one of us is the killer, it would be kind of stupid and obvious for that person to kill their partner out here, right? He or she isn’t dumb, and probably wouldn’t take the risk.”

I kicked at the soft dirt at the edge of the driveway. “I suppose...”

Paul resumed fiddling with his phone. “If there’s no objection from these guys, you can pick who you feel most comfortable teaming up with.”

Adam caught my gaze for a split second and then looked away. “It’s okay with me.”

“Yes, it’s fine.” Victor furrowed his brow at the darkening clouds. “If we want to attempt to find a signal, we should get moving soon. I think we’re in for another storm today.”

“So, who’s it going to be?” Paul tapped his foot and watched me, waiting for an answer.

I considered my options. Paul seemed like a nice enough guy, and eager to leave the lodge, but it might easily be an act. Plus, someone of his size would have no problem overpowering me. I wanted so, so badly to trust Adam, yet something held me back. If I had to be alone with one other person, I decided to take my chances with the middle-aged man in slippery boots. “I’ll go with Victor.”

If my choice disappointed Adam, he didn’t show it.

“Okay,” Paul said. He pointed to the opposite end of the lodge, past the fountain. “We’ll take the other side. Come on.”

I switched on my phone while they left and waited to see if even one bar would pop up at the top of the screen. Nothing. “Where to first?” I asked Victor.

“Your guess is as good as mine.” He moved toward the tree line, his feet squishing in the mud. “Follow me.”

We wandered through the trees, and I stayed several paces behind him. Rainwater dripped off the branches above us. I shielded my phone with one sleeve. “How far out do you think we should go?”

“Navigating any slopes or inclines would be dangerous, especially with the heavy rain over the past two days.” He held back a low-hanging bough to let me pass, and I warily kept my distance from him when I edged around it. “I recommend we try to stick to the flatter areas and keep track of where the lodge is at all times. We’re leaving plenty of footprints, so I’m not too concerned about getting lost.”

“Sounds good to me.”

We proceeded forward, and I waited in vain to see if my phone would let me call for help. The stillness of the forest, minus the squelching of our shoes, made me uneasy again. I needed to focus on something other than the disturbing thoughts racing through my mind, or at least distract my potential killer with some conversation.

“While we’re out here, I wanted to apologize for the confusion with me not being my sister and everything.” I stepped over a protruding tree root. “I feel terrible about it, especially since...you know.”

Victor glanced back over his shoulder and offered me a nod before continuing to lead the way. “Part of the mix-up was my fault. I shouldn’t have assumed anything when you arrived.”

“I still could have said something right off the bat.” I checked my phone’s screen again. No signal. “You’ve been doing this mystery thing for a while, right? Any insights?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I know we were all supposed to act out a fictional story, but with your experience, I wondered if you had any ideas about who the killer is, or if you’d picked up on any clues.” Shaking my head, I sighed. “And now that I’ve said it out loud, I realize it sounds kind of dumb. But I’m struggling to figure out who I should trust and who I should avoid.”

“Your feelings are understandable,” he said without turning around. “However, though I do have some suspicions, I’d prefer to keep them to myself for now. It’s not that I don’t believe you are who you say you are, but—”

“No, I get it. It’s okay.” Memories of the group’s prior discussions flitted through my head, and I shivered. “We can’t, or shouldn’t trust anyone, the two of us included. Nothing personal, of course.”

“Of course.”

We plodded through the brush. Muffled thunder echoed across the skies, and I grimaced. Time was running out, and our mission to call for help had been unsuccessful so far. As I inspected my phone for what felt like the hundredth time, I heard Victor cry out.

Jerking my head up, I hurried over to where he’d been standing a moment earlier and caught myself at the edge of the embankment he’d tumbled down. “Victor!” I called from the top of the ridge. “Are you all right?”

With a loud groan, he pulled himself to his feet. Thick globs of mud clung to his suit. He attempted to brush them off but only succeeded in smearing them further. “Hurt pride more than anything else,” he grumbled.

“Can you get back up here?”

“I think so.” He took a few steps up the slope, lost his footing, and slid down a second time. “Damn!”

We stared at each other for an endless, wordless moment. A hint of anxiety flickered in his eyes. If I was the murderer, he had to think himself an easy mark, an opportunity too good to pass up. On the other hand, I reasoned, it would be equally easy for him to subdue me if I offered him any help. Would either of us be willing to take a chance?

After what felt like hours, Victor broke the silence first. “If you want to go get the others...”

I exhaled slowly. Despite our circumstances, I didn’t feel right leaving him alone in the forest at the verge of another torrential downpour. Whether or not compassion proved a stupid choice remained to be seen. Looping one hand around a low, sturdy branch, I extended the other toward him. “Please don’t drag me down into the mud. Or, um, kill me.”

Planting my feet in the soft ground, I clung to the tree. He used my arm to climb to the top of the embankment. My sneakers slid forward, but I helped haul him out of the hollow.

“Thank you,” he said, panting for air. “I’m not sure I would have done the same in your position.”

“I figured if I was going to die out here, it might as well be while doing a nice thing. Besides, assuming you’re not the one murdering everybody, you probably have the best shot at figuring out who is, since you know the most about the lodge and who’s supposed to be here.”

“You give me far too much credit.” Victor chuckled, then frowned. He gestured toward the streaks of dirt on my sweatshirt. “I’m sorry about the mud and the mess. I’m afraid we both look a little worse for wear right now.”

I tried to keep my voice light. “If we do manage to escape this place, I will be thrilled to do a load of laundry. Thrilled, I tell you.”

I succeeded in getting another small laugh out of him. “Indeed.”

Another low boom of thunder echoed through the sky, this one closer than the last. “I think finding a signal out here is hopeless by this point,” I said. “And I don’t really want to get rained on. Should we start heading back?”

“Yes, good idea.” Holding the branches aside for me again, he let me pass, and we started retracing our path back to the lodge.

The first heavy drops splattered on the top of my head when we arrived at our parked cars. I yanked my hood up over my hair and spotted Adam and Paul approaching from the opposite direction. I raised my arm to wave, but something odd between us caught my attention.

Two long legs culminating in a pair of stiletto heels dangled from the rim of the fountain, grazing the cobblestones. A head and torso bobbed along the water’s surface, floating lifelessly as the rain pelted their back. Across the driveway, Paul broke into a run.

I met him at the fountain with Victor and Adam close behind. Though it lay face down, there was no mistaking Brittany’s body in the water. Lifting my gaze, I looked at each of them, silently imploring one of them to tell me I was dreaming, or we weren’t too late to save her. Without bothering to check for a pulse, Paul shook his head. I swallowed back the dread bubbling up in the back of my throat.

The killer had struck again.

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“All right. I put her in her room like we did with the others.” Paul peeled his damp shirt, which had been made wetter when he’d slung Brittany’s sodden corpse over one shoulder, away from his body and tried to air it out. “So tell me, those of you who’ve managed to stay dry, how the hell did this happen?”

“What are you talking about?” Laura placed her hands on her hips and raised one eyebrow. For a moment, I thought she was going to reprimand him for speaking too loud in her library. “How can you be so sure one of us killed her? For all I know, you came back and dragged her outside.”

“Well, I didn’t!”

She shook her head. “Like you’re going to say otherwise?”

“Fine, then.” Paul turned away from her to face the others. “But you have to admit it’s more likely one of you in the lodge at least would have heard something.”

Isabel dropped her gaze to the floor, while Dylan offered a casual shrug for a response.

Shoulders slumped, he let out a long sigh. “Of course not.”

I shared in his disappointment, though I didn’t say so out loud.

“Now, wait,” Victor said. “If we all settle down and talk this through, maybe we’ll be able to glean some pertinent information.” Despite his rumpled, muddy appearance, he remained a voice of reason. “We’ll start with your search of the building. Tell us

more about what went on here.”

Laura ignored his request for calm. “He is completely useless,” she snapped, pointing at Dylan. “All he did was sit around, playing games on his phone.”

“I already told you what I thought about your stupid idea to look for someone who doesn’t exist. So why does it matter how I decided to waste my time?” A smug expression crossed his face. “And if that’s all I did, then by your logic, I didn’t kill her. Right?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I’m sure you could have slipped out for a couple minutes without us noticing.”

“Okay, it’s a start,” Victor said. “Where were you two ladies while he wasn’t participating?”

Isabel’s lips puffed out. She exhaled and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “We thought we’d be able to cover more ground if we split up, and we swore we’d be careful. Like, if something bad happened, the others would hear it, or we’d be alert enough to avoid an attack, or...” Her frown deepened, and she shook her head. “Clearly, we were wrong. And now Brittany’s dead, and it’s all our fault.”

“Especially if you were the one to drown her,” Dylan said.

“Oh, fuck off already.” Laura’s cheeks grew darker with anger, their hue matching the vibrant color of her hair. “If you’re not actually going to be helpful, why don’t you just shut up and let the rest of us try to figure things out?”

“Yeah, since you’ve been doing such a great job so far.”

“At least some of us are trying!” She waved him off with one hand. “Go back to your

little games, Senseless Sniper, or whoever you are, while the adults here get stuff done.”

He snorted. “Keep throwing your hissy fit. It’s really making you come across as so much more mature than me.”

“Enough!” Victor shouted. “We don’t need to be best friends here, but all this bickering does nothing more than distract us from the important issues and weaken us. If we’re going to survive this, we need to be willing to work together, and that goes for everyone in this room.” He looked back and forth between Dylan and Laura. “Get out of this alive, and the two of you never have to speak to each other ever again. Until then, if you can’t say anything constructive, say nothing at all. No one else wants to hear it.”

They glared at him, but neither answered.

“Regarding our group outside,” he continued, “we also split up, but into pairs.” He tugged at the bottom of his stained jacket. “You may have surmised I had a bit of an incident with a slippery patch of uneven terrain. Miss Campbell was kind enough to help me out, so the two of us can vouch for each other.”

A glimmer of hope flickered to life inside me, and I looked over to Adam. “And if the two of you were together the whole time...”

“Uh...about that.” Paul ruffled the hair at the back of his head, sending fine droplets of rainwater cascading to his shoes. “I, um, had to relieve myself, so I told him to go on ahead and I’d catch up.”

I groaned. “And you listened to him?”

Adam shoved his hands into his pockets and bit his lower lip. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“I didn’t think it was a big deal. In retrospect, I should have stuck around.”

Laura crossed her arms over her chest. She glowered at them, the creases in her brow deepening. Though she didn’t articulate her thoughts, her accusations and fury were apparent.

Out of desperation, I clung to that glimmer, although it faded quickly. “Would there have been enough time for one of you to come back to the lodge, kill Brittany, and run back before the four of us reconvened? I mean, how long does it take to pee behind a tree or whatever?”

“Who knows.” He rocked back and forth on his heels. “I don’t think we were separated for very long, but I can’t say for sure.”

“And I already said I didn’t kill her, but I’m sure not everybody believes me.” Paul exhaled again. “Not like I can blame you, without having any proof. We’re right back in the same situation, not knowing anything for certain.”

Victor straightened and cleared his throat. “Unless you believe there’s a conspiracy underway, Miss Campbell and I have been cleared of Brittany’s unfortunate death, at the very least. However, I don’t know how meaningful said information is at this point in time.”

Isabel’s nose twitched. “It’s a start, I guess.” She rubbed her arms. “I hadn’t thought about the possibility of there being more than one killer.”

Her words hung heavy in the air. The theory of multiple murderers troubled me, too. But, as Victor had pointed out, I knew he hadn’t killed Brittany. I found some consolation in being able to count on one person.

“I certainly hope that’s not the case,” he said. “But I suppose we shouldn’t rule

anything out.” He reached for the top button of his coat. “Now, if you don’t mind, I really must change out of these soiled clothes and try to wash the mud out of my hair. I’m sure the others who were with me outside would appreciate some time to freshen up, too.”

“A hot shower does sound nice,” I said.

He nodded. “Shall we all return to our rooms, then, and plan for a late lunch or early dinner in an hour?”

“All right.” Paul strode toward the staircase. “You can decide who’s prepping the food. With all the dead bodies I’ve been examining and hauling around, I think I’ve earned a pass.”

We agreed to meet in the foyer in one hour. I hurried up the stairs, shedding my damp, dirty clothing as soon as I locked the door behind me, and draped it over the radiator. Turning the faucet all the way to one side, I let the shower fill the bathroom with steam and tried to reason through the events of the last several hours.

The guests who’d stayed inside had a greater window of opportunity to drown Brittany in the fountain. Dylan wouldn’t have had to struggle much to physically overpower her, I thought, but could Isabel or Laura have created a ruse to lure her outside? Then again, with her ridiculous high heels and ditzy demeanor, anyone might have been able to catch her off guard or off balance.

I stepped into the shower and tilted my face up into the spray. Closing my eyes, I sighed, the plaintive sound echoing off the tiles. I wanted to believe neither Adam nor Paul would have had enough time to rush back to the lodge to kill her, but, by their own admission, I couldn’t rule either of them out.

Why didn’t I choose to stay with Adam? Then we’d each know the other was

innocent.

I shook my head to push the silly, futile thought out of my mind, and reached for the shampoo bottle. Although a fourth death unnerved me, it had given us more information to work with. I needed to concentrate on facts, not any lingering attraction to the cute guy and potential murderer next door.

Victor had been correct when he'd pointed out the two of us had an alibi for Brittany's drowning. While the killer had been able to commit the crime unseen, they had allowed us to start eliminating suspects. A small clue was better than nothing at all. Maybe the killer's luck would run out, or this little slipup would be a deterrent to carrying out the next murder.

I rinsed the lather out of my hair and rubbed my skin with a washcloth until all traces of mud swirled down the drain. My survival depended on untangling this mystery, and I now had more evidence at my disposal. I didn't care how, but I was determined to find a way to leave the lodge alive.

Bolstered by my newfound confidence, I shut off the faucet and quickly dried off with the towels. Since my casual clothes were soiled and damp, I put on the purple dress I'd worn the first night, before we'd learned what was in store for us over the weekend. The silky fabric swished across the tops of my knees as I marched out the door. I felt prepared to take on whatever twist the killer threw at us next.

Dylan sat on the bottom step of the staircase, swiping the screen of his phone. He nodded at me when I approached, and I leaned against the railing to wait for the others. Another door on the landing opened, and I glanced up to see Laura peek her head out. Isabel's door opened a moment later, and they joined us at the bottom of the stairs, followed by Paul and, lastly, Adam.

"I'm starving," Paul said. "What did you guys decide on for lunch, or dinner, or

whatever you want to call it?”

“Nothing yet.” Laura pushed her glasses up her nose. “Besides, shouldn’t we wait for Victor?”

The hair at the back of my neck stood up at the mention of his absence. “Where is he, anyway?” I murmured.

Several of us exchanged anxious glances. Paul shrugged. “The guy had, like, half the dirt from the forest stuck in his hair and clothes. I’m sure he’ll be out here in another minute.”

We waited in silence. Dylan continued playing on his phone while Isabel picked at her fingernails and Laura spun her wristwatch in circles. Adam stood next to me at the railing, no more than a couple of inches between us, yet I didn’t look at him. Somehow, deep in the back of my mind, I knew something bad had happened. Again.

I hoped and prayed for Victor to emerge from his room, a picture of calm and poise in his immaculate suit, but it was to no avail. I pushed off the banister and descended the last two steps. “I’m going to check on him,” I said, unable to keep the quiver out of my voice. “Anyone else want to come?”

The staff quarters were on the opposite end of the foyer, closer to the entrance to the library. With the others behind me, I crossed the great hall, my footsteps echoing on the wood floor. The door to Victor’s room stood between two of the giant bronze animal statues. I took a deep breath, raised my hand, and knocked.

No answer.

I knocked again, louder this time. “Victor? Is everything okay?”

Nothing.

I turned around, knotting my fingers together in front of me. “What now?”

“Is the door locked?” Paul asked.

I reached for the knob. It turned easily in my hand. Fear and panic churned in my stomach, sending a tremor through my arm, but I had to see what lay on the other side.

My worst suspicions were confirmed when the door swung open with an ominous creak. Clad only in a bathrobe, Victor lay face down on the floor. A raised, purple bruise had emerged near the base of his skull, his hair mussed around it. Beside him were the two pieces of a broken pool cue, the latest murder weapon.

Horror at the sight before me weakened my knees. I dropped into a squatting position and buried my face in my hands. “No,” I said weakly. “No, no, no, no...”

“Shit,” Paul said. Through my fingers, I saw him move in front of me. “How the hell did someone get in here, anyway?”

“Maybe he forgot to lock the door,” Laura said. “Or someone picked the lock. Either way, someone could have hidden in the closet and snuck up on him.”

Paul opened the second, smaller door. “Well, there’s no one in there now.”

I couldn’t stand to listen to their speculation. “Who cares? Does it even matter?” The quake in my voice sounded more apparent, and the distress I’d been bottling up for days threatened to come to a head. “Victor knew the most about this place and the people here. I thought he might have a shot at figuring this thing out and getting us all out of here, but now he’s dead .” Tears sprang to my eyes on the last word, and I

attempted to choke them back.

Adam stepped toward me. “It’ll be okay.” He reached for my shoulder. “We’ll find a way to—”

“Don’t touch me!” I jumped up and backed away from him. “He was the only person I trusted, and look what happened!” My chest heaved, and I gasped for air. I felt on the verge of hysteria. The words kept rushing out of my mouth. “I can’t stand this horrible, vile place anymore and being stuck here with all of you. I didn’t want to come here to begin with, and now I’m going to be the victim of some sick maniac who thinks killing people is a game.” Frustration and rage mingled to send the tears cascading forth, but I’d long passed the point of caring. “So, whichever one of you is getting enjoyment out of watching the rest of us suffer, fine. You win. I hope you’re fucking happy!”

Without waiting for a response to my outburst, I spun around and fled to my room.

The lid of the toilet felt cool against my flushed, damp cheeks. I’d locked myself in the bathroom and curled up on the floor to cry for what must have been hours. I was scared for my life, afraid of everyone around me, and furious with my sister for getting me into this predicament in the first place. I wanted to go home.

I dragged myself into a sitting position against the wall, the first step in acknowledging I couldn’t stay holed up in the bathroom forever. Once my breathing resumed its normal rhythm, I stood, placing one hand on the towel bar for support. I caught a glimpse of my head in the mirror as I rose and winced. My red, puffy eyes and disheveled hair matched my mood, and I looked ridiculous in my cocktail dress. “Time to go to bed and hope tomorrow can’t possibly get worse,” I muttered to my reflection.

I changed into my pajamas and hung the dress in the closet, wondering if I'd ever get the chance to wear it again. Before climbing into bed, I decided to open the window a crack to let some fresh air into the stuffy room. When I raised the curtain to reach the latches, I saw someone standing near the railing again.

Oh no.

Adam turned at the sound of the window opening, despite my attempt to keep it quiet. "Hey, there you are." Light rain had plastered his hair against his forehead. He held something beneath his open jacket, and I stiffened. "Don't get scared, it's just me."

I shook my head. "Go away. Please."

Pulling his jacket aside, he revealed a small plate. "I brought you a sandwich. I figured you might want to eat something. Or at least you should eat something."

"I don't want it."

He shrugged, disrupting the rivulets of water running down the slick fabric. "I'll take a bite of it first if it would help."

I wanted to laugh, but I was exhausted and frustrated with him, perhaps irrationally. "Why?" I said, my voice cracking. "Why couldn't you have stayed with Paul today? Then you would have been together when Brittany died, and then I'd know for sure you weren't the killer, and I'd believe more of what you say, and..." A hiccup interrupted my ramblings, and I fought back a new surge of tears.

"I know, I know." Adam sighed, his shoulders drooping. "I've been kicking myself over it all day. It was stupid of me, of us, and if I could go back and change things, I would." He wiped the raindrops from his brow. "There's nothing I can say right now to make this any better or convince you to trust me, and I don't blame you. I just

wanted to bring you some food and see if you were okay.”

My throat tightened and I rubbed my eyes. “I’m not.”

Creases appeared in his forehead. “I probably wouldn’t admit it in front of the others, but I’m scared, too. But I keep thinking we’ve come this far and—”

“No. It doesn’t matter.” A nagging, terrible thought I’d been attempting to ignore fought its way to the surface, and the words started tumbling out too fast again. “Don’t you get it? Victor and I each knew the other hadn’t killed Brittany, and we gave each other alibis. He obviously wasn’t the murderer, and now he’s dead. Which means...” I swallowed and tried to keep my voice steady. “I’m next.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Sure I do. It makes sense. Unless enough people believe in the multiple killer theory, they know I’m innocent. And if I’ve been cleared, and I’m not helping to muddle up everyone else’s suspicions, then I don’t really serve a purpose while alive, do I?” I sniffled, but the tears didn’t come. Either I was dehydrated or I’d resigned myself to my dismal fate. “So, I have a strong feeling I’ll be the next victim.”

The rain grew heavier, splattering against the balcony. Adam moved closer to the window, fixing me in an intense stare. “I’m not going to let that happen.”

I tilted my head to the side and hugged my arms to my chest. “How can you be so sure?”

Droplets clung to his dark lashes, but his gaze never wavered. “I’ll find a way to keep you safe. And somehow, though I don’t know how yet, I’m going to prove to you I’m innocent. We’re going to get out of this alive.”

Clinging to wisps of hope had already turned out to be a mistake once during the day. I didn't know if my psyche could handle another blow of disappointment, so I didn't answer. Adam took the plate of food out from beneath his jacket and set it next to the door, beneath the overhang. "I know you have no reason to believe me, but, like I said, I'll find a way. I won't bother you anymore tonight." He straightened and vanished into the shadows.

I waited until sure he was really gone before opening the door to retrieve the sandwich. My stomach gurgled, and I realized I felt rather hungry. Though simple, the food did help improve my state. I only wished I found similar comfort in Adam's promises.

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In the morning, I hovered near the door and listened for movement outside. I toyed with the idea of staying in my room until help arrived or the murderer decided to end my life, whichever happened first. Alas, I knew hiding wouldn't stop someone determined enough, and not knowing anything would increase my anxiety. Time to face the others.

I opened the door when I heard footsteps and voices. Paul stood at the top of the stairs, while Isabel and Laura lingered near their rooms. They glanced at me when I emerged, but I did nothing but offer them a cursory nod. Awkward or not, I saw no reason to apologize for anything I'd done or said the previous night.

Adam and Dylan soon joined us. I thought our group would continue waiting on the landing, and then I remembered those present were the only ones left. Victor's absence left a noticeable void. I contemplated how we'd fare without his guidance.

Laura smoothed the front of her skirt and cleared her throat. "So...breakfast?"

We mumbled some sort of assent and moved toward the steps. Paul hesitated and put up a hand to stop us. "Before we start what I hope will be our last day here, this is what I'm thinking. I don't want to take any chances, so whatever we do, I suggest we do it as a group, or only one person leaves at a time." He looked at each of us in turn. "That goes for everything . Food, water, bathroom...one at a time, and maybe we'll get lucky and the killer won't catch any of us alone. What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me," Adam said.

Isabel nodded. "It's probably the best we can do right now."

No one voiced any disagreements, and we headed down the stairs and into the kitchen. I gathered together the last of the pastries while Isabel rummaged through the refrigerator. “Anyone want any eggs?” she asked. “You can watch me prepare them, if you’ll feel better.”

“Sure.” Laura reached for the glass pot drying in the sink. “I’ll get some fresh coffee going.”

Adam located clean plates and utensils while Paul emptied the remainder of a carton of orange juice into a pitcher. We worked together in a domestic routine, and the atmosphere of the room almost felt pleasant. If only the clinking silverware and smell of coffee brewing could help me forget the sinister events of the past and the threat of danger lurking around every corner.

Once Isabel finished cooking the eggs, we brought our meal into the dining room. No one attempted irrelevant small talk, yet some of the tension from the previous day had dissipated. Maybe we will find a way to survive this, I thought while spreading some butter on a roll.

After finishing the food on his plate, Paul downed his orange juice in one long gulp and slammed the glass on the table. “I’m going to head outside to see what’s going on, or if I can at least make a phone call yet.” He stood, the legs of his chair scraping against the wood floor with a loud screech. “If you don’t mind, I think this time I’d rather go by myself. It’s not like having a group with me yesterday accomplished anything, and Brittany died anyway.”

I winced at the reminder.

“We’ll all stay here until you get back,” Isabel said.

I chewed on my roll and glanced out the dining room window. Sunbeams tried to

break through the clouds, casting a yellow-gray glow over the trees. The rain had stopped for the time being, and I wondered about the flooding near the bridge farther down the mountain. Even if the storms had caused irreparable damage to the bridge, I hoped some of the cell towers in the area had been repaired by now. My brain warned me not to be too optimistic, but my heart wished for Paul to finally be successful in one of his exploratory journeys outside.

As I raised my mug of coffee to take a sip, a tremendous crash reverberated from outside the room, so loud, I swore the floor shook beneath my feet. Coffee sloshed onto the tablecloth when I jumped, and I put the mug down before I added more to the mess. I looked up in alarm, in unison with everyone else at the table.

“What the hell was that?” Dylan asked.

“I don’t know.” I tried wiping up the spill with my napkin, though my hand shook. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

Laura set her fork down and adjusted her glasses. “I suppose we should go investigate.” Behind the thick lenses, worry darkened her eyes, and her voice held a slight waver.

Isabel wrung her napkin in her lap. “I guess we have to.”

I would have preferred to stay in the dining room and pretend nothing happened, but I knew they were right. Rising from my chair, I waited for everyone to reach the door and joined the back of the huddle. Unease rippled through me again, and I feared what we would find in the foyer.

Laura stopped in the doorway and gasped. I inched forward to peek around her and did the same. Across the foyer, one of the massive bronze statues had fallen near the front door. A hand and arm stuck out from beneath the metallic moose’s giant antlers.

Adam rushed across the room and knelt next to the toppled statue. “Paul!” he shouted.

I predicted there would be no response.

The rest of us joined him. I tried to keep my eyes averted since I had no desire to see what effect the weight of the statue had had on Paul’s body. “This is crazy,” I murmured. “How did this even happen?”

Laura bent over and picked up a leg that had broken off the moose. Her brow furrowed when she held it closer to her face. “This appears too smooth to be a natural break. And there’s something attached to it.” With two fingers, she stretched out a thin wire so fine, it was practically invisible.

Adam crawled around to the opposite side of the statue, near the door. “Looks like the other end was attached over here.” He stood and stared at the gory scene on the floor. “This is quite the elaborate trap. Someone put a lot of effort into setting this up.”

Isabel twisted her fingers in front of her. “It could have been any one of us to walk into it.”

I remembered Paul’s advice from earlier in the morning and shivered. “And now we’re not even safe if we stay together. Who knows what other dangers this place is hiding?”

No one answered. When the silence became unbearable, Adam cleared his throat and gestured toward the statue. “Well, let’s get this cleaned up, and we’ll take Paul back to his room. Dylan, can you give me a hand?”

“All right.”

Each stood on one side and grabbed an antler. “Shit, this thing is heavy,” Dylan muttered.

Grunting, they managed to shift the statue enough to free Paul’s body. I glanced away when they picked him up off the floor. Since we’d arrived, Paul had appeared so strong, so confident...and even he was no match for the killer. Once again, any lingering wisps of hope I’d had disappeared with the latest victim Adam and Dylan dragged away.

The three of us women waited in the foyer for their return without speaking. Adam descended the stairs, his shirt rumpled, and wiped a few beads of sweat off his brow. “I’m going to head outside and pick up where Paul left off,” he said. “Maybe something’s changed, or I’ll come back with good news.”

“We’ll all stay here,” Laura said.

“Be careful,” I called after him as he stepped around the statue and opened the front door.

With few other options, I trudged back into the library behind everyone else. I kicked off my shoes and curled up on the end of one of the couches, hugging my knees to my chest. Another day of nothing but waiting to see if I’d live past sunset seemed unbearable, but little else held my focus.

Dylan collapsed into an armchair and pulled out his phone to resume playing his games. Isabel and Laura started a new game of billiards, the clacking of the balls the sole sound in the room. Not long ago, the library had been filled with people. Now its vast size highlighted our dwindling numbers.

A tall figure darkened the doorway. I froze, but it was only Adam.

Isabel glanced up and rested her pool cue against the table. “Any luck?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Still can’t get a cell signal. And from what I saw, the bridge hasn’t been repaired yet.”

“Ugh.”

The billiards game resumed. Adam sat on the opposite end of the couch from me, yet said nothing, staring straight ahead. I rested my chin on my knees and tried to hide a yawn with my forearm. No matter how tired I was, I needed to remain alert.

Dylan’s phone beeped from where he sat to my left. “I need my charger,” he said, standing. We watched him leave the room and then resumed our activity—or lack of activity, in some cases.

I braced myself for something bad to happen while he was gone. Every noise startled me, anxiety gripping my limbs like it held them in a vise. Dylan returned without incident, however, and slid his chair closer to the wall to plug his phone into an outlet.

Time passed at an excruciating pace. I occupied my mind with fantasies of a rescue team bursting in, saving us all, and somehow outing the killer. Although I accepted we were stuck until further notice, not every flicker of hope in my heart had been extinguished. Yet.

Laura shot the last ball into the corner pocket and laid her cue on the table. “I’m going to get another cup of coffee from the kitchen. Anyone want anything? I promise I won’t poison it.”

We all murmured some form of polite refusal.

“I won’t be long.” She left for the kitchen, and again, I anticipated some sort of fatal disaster. Within minutes, she came back holding a mug, and the tedium continued.

Eventually the orange juice and coffee I’d consumed at breakfast flowed through my system and took their toll on my bladder. I didn’t want to move, but I had to leave the room. Pushing aside my fear, I hopped off the couch and hurried toward the door. “I’ll be right back,” I mumbled on my way.

My imagination convinced me at least one floorboard between the library and the restroom had to be booby trapped, but I arrived at my destination in one piece. Flushing the toilet didn’t set off any explosives, and nothing but cool, clean water flowed out of the faucet. I wiped my trembling hands on a towel and took a few deep breaths. Despite how much I yearned to be safe, paranoia made me want to crawl out of my skin. If a better balance existed, I needed to find it.

Upon my return to the library, I nearly collided with Adam, who had been waiting by the door. All attempts to calm my rattled nerves vanished, and I jumped back, my pulse racing. “What are you doing?” I snapped. “You scared the hell out of me!”

“Sorry. I was just keeping an ear out.” He raised his hands in a gesture of apology, but then determination hardened his gaze. “I meant what I said last night,” he said, his voice low. “I’m not going to let anyone hurt you. Not if I can help it.”

I exhaled and tugged at the collar of my shirt. The surprise encounter, along with his attention, had sent a wave of heat through me. “Well, giving me a heart attack isn’t the way to go.”

“You’re right. Again, I’m sorry.” Adam beckoned for me to enter the room. “Come on, let’s do something. We can’t sit around staring at the walls all day.”

Crossing my arms, I raised an eyebrow. “What did you have in mind?”

He scanned the library and pointed at the small table near the windows. “How about a game of chess?”

“I’m terrible at chess.”

A tiny smile crept across his face. “So am I. It’ll be perfect.”

Plopping on the sofa and waiting for another tragedy to befall us didn’t sound like the better option anymore. “Fine,” I said, sighing.

Adam pulled out one of the chairs and waited for me to sit before taking the seat across from me. I watched him set up the board. “Aren’t you afraid the others will think we’re conspiring or something?” I asked.

“I don’t care what they think.” He placed a row of pawns along the black and white squares. “You’re the only one I care about in this room.”

I propped my elbows on the edge of the table and stared down at the board. “I suppose I should be flattered.”

“If you’d like. But you don’t belong here with the rest of us, so if anyone’s leaving this place alive, it should be you.”

My eyebrow shot up again. “What do you mean?”

Adam positioned the last piece on my side and leaned back in his chair. “I’m still trying to figure out what we all have in common, why we were brought here. Obviously, it was all a ruse—my invitation and ticket didn’t really come from a former client, Paul didn’t win a contest, and so on. But your appearance here is an accident, we’ve established.”

I thought of my sister and wondered what she could have done to make anyone want to hurt her. The same thoughts regarding the charming man sitting across from me flitted through my mind. “So, what did you deduce?”

“Not much.” He picked up a pawn and moved it forward two spaces. “I won’t say I’ve lived a perfect life, but I can’t think of a reason why someone would want to kill me. Especially in such a bizarre, twisted way like we’ve seen.”

I decided on my first play, sliding out a pawn of my own. “Perhaps it’s another case of mistaken identity, like with me.”

“It’s possible.” Shrugging, he moved his knight in an L-shape. “Or I might be way off base, and some psychopath picked us all at random.”

“Also possible.” I sent a bishop diagonally to the edge of the board. “But maybe we shouldn’t be worried about a motive right now. I’ve been thinking more about the means for these murders.”

One side of Adam’s mouth curled up in a half-smile. “Oh, really? What are your findings, Detective?”

I snorted, the closest I could get to a laugh in our dire circumstances. “Like you, not a whole lot. Yet, after this morning in particular, something’s been nagging at me.” Leaning forward over the board, I dropped my voice to a whisper. “Whoever the murderer is, he or she has been moving around unnoticed. The trap Paul walked into must have taken some time to set up.”

“Done at night, I assume.”

“Right. But even Victor’s death had me thinking...was the killer really brazen enough to waltz past all our rooms while we were showering and changing, go

downstairs to whack him over the head, and come back up the staircase and risk being caught by someone else?" I rubbed my arms, the chilling thoughts causing discomfort. Even sitting in this secluded corner of the room, I squirmed as if someone watched me, waiting to plan their next attack. "We're missing something."

"Hmm." He tapped his fingers on top of one of his rooks. "What's your theory, a secret passage?"

I shook my head. "Don't be ridiculous. I doubt those exist in a newer building like this."

His face took on a more serious expression, and he moved the rook. "I know, I know. You have a good point, though. It is rather curious that the killer's been moving around so freely." He gestured toward the others. "Too bad we were the ones outside and not searching the house. I don't know if they'd share their findings."

As if on cue, Isabel announced her intentions to go to the kitchen for a glass of water. I nodded in acknowledgement and continued. "Our pool of suspects is growing smaller. I'd prefer not to share much with them, either."

Adam's full grin made its appearance, along with those endearing dimples. "So you've ruled me out, then?"

I pretended to focus on the chess set. "I didn't say that."

"I shouldn't push my luck." He slid another piece closer to the center of the board. "What do we do next?"

"Not much other than what we've been doing." I studied the board to determine my next move. "Sit here and try not to die."

“It’s better than any plan I can come up with.” Folding his hands in front of him, he reclined in his chair while I deliberated. “We could also attempt to act like there’s nothing sinister going on and just talk, like we did the other night.”

I tried to hide my smile and hoped my face wasn’t turning pink. “We could,” I said, finally moving my other bishop. “Since there isn’t much else for us to do.”

“Even if there was, I’d choose learning more about you.” Adam captured one of my pawns and placed it on his side of the board. “Tell me more about the fascinating world of graphic design.”

He managed to elicit a genuine chuckle from me. “Fascinating. Yeah, right.” I reached for a knight but changed my mind. “I’m sure you want to hear all the details about how much time I spent designing a new logo for a client’s business per his specifications, only to have him try to argue for a reduced fee because he wanted the letters to be blueish-green and not greenish-blue.”

“Yes. That is exactly what I want to hear about.”

“Liar.” I settled for the safe choice of moving another pawn forward. “But since, as we’ve pointed out, we have nothing better to do, I guess I can humor you.”

He inched his pawn toward mine. “Or tell me what you do outside of work instead.”

“My sister is under the impression I do nothing but read and fill out the daily crossword puzzle in the newspaper.” Rolling my eyes, I shrugged. “She might not be too far off base.”

“Hey.” He moved back, the chair squeaking beneath him. Dipping his head, he caught my gaze across the board. “We’re not talking about her. We’re talking about you.”

A pleasant warmth flooded my cheeks again. “Well, I do like to read. But I’ve been trying to get out of the house more. I’m considering taking up hiking or something along those lines.”

“After this extended weekend, I’d think you’d want to avoid mountains for a while.” A roguish twinkle lit up his hazel eyes. “Though, if you’re up for it, I’m familiar with some local trails near my place.”

“We’ll see.” I swiped his pawn off the board and pursed my lips. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here.”

Isabel returned with a full glass of water, and I realized I hadn’t been concentrating on all the ways she could die while out of the library. Maybe chess did have its merits after all. If letting my guard down around Adam proved to be a mistake, at least I wasn’t spending my last moments in terror, hiding in a ball on the couch.

I continued our breezy conversation in an effort to further ignore our surroundings. “Your turn. Not in the game, I mean. It’s your turn to captivate me with tales of what’s bound to be your glamorous, fast-paced marketing job.”

He stared into my eyes, making me feel like the only other person in the room. “Oh, I think I can manage that. Whatever it takes to keep improving your opinion of me.”

We chatted and played, laughed and shared. Truthfully, I had little interest in the outcome of the game and didn’t care when he captured more of my pieces. “Checkmate,” he said as the clock struck one.

The others stopped what they were doing and looked up. “Lunch?” Laura offered with a shrug.

We assembled some paltry sandwiches with what we found in the fridge. “What’s the

food situation?” Dylan asked. “Like, I know we’re not going to starve here, but if we don’t need to limit ourselves...”

Laura handed him another piece of bread without saying anything. Isabel glanced out the window. “The weather wasn’t too bad today. Hopefully, people were able to start repairing the bridge, or even the cell towers, and we can get out of here soon.”

“Not soon enough,” I muttered. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw Adam’s shoulders sag, and I felt a twinge of guilt.

If my words disappointed him, he recovered quickly. “Dylan, if you want another sandwich, I doubt anyone will hold it against you.”

Dylan shoved his phone in his pocket and picked up a plate. “Maybe later. I just wondered.”

We ate in our usual silence. The lack of conversation bothered me less than the prior days’ disputes. Arguments were dangerous diversions, I’d decided, and the tentative peace fanned those relentless flames of optimism.

“I’ll clean up in here,” I said once everyone finished. “It’ll give me something to do.” No one else made a counter offer, and I rinsed off the dishes in the sink as they filed out of the room. Through the window, I gazed at the rear of the property. A neat little garden sat beyond the back door, though the heavy storms had torn apart the few remaining plants. Beyond the dirt square, curling vines climbed up a trellis to the balcony outside our rooms. Aside from the gruesome events I’d witnessed, I acknowledged the quaint beauty of the lodge and surrounding property. I wished I’d been able to enjoy it under different circumstances.

Adam waited for me inside the library. This time, I didn’t jump when I opened the door. “I’m going to run to the restroom really quick,” he said, “and then how about a

rematch?”

“Sure.” I flashed him a genuine smile. “I’ll reset the board.”

I sat down and placed the pieces on their assigned squares. Adam returned within a few minutes, taking his seat while I finished up.

“You go first this time,” he said.

“All right.” I lifted my chin in mock arrogance. “I’m determined to beat you this round.”

He laughed and leaned forward. “Bring it on!”

We started our next match. I wanted to concentrate on the game to increase my chances of winning, but something else tugged at the back of my mind. Since becoming less agitated and skittish, I was able to examine the details of the ongoing mystery with a clearer head. No criminal mastermind operated without mistakes. There had to be some clues left behind somewhere.

I replayed my prior conversations with Adam while we moved the pieces around the board. Motive or opportunity...why or how... I thought of the others’ actions throughout the day, from meeting them on the staircase first thing in the morning to when they left me in the kitchen to wash the dishes after we ate lunch. The kitchen...with the cute garden and trellis I hadn’t noticed before...

Suddenly, the answer to some of my questions exploded into clarity. Though little more than a theory, I felt confident I knew how the killer moved around without drawing attention. The wooden lattice outside provided plenty of footholds for anyone wanting to move from the upper floor to the lower without using the staircase or passing by the other bedrooms. I doubted anyone had checked to see if the kitchen

door had been locked, and there might even be other ground floor entrances to the lodge I didn't know about.

Excitement at my discovery lasted mere seconds. I realized I'd only seen one person out on the balcony. Were Adam's desires for fresh air and admiring the scenery nothing more than excuses? After he brought me food and tried to comfort me last night, did he scale down the wall to set a lethal trap? Could he switch from acting kind and compassionate to plotting murder so quickly?

"Veronica?" His voice interrupted my thoughts. "You know it's your turn, right?"

"Oops, sorry." I moved a rook without caring where it landed. Across the room, Laura walked through the doorway with another cup of coffee. I hadn't even seen her leave. So much for being alert.

I debated whether to share my revelation with Adam. I wanted him to reassure me he wasn't skulking around the lodge and killing off our companions, but his words alone wouldn't fully convince me. The best course of action, I reasoned, was to act natural and attempt to remain observant.

"Careful," he said when I reached for a bishop. "You don't want to leave your queen unguarded."

I withdrew my hand. "Are you letting me win?"

"Merely offering some advice." The mischievous sparkle reappeared in his eyes. "The queen's as important as the king here. She should also be protected."

"Trying to charm me with chess strategies." I opted for picking up a knight instead. "Very cute."

“Is it working?”

I set the little horse back down and gave him an exaggerated shrug. “Maybe.”

Despite my best efforts, I lost the second game. “One more round,” I said when he plucked my king from the board. “I have to win eventually.”

Before he answered, movement out the corner of my eye caught my attention. Dylan jerked his head up, looking away from his phone for the first time in hours. “Do you guys smell something?”

“Smell what?” I asked.

The high-pitched screech of an alarm pierced the air.

Adam leapt from his chair. “What is that? Where’s it coming from?”

“It sounds like a smoke detector.” Laura’s pool stick clattered against the floor when she dropped it. “If it’s not a crazed killer we’re worrying about, then it’s the freaking house burning down around us.” She tossed her hair back over one shoulder and marched toward the foyer. “Come on, let’s go.”

We followed her out of the room. “I think it’s coming from the kitchen,” Isabel said.

Adam approached the door and gave it a tentative nudge. Thick smoke spilled out from behind it when it opened. Isabel yelped when he jumped back, and a new surge of panic slammed into me.

“Be careful!” I yelled.

Eyes wide, he put his hand on the door again. “It’s not hot. I think it’s mostly smoke

in there, and we can stop it before it gets much worse.” He pulled the edge of his shirt up over his mouth and nose. “There has to be a fire extinguisher around somewhere,” he said, disappearing into the kitchen.

“Adam!” Frozen in fear, I tried to rapidly pick the best from a set of terrible options. I didn’t want to become injured or incapacitated in the kitchen, but being forced outside to endure unpredictable weather and eventual nightfall didn’t sound appealing either. I recalled how I’d felt when helping Victor out of the mud and I knew I had to at least attempt to do the right thing. Taking a deep breath, I barged into the smoky room.

Inside, I couldn’t see more than a few inches in front of me. I reached for the wall and used it to help guide me around the perimeter of the room until I arrived at the rear entrance to the garden. I flung open the door and hoped some of the smoke would drift outside. After gulping in a few breaths of fresh air, I set out to do the same with the windows.

“Where are you?”

“Check the closets for an extinguisher!”

“Can someone get to the sink?”

“I think the smoke is coming from the oven!”

Confused shouts echoed throughout the kitchen, nearly drowned out by the incessant blare of the alarm. I groped my way to the nearest window and fumbled with the locks. Once I succeeded in getting it open, I knocked out the screen for good measure, then repeated the process with the others. I turned around, but the dark gray clouds limited my visibility.

On the other side of the kitchen, the oven door opened with a bang. I heard the loud whoosh of what I assumed was a fire extinguisher and stumbled toward the noises. Little by little, the smoke thinned out. I saw Adam leaning against the cabinets, wiping sweat from his forehead. Dylan stood beside him, holding the bright red canister he'd emptied into the oven.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"What?" Dylan shouted over the shrill whine of the smoke detector.

Adam held up one finger to pause our conversation. He hoisted himself up on the countertop and reached for the alarm mounted on the ceiling. With the push of a button, deafening silence washed over the kitchen.

Isabel tentatively approached the oven, as if it would burst into flames if she got too close. "What happened? I mean, how did the fire start?"

Adam hopped off the counter and grabbed a nearby pot holder. He used it to slide a rack out of the oven, which held a charred, black mass in the center of a tray. "I doubt we'll ever know what this was," he said, nudging at the shelf with his foot. "Whether someone wanted to burn the place down or just set us on edge even more...well, there's yet another mystery."

I reached over the smoldering clump and turned one of the oven dials. "It's set pretty low. I don't even remember if it was on when we were making our sandwiches for lunch."

Dylan dropped the fire extinguisher and grimaced. "We were all in and out of the library throughout the day. Anyone could have set this up at any time."

Isabel nodded, then looked around. "Where's Laura?" Notes of concern colored her

voice.

Oh no . I swallowed. “Maybe she went back to the library?” I didn’t believe the words coming out of my mouth.

Adam ran a hand through his hair. The worry in his deep-set eyes matched my trepidation. “Let’s go find out,” he said with a sigh.

We peered into the foyer. Empty. Together, we plodded across the room with heavy steps. Isabel pushed on the library door, which swung open with a foreboding creak. No sign of her.

Our search ended in the dining room. Laura’s body lay draped across the chair at the head of the table. The bright red hues of her hair offered a stark contrast to the bluish tinge of her skin. Her mouth hung open, frozen in surprise, and her hands were balled up beneath her chin. Upon closer inspection, I saw a pair of nylon pantyhose wrapped tightly around her neck.

The purpose of the fire became all too clear. We stood in a half circle, gaping at the gruesome sight before us.

Dylan let out a noncommittal noise and stuck his hands in his pockets. “And then there were four.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:55 pm

Despite scrubbing at my skin and hair in the shower for what felt like the entire evening, the smell of smoke clung to me. Even if I imagined the unpleasant odor, I constantly replayed the events surrounding the fire in my mind. Whoever set up the oven to start smoking had succeeded in creating chaos, which resulted in being able to murder Laura while the rest of us ran around amidst all the pandemonium. But who was the culprit?

I agreed with Dylan's statement—all of us had the same opportunity. And I'd been so engrossed in the games of chess and my determination to find some clues I'd lost track of the comings and goings of everyone else. My thoughts turned back to Adam. Did he set the fire on one of his trips out of the library? Was that why he'd marched into the kitchen so fearlessly? And where was he when I was trying to clear the smoke out of the room?

I tried convincing myself he wouldn't have been able to leave the kitchen without me noticing, yet someone had been able to do exactly that. I found it difficult to reconcile the image of the amiable, attractive man with whom I'd spent the afternoon with one of a ruthless killer...but then again, I'd felt the same way about everyone here. Sighing, I put on my pajamas and combed out my hair. Every time I thought I'd made progress in untangling the mysteries of the lodge, something new happened to set me back. Although I hoped I'd figured out a few key points earlier in the day, I doubted I'd solve anything else overnight.

When I left the bathroom, my gaze immediately went to the window. Sure enough, Adam stood at the edge of the balcony, moonlight illuminating his profile as he stared over the railing. The day's theories jumbled together in my head. Was he waiting for the rest of us to go to sleep to plot his next nefarious act? Or did he wait for me

again?

Pushing aside my better judgment and the urge to hide in bed beneath the covers, I decided to confront him. I flung the window open and leaned against the sill. “What are you doing?” I called.

He turned, showing no signs of surprise at my question, and gestured toward the sky. “Just admiring the stars. It’s finally a clear night.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And I needed to get out for some air.” He rubbed his nose. “Everything smells like smoke inside, it seems.”

Both reasons sounded plausible. We stared at each other in silence until his expected invitation came. “Would you care to join me?”

I picked at the peeling paint on the window frame. “I don’t know.”

Adam shrugged and faced the trees again. “Whatever you decide, I’ll be out here a while longer.”

I remembered how nervous I’d felt in the library, and how he’d helped put me at ease. Even if I had no proof of his guilt or his innocence, one relentless thought echoed loud and clear. I didn’t want to let fear consume me. I was tired of being afraid.

Slipping on my worn sneakers, I opened the door. His head tilted at the noise, but he didn’t move. I joined him on the far side of the balcony, a faint breeze ruffling my hair.

“You’re not going to throw me over the railing or anything, are you?” I tried to joke.

No laughs, not even the hint of a smile. “Of course not.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“I don’t want to talk about any of that stuff right now.” Adam let out a puff of air. “Maybe it’s stupid and naïve, but if I’m out here, it’s easier to pretend nothing horrible is going on inside.”

“I understand.”

I followed his gaze out over the dark smudge of trees. Overhead, countless stars splayed across the inky sky, paling in comparison to the luminous full moon. Though undoubtedly magnificent, the panoramic view made me feel even more small and helpless.

Another breeze wafted by, carrying the scent of pine needles. I shivered and rubbed my bare arms. The thin tank top I wore did little to protect me from the evening’s cooler temperatures. “I guess I didn’t really dress for the occasion,” I said. “Besides, my sweatshirt’s still damp from yesterday.”

He nodded back toward the row of doors. “I can run inside and grab my jacket, if you’d like.”

“No, thanks. I’ll be fine.” I tried not to let my chattering teeth belie the statement.

Adam moved behind me. I tensed, then relaxed as his broad hands covered my shoulders. His skin against mine sent flutters throughout my body. Heart racing, I inched backward and leaned into him.

He wrapped his arms around me, folding me into a warm embrace. We stood motionless beneath the stars, his light breath tousling the hair at my temple. A near-

imperceptible shift occurred in the world around us. Suddenly, the universe didn't feel so uncaring and daunting. I wasn't as alone and powerless as I'd thought.

My pulse raced, and I found both solace and excitement enveloped in his arms. I wanted more from him. Turning, I remained in his grasp and gazed into his eyes. Moonlight reflected in their depths, mesmerizing me.

"This was inevitable, wasn't it?" I murmured.

"Mm?" His face hovered dangerously close to mine.

"Us, winding up here, like this."

"Maybe so." Adam dropped his hands to my waist, pulling us closer together. "I won't comment on the paths leading us here, but I will say that from the first time I saw you, I hoped for this chance."

The crisp mountain air no longer felt so cold. Heat spread over my body. His head ducked down, and he captured my mouth in a gentle kiss. Soft lips pressed against mine. I melted farther into his embrace. His tongue slid forward, and I welcomed it, reveling in his sweet taste.

I ran my hands over his shoulders and laced my fingers behind his neck. Lost in his kiss, I pretended we were two normal people surrounded by beautiful scenery, doing nothing more than succumbing to a mutual attraction in one exhilarating moment. Even if something terrible happened to me later on, I could say I chose happiness over fear.

Our kiss grew more fervent, and his grip on me tightened. I let out a small whimper when he pulled away, but he beamed at me. "Stay with me tonight," he said.

The edge in his voice sent a shiver through me, although my cheeks burned hot.

“Since we don’t know what tomorrow will bring, let’s be together now.”

A tremble shook my knees, and I was glad his strength supported me. Several tiny wisps of doubt flitted through the back of my mind, yet my desire for him overpowered them.

“Okay,” I said, the single word all I managed to get out.

Adam took me by the hand and led me toward his room. I floated across the balcony behind him in a dreamy haze. Once he opened the door, though, all semblances of tenderness disappeared.

Inside, he shoved me against the door and assaulted my mouth with a crushing kiss. His lips whisked away my noise of surprise, and a new wave of need washed over me. Yearning to discover more of him, I balled my fists in his T-shirt, anticipating the feel of the firm muscles underneath.

He cupped both sides of my face with his hands, the pressure of his lips never relenting. Though pinned to the door, I rolled my hips to meet him. His fingers drifted down to my neck, and I gasped.

Adam drew back, breaking the kiss, and studied me. Darkness shadowed his hazel eyes. “You still don’t trust me.” Fingertips rested at my throat. “Not completely.”

I stared at him, my chin trembling. Twinges of guilt stabbed at my heart. I couldn’t answer.

“Oh, Veronica.” He towered over me, keeping me trapped. “I swear on my life, I’m not going to hurt you.” With one finger, he tilted my face upward. “However, if you

let me, I will make you scream.”

He punctuated the declaration with a quick swipe of his lips across mine. Before I could react, he spun me around and slammed my wrists against the door. Leaning into me with his full weight, he nipped at the edge of my ear. “Tell me to stop, and I will.” The raspy tones of his growl added to the thrilling sensations. “But first, you should know how much I want you.”

His mouth skated over my neck, and I squirmed. “Is that so?” I asked, trying to keep my voice airy.

His palms skimmed over my sides, their warmth radiating through the thin material of my tank top. “From the sexy dress you wore the night we first met,” he whispered, pressing into the swell of my hips, “to those tight jeans later on...” He gave my ass a squeeze before continuing to roam over the front of my body. “Everything about you was irresistible. And, lucky me, I then learned you were smart and witty and wonderful on top of that.”

My breath clouded the glass panes when his hands slipped beneath the flimsy shirt, caressing my stomach. “Should I continue?” he asked.

I didn’t know whether he referred to his salacious words or bolder explorations. Both options sounded good. “Mm-hmm...”

Adam returned his attention to my ear, tracing a line along the ridge with the tip of his tongue. “Knowing you were so close, just one room away from me, drove me crazy.” His hands rose, his thumbs grazing the underside of my breasts. “Each night, I’d lie awake here thinking about you. How I could get to know you better, win you over, make you mine.” Meandering higher, strong fingers massaged my flesh, cupping and kneading. “Like I said, maddening.”

A haze of lust enveloped my senses, and I struggled to breathe evenly. All I focused on was how much I wanted him to touch me everywhere. The cool glass along my cheek contrasted with the fire growing between us, creating a dizzying effect. My breath hitched in my throat when he found my hardened nipples.

“What about you?” he asked, teasing at the buds.

His skilled manipulations prevented me from forming cohesive thoughts. “What about me?”

Adam kissed my neck again, never relinquishing his hold on me. “Were you thinking about me in the same way?”

I debated how honest to be, even as he distracted me with his titillating movements. “I was attracted to you, but I didn’t want to admit it to myself. I thought you might be dangerous, and I should stay away.”

I worried my answer disappointed him when his hands left my chest, but they came to rest back on my hips. The pads of his fingers danced along the waistband of my pants, skimming inside the elastic.

“And now?” he encouraged.

I shuddered, imagining him dipping lower and lower. “Maybe I shouldn’t have kept my distance.”

My wishes came true when one hand snuck between my legs, toying with my panties. “Maybe?”

Only a small patch of cotton separated us. I wriggled beneath him in an effort to seek out more of his touch. “Fine, definitely,” I said. “I shouldn’t have tried to push you

away.”

Adam chuckled, a wicked laugh that resonated in my ear. “Good, good.” He stroked me through the dampened fabric, pulling me closer. The heavy bulge of his erection pulsed against me from behind, eliciting a fresh flood of arousal. “Then let’s start making up for lost time.”

He half-dragged, half-carried me over to the bed, where we collapsed on top of the covers. He quickly peeled off my top and tossed my sneakers to the side, doing the same with my pajama pants. I shifted backward, closer to the pillows, but he caught me. With one swift motion, he yanked my panties away, leaving me exposed in the moonbeams streaming through the windows.

“Perfect,” he said, tracing the curve of my breast. “Even better than in my wildest fantasies.”

Standing next to the bed, he removed his undershirt and jeans with the same haste, allowing me my first unobstructed view of his body. The wan light etched into the lean lines and firm planes of his torso. I enjoyed the sight, but I silently urged him to shed his boxers, the last article of clothing between us.

Before he finished undressing, he rummaged around in a bag on the nightstand. “Stupid optimism finally wins out,” he said, dropping a box of condoms onto the wooden surface.

I giggled, appreciating his foresight. “My sister did suggest I might meet someone this weekend, but apparently, I didn’t plan so well.”

He flashed me a grin. “To be honest, I didn’t think I’d wind up being this lucky. Yet, here we are.”

At long last, he slid his underwear off over his narrow hips. His erect cock stood stiff in the moonlight, long and sturdy like the rest of him. An intense craving consumed me, and I quivered in anticipation. I needed him.

Adam unrolled the latex sheath over his thick shaft before rejoining me on the bed. Propping himself up beside me, he ran a single finger over the length of my body, from my collarbone, between my breasts, straight down to my waiting pussy. A trail of sparks traveled the same path, and I drew in a sharp breath.

“Are you still ready for me?” he asked.

I nodded.

He spread my thighs apart with a firm shove. “Normally, I would take my time with someone as amazing as you, but if I don’t fuck you right this second, I’m afraid I might explode.”

Without warning, he grabbed my hips and flipped me over. The tip of his cock teased at my pussy, and I inhaled. Bracing myself on my forearms and knees, I swallowed back a moan as he worked his way inside. Palms planted on either side of my hips, he pushed into me inch by inch, stretching me. Never before had I felt so full .

He set the tempo with short, quick thrusts. I rocked back to meet him, savoring every collision of our bodies. Within moments, our measured rhythms broke down, and pleasure took command. Holding me in place with his solid grip, he slammed into me even harder. I dug my fingers into the mattress and tried to match him, but my efforts were futile. He had complete power over me.

Every time he lunged forward, his cock forged deeper into my cunt, gliding across my most sensitive nerves. Ecstasy prickled over my skin, simmering in my veins. I clutched at one of the pillows, burying my face in it, and lost myself to the whirlwind

of sensations.

Never slowing, Adam slipped one hand beneath me. Expert fingers sought out my clit, rubbing in little circles. The added pressure proved too much to handle. A violent orgasm overtook me, sending me off balance. It raged through me like a hurricane, an inferno, something bigger than I could control. I clenched around him and screamed into the pillow while the tremors wracked my body. As I rode out the storm, satisfaction settled over me, erasing all the negativity of the prior days.

My muscles slackened and my breathing gradually slowed. He withdrew, and I sensed movement beside me, yet I stayed in place, enjoying the utter bliss. When I turned and opened my eyes, Adam lay on his back, hands pressed to his head.

“Damn, I needed that,” he said, letting out a long breath. “I think we both did.”

I smiled. “Definitely.”

He leaned over and dropped the used condom into the plastic receptacle beside the bed. Shifting, he reached for me. “Come here.” He slid an arm underneath my limp body, and I allowed him to pull me from the pillow onto his shoulder. “I dreamed about this part, too, holding you close and being with you.”

I snuggled against him, lulled by the rise and fall of his chest. “Not to shatter all your grandiose visions of me, but it’s been a while since I’ve...well, done any of this.”

A short chuckle reverberated beneath my ear. “Same here, actually.”

“Someone like you?” I ran my fingers along his collarbone. “I find it hard to believe.”

“I could say the same thing about you.” Leaning his cheek against the top of my head, he toyed with the ends of my messy hair. “I moved halfway across the country for my

current job a while ago and have been throwing myself into it ever since. It hasn't left me a lot of time for meeting new people and having some fun."

"I understand. I've been known to fall into the same habits." I continued tracing lines over his chest, delighting in the warmth of his skin. "And while my sister never seems to have a shortage of guys to date, none of them have ever been appealing to me." I crinkled my nose and rolled my eyes at the memories. "Maybe my standards are too high."

"Hey, you're here with me now." He squeezed my shoulders. "They can't be that high."

I laughed. It felt good to push aside all the horrors of the previous days and the loneliness leading up to them. "You're different. You can actually hold an intelligent conversation for more than five minutes, and I'm determined to beat you at chess one day."

"You will."

Mentioning the future cast a gray cloud over our pleasant discussion. I tilted my head back to look up at him. "What happens next?" I whispered. "We're still not out of danger. Even now, someone could break through the door any second..."

"We've already come this far." Adam rolled onto his side to face me. "Part of me believes we were meant to find each other, that the fates or the universe or whatever wouldn't let us have something this good only to rip it away."

I blushed. "You make things sound so simple. I don't know how you're so confident."

"I'm not. It's a front." He ran his hand down to the small of my back, pressing our

bodies together in a long, unbroken line. “We’ve seen terrible things, and I’m frightened, too. But the idea of spending more time with you is all the motivation I need to find us a way out of this place.” His forehead rested against mine. “I’ve waited a long time to meet someone like you. I’m not giving up.”

“I like the way you think.”

Vowing to forget our troubles for at least the rest of the night, I kissed him. Our tongues met in a lazy tangle, a contrast to our previous frantic pace. I returned my fingers to his shoulders and chest, seeking out every ridge and muscle. In our prior lust-driven race toward release, I hadn’t gotten the opportunity to explore his body in detail. Now, I wanted to learn everything about him.

I let my palms roam over the expanse of toned muscles, gliding over his pecs, arms, and back. He let out a soft groan against my mouth when I skimmed over his nipples, but I didn’t stay in one spot for very long. I smoothed the downy curls at the center of his chest, following their path across his abdomen.

Adam stirred as I traveled lower and lower. I grazed the tip of his erection yet left it alone, choosing to cup his firm ass instead. Another strained growl rumbled in his throat, and he nipped at my lower lip. I giggled, and my fingertips danced back around to the front of him. With a light, feathery touch, I ran them up and down the length of his shaft.

The hand at my back tensed. I wrapped one hand around his cock, the perfect combination of satiny skin and solid steel. Its weight in my grasp triggered a new ache deep in my core. I had to have him again. Tightening my grip, I gave him a deliberate pump.

He broke the kiss, the muscles in his neck and jaw tight. “We’d better be careful,” he said.

“Right.” I delivered another playful squeeze before releasing him. “So hurry up.”

Shaking his head, he grinned. “You really are something else.”

He groped around on the nightstand for the box of condoms, yanked one out, and donned it in record time. The mere thought of his cock inside me drove me crazy with desire, a craving only he could satisfy. I pulled him back toward me and ground against the swollen shaft.

Adam stroked the back of my thigh, lifting my leg over his hip. He penetrated my pussy, his wide head pushing inside. When our bodies reconnected, we stayed motionless for an infinite moment. I held him in place, marveling at how I seemed to be made for him. In that instant, nothing else mattered besides the two of us.

He slowly rocked into me. Faint flutters prickled at the ends of my nerves. Another gentle pulse intensified the pleasurable buzz. I looped my arms underneath his to embrace him and tucked my head into his shoulder.

“Uh-uh.” With one hand on my cheek, he guided my face back to meet his gaze. “Look at me. I want to see you this time.”

A stronger thrust caused me to cry out in surprise. I clenched my knees around him, drawing him farther in. Mirroring his movements, I caressed his jaw, drawing my thumb from his coarse stubble to his velvety lips. All my senses were in overdrive, every impression magnified.

Eyes locked together with mine, he buried his cock deep inside me again. The air whisked out of my lungs, and a new kind of apprehension churned in my mind. In this incredible, intimate moment, I was left exposed and vulnerable to him. I swore he saw inside my head and read my every thought. It had been so long since I’d allowed someone to get so close to me, but I’d promised myself to discard all fears for the

night.

His advances increased in speed and force. I could have stared into those dazzling hazel eyes for eternity, but the impending climax beckoned to me. Closing my eyes, I surrendered, letting my head roll against his palm. Where my first orgasm with him had been primal and volatile, this one rippled through me in a series of peaceful quivers. I spasmed around his throbbing cock, then sighed as all tension flowed out of me.

A tender kiss brought me back to reality. “You are so beautiful when you come,” Adam whispered, running his fingers through my hair.

His words never failed to send a rush of heat to my cheeks. I draped my arm over him and smiled. “Maybe you bring out the best in me.”

He laughed, pulling me in for a hug. “I can’t take too much credit for how wonderful you are.”

Stifling a yawn, I nestled alongside him, my head heavy on the pillow. “And speaking of good things, I might actually get some sleep tonight.”

“I hope so.” His body curved into a perfect fit against mine. “I don’t care if we doze off now or stay awake until dawn. Just know you’re safe here with me.”

I believed him.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:55 pm

Sunlight streamed in through the windows, penetrating the dense wall of evergreen trees surrounding the lodge. The hazy golden rays inspired contrasting feelings. The worst of the storms may have been behind us, but despite the blue skies outside, I knew we weren't out of danger yet. Every other time I'd allowed hope to rekindle inside me, I'd been disappointed and defeated.

This time, though, something was different. Beside me, Adam stirred, his arms still loosely folded around me. "Good morning," he murmured.

"Morning. I hope I didn't wake you."

"Nah, I've been up for a few minutes." He stroked my shoulder. "I didn't want to let you go yet."

I inhaled, breathing in the scent of his skin. "I wish we could stay here like this all day."

"Me, too." His smile faded. "Unfortunately, I think we'd be pretty easy targets in this state."

"Agreed." Rolling onto my back, I sighed. "I guess I should go get ready, and we can meet up with the others."

Adam stayed in bed and watched me collect my clothing. I pulled on my pajamas and located my sneakers underneath the dresser. When I moved toward the door to the balcony, he sat up, the covers bunched around his waist. "Wait, Veronica. Before you go..."

I stood in front of him, one eyebrow arched.

He leaned forward, staring up at me with those gorgeous gold-flecked eyes. “If something bad does happen today, I just wanted to—”

“No. Don’t say it.” I shook my head. “I like your other ideas better, the ones where you talk about a future beyond this horrible place.”

“Okay, then.” The tension in his jaw softened. “I hope last night doesn’t turn out to be a one-time thing. Coffee, hiking, chess...all those plans weren’t empty talk. Anything and everything you want, we’ll do it together.” He rubbed at the stubble on his cheek. “Assuming you feel the same way, of course.”

I took his face into both of my hands and kissed him. “I do. And thank you for indulging me.” Straightening, I stepped back and reached for the doorknob. “I’ll see you in a little while.”

Back in my own room, I turned on the shower and hopped inside. The warm water running over my skin reminded me of Adam’s intimate touch, and I smiled, working the soap into a lather. My sister had been right, for once. Who knew I’d actually meet someone interesting at an event like this? I imagined her laughter ringing in my head when she heard the details, and I hoped she didn’t gloat too much.

I joined the rest of the group at the bottom of the stairs. “So, what’s the plan for today?” Adam asked. “Do we want to attempt getting down the mountain while the weather’s nice, or stay here until we know it’s safe?”

Isabel’s nose twitched. “Neither option sounds appealing. I don’t want to be stuck here any longer, but I don’t want to risk one of you shoving me off a cliff or something.”

I winced when I remembered the previous morning. “And the last time Paul tried to leave, it didn’t end well for him.”

“All right.” He looked at each of us in turn. “Same ground rules as yesterday, then? Only one person leaves the room at a time, and so on?”

“Sure,” Isabel said flatly.

Dylan hadn’t said anything since we reconvened.

“Hey, can you get a signal on your phone yet?” I asked him. “I didn’t even think to check mine before coming downstairs.”

“Nope.”

I took no offense at the stilted conversation from the other two. All we needed to do was get through one minute at a time. We’d be cautious, we wouldn’t fall for any attempts at distraction again, and we’d be out of here by the end of the day...right?

In the kitchen, Adam scrambled the last of the eggs and divided them onto four plates. I picked at a stale croissant and tossed most of it in the trash. We completed our new ritual of eating in silence and returning to the library for the interminable wait.

Dylan flopped into his usual armchair and took out his phone.

Adam picked up the deck of cards from the coffee table. “Anyone up for a game?”

I joined him at the sofa, and Isabel sat across from us. “What are you playing?” she asked.

“Doesn’t matter. Whatever you’d like.” He shuffled the deck. “Poker, blackjack, go fish...”

“Funny.” She didn’t laugh.

“If Dylan joins us, we have a few more options,” I said.

He remained transfixed by his screen. “Nah, I’m good.”

Adam dealt the cards into three piles. “Back to poker it is, then.”

We played hand after hand, only muttering the words necessary to keep the games going. At any moment, I expected someone to burst through the door to tell us the bridge had been repaired, we could leave the lodge, and go back to the safety of our homes to forget about this nightmare of a trip. The minutes on the clock ticked by at the same sluggish pace as the previous day. Part of me wanted to slip into a cozy corner with Adam again to help pass the time, but it didn’t seem right to leave the others. I wished the cards did a better job of holding my attention.

After winning a hand with three of a kind, Isabel stood. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

I turned toward Adam, tucking my feet beneath me. “Once I master chess, is poker next on your list of projects for me? I don’t seem to be very good at cards, either.”

He grinned. “Cards are more luck than strategy a lot of the time. I can think of better things for us to do.”

Before I could shoot back a witty remark, a blood-curdling scream emanated from somewhere beyond the library door. The three of us looked at each other in alarm, eyes wide.

Ice ran through my veins and terror gripped me. “No,” I whispered. Wrapping my arms around my legs, I shrank into a ball in the corner of the couch. “Not again. I can’t do this again.”

Neither of the men said anything. I rested my head on my forearms and focused on inhaling and exhaling in a steady rhythm. Adam’s hand brushed my shoulder, but I recoiled from his touch. Closing my eyes, I tried to convince myself nothing was wrong, that if we waited a few more minutes...

“Shouldn’t we go see what’s going on?” Dylan finally said.

I peeked at him over my knees. Adam didn’t answer.

Dylan stood and pushed his hair out of his eyes. “This whole weekend, everyone’s been treating me like I’m the biggest asshole they’ve ever met, and now I’m the only one who cares if she’s alive or dead? If only they could see us now.” Shaking his head, he put his phone away and walked toward the door. “Whatever.”

He may have had a point, I thought, though it wasn’t enough to get me off the couch. I tucked my head back down and searched for something to cling to. The chances of leaving the lodge alive seemed smaller and smaller with each passing moment, yet not impossible. If I stayed here without moving, maybe I’d be able to dodge whatever gruesome fate the killer had in store for me. It sounded like a stupidly simple plan, but it was the only one within my grasp. Hugging my legs tighter to my chest, I braced myself for the next round of bad news and waited for Dylan to return.

And waited.

And waited.

I didn’t know how long he’d been out of the room. The growing pit in my stomach

indicated he'd had plenty of time to find the cause of the screaming and come back, or at least call to us for help. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up. Realization set in, and panic wrenched the air from my lungs.

There were only two of us left.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:55 pm

My breaths came in quick gasps, and sweat beaded on my skin. Primal instincts shrieked at me to get away, to find some way to escape. I leapt up from the sofa, nearly tripping over the coffee table. Adam jumped back, startled, and I ran around to the other side of the opposite couch, desperate to put something between us.

“Veronica?”

“Adam, what did you do ?” My voice trembled.

“What are you talking about?” He pushed off the cushions, rising to his full height.

“Don’t move! Don’t come near me!” Tears sprang to my eyes and I took another step back. “I trusted you,” I choked out.

He remained standing, but stayed on his side of the couch. “I still don’t know what you mean. I didn’t do anything.”

“Stop lying to me.” I glanced around the room, though I wasn’t sure if I searched for an exit, a means of defense, or Dylan walking through the door. “Something happened to Isabel, and it’s clear by now Dylan stumbled into another trap. I know I’m not a murderer, so that leaves only one other person. You.”

Hurt darkened his eyes, and I felt a quick pang of guilt. “How could I have killed anyone?” he asked. “I’ve been with you since last night.”

I wiped my cheeks with the backs of my hands. “Someone’s been sneaking around this place at night, and I think I figured out how. You could have left your room

before I saw you out on the balcony. Or even this morning after I went to shower and change.”

“Fine. I guess there’s no use in trying to convince you otherwise.” Adam turned to sit down again, but stopped halfway through the motion. “No. Wait.”

He stepped closer to me. I scurried backward and collided with the pool table, wincing when the corner jabbed me in the hip.

Kneeling on the couch, he clasped his hands on the rear edge and fixed me in an intense stare. “Look at me. Think of all we shared last night. I meant every word I ever said to you.”

I twisted the hem of my shirt in knots. “There’s no one else here, no other explanation.”

“There has to be.” His gaze never wavered. “But if you can look me in the eye and tell me you believe I’m responsible for killing over a half dozen people, I won’t stop you from trying to do whatever you think is best.”

Slumping against the pool table, I blew out a long stream of air. My limbs felt like they each weighed a hundred pounds, and I needed this situation to be over with one way or another. “I’m so, so tired.” The words came out in a pitiful whimper. “And I just want to go home.”

“I know. Me, too.” When Adam climbed off the couch and walked around it, I didn’t try to stop him. He approached me slowly, extending his hand. “Come on. Let’s go solve this mystery.”

With nothing left to lose, I let him curl his fingers around mine. He led me out of the library, where we peered into the foyer. No sign of Isabel or Dylan.

“Let’s try the kitchen first,” he said.

We crept across the great hall. Adam pushed on the door, and it swung open with a slow creak. The first thing I saw was a crimson puddle oozing toward us over the pristine white tiles. I followed its path to find Dylan lying face down on the floor, a knife buried in his back up to the hilt.

“Took you long enough.” Isabel leaned against the counter, a blood-soaked towel wadded up beside her. She held a gun, which, though currently pointed at the floor, appeared far too natural in her hand. “I have to admit, Dylan surprised me when he was the first one to come looking for me. But I guess you two have been rather preoccupied.”

Adam yanked my arm and moved in front of me, shielding my body with his. “Do we get any sort of an explanation, or are you just going to shoot us and get it over with?”

She smirked. “It’s no accident, Adam, that you’re one of the last to survive. Well, I suppose you might have triggered the statue to fall on you, but I felt pretty confident Paul would be the victim there. He did always seem too eager to be in charge and play the hero.”

“Me? Why me?” His head tilted to the side. “I’ve never even met you before.”

“No, you haven’t. But it doesn’t mean we don’t know each other, or at least know of each other.” She stared at him, her expression blank. “Avery is actually my middle name, not my surname. You probably know me better as Isabel Porter.”

Adam dragged his hand down his face and shook his head. “You’re Izzy.”

“Don’t call me that!” she snapped. “Mia was the only one allowed to call me that.”

Nothing about this conversation made sense to me. “Who’s Mia? Can someone fill me in on what’s going on here?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Go ahead, tell her. I’m not the only one here with blood on their hands.”

“You’re crazy,” Adam said. “I didn’t kill anyone.” He dropped my arm and rubbed at his temples, his voice growing quiet. “But if you think I don’t feel guilty every single day, you’re wrong.”

The presence of the gun unsettled me, but I needed to know how we all wound up in this situation. “Isabel, what happened? Please, tell me.”

“My sister—my smart, beautiful, amazing sister—planned her whole life around the future he promised her.” A muscle in her cheek twitched. “And then, when he tossed her aside like yesterday’s trash, she didn’t think life was worth living anymore.”

“It wasn’t like that!” He clawed at his hair again, clearly agitated. “Mia was sick. I wanted to help her, or get her help, or do something to save her. But nothing worked.”

Isabel rolled her eyes. “So, you took the easy way out.”

Palm to his forehead, he paced in tight circles in front of me. “You have no idea what we went through. She’d claim I was the only bright spot in her life, but then she kept dragging me down into her darkness. I never knew how she’d react to whatever I said or did. Some days, I couldn’t even go to work in the morning without her accusing me of abandoning her or hurting her.” He stopped moving, his hand shielding his eyes. “I thought she’d be better off without me in the long run,” he mumbled.

“Well, that was quite the error in judgment.” She crossed her arms, fingers still

wrapped around the gun. While it wasn't aimed directly at us, I had no doubt she could fire off a quick shot if we made a wrong move.

Adam faced her, glaring. "What about you? You were never around! You were studying abroad. You weren't even on the same continent as us, but somehow, this is all my fault?"

"She didn't want me to worry! She wanted me to stay in school so I'd have a better life than her." Her eyes glistened with unfallen tears. "I didn't know how bad things had gotten until after you'd left, but by then, it was too late." She wiped her face with her sleeve and straightened. "Regardless, you were the catalyst. You were the one who destroyed her, made her feel worthless."

"If it wasn't me, it would have been something else. Like I said, she couldn't think rationally anymore."

She snorted. "Easy for you to say now."

Although she hadn't spoken any direct threats, I needed to diffuse the friction somehow. "Explain this to me, since I'm still kind of confused," I said. "You think Adam is responsible for your sister's death, so you gathered a group of people here and killed them one by one because...?"

Her jaw relaxed a little. "I wanted him to feel helpless, to be teetering on the line between life and death and not able to do a damn thing about it." A cruel smile spread across her face. "I got lucky with the bad weather. I thought I'd have to carry out my plans within a day or two, but since we were stuck here, I decided to take my time and really draw out his suffering."

I recognized we were not dealing with a sane person here, but if she kept talking, she wasn't aiming the gun at us. "What about the others, though? Did you invite random

people to be your victims?”

“Oh, no. Of course not.” Isabel chuckled. “Everyone here shared a common trait. They all used and abused people, and they finally got what they deserved.”

Adam raised his eyebrows. “What, you think they were somehow responsible for causing deaths, like you’ve convinced yourself I am?”

She shook her head. “Not necessarily. More of a general disregard for other people’s feelings and livelihood. They didn’t care about anyone but themselves, so I don’t think the world will suffer from their losses.”

I tried to reconcile her statements with the companions I’d met at the lodge. “All of them? I mean, we didn’t get to know some of them very well, but Paul and Laura seemed nice enough.”

“Paul stole pills and other drugs from the hospital where he worked and sold them to anyone willing to pay for a fix.” She clicked her tongue. “Doesn’t sound very nice to me.”

I blinked twice. “And Laura?”

“When she wasn’t working at the library, she had a very lucrative side gig as an internet cam girl. There’s nothing wrong with that, but, by my last count, she’d told fifteen different men they were her one true love and reaped the financial rewards of their affections.” Tapping her fingers on the counter beside her, she continued rattling off her list. “Dylan helped hack women who he thought interfered with his games and published their personal information online. Mary embezzled money from the non-profit she worked at. And Jeremy ditched his parents in a crappy nursing home after they supported him through all sorts of failed business ventures.” She let out a dramatic sigh. “And the sad part is, if they hadn’t accepted their invitations, I had a

long list of other selfish, nasty people I'd found ready to take their place."

The indifference with which she spoke disturbed me. So did a new realization. "Wait a minute. My sister was supposed to come here, not me. Why did you invite her?"

"You don't think she falls into the same category?" she asked in a snide tone. "Flitting around from one guy to the next, leaving a trail of broken hearts in her wake. Fun for her, I'm sure, but not so much for the men she hurts."

I couldn't deny Isabel's accusations, but I grew angry on Trina's behalf. "Okay, my sister might be a total flake, but it doesn't mean she deserves to be killed for it!"

"You've covered all the other guests," Adam said. "But what about the staff? What did they do to incur your bizarre sense of justice?"

She shrugged. "Collateral damage."

I gaped at her in horror. "That's terrible."

"Oh, please. Do you really think that airhead would find a cure for the common cold whenever she went back to her college classes?" She flicked her wrist in a dismissive gesture. "And I'm sure if we did enough digging, we might find some skeletons in the others' closets."

Isabel's words repulsed me, yet my attempts at stalling were working so far. Maybe help would arrive in time after all, or a method of escape would present itself. "How were you able to plan the murders? Shooting and stabbing seem simple enough, but how did you know about things like the fountain or the statues?"

She glared at me with derision. "Aside from something called the internet, where the company coordinating these weekends has a website with all sorts of pictures, the law

firm where I work handled a personal injury case where some idiot tripped on the steps and tried to sue.” An exasperated noise left her lips. “A stupid lawsuit, but I had access to all the files. Everything I wanted to know about the lodge and its events, from the layout, to schedules, and so on, was right there at my fingertips.”

I nodded. “And that’s how you were able to sneak around unnoticed?”

“I figured I might have to improvise here and there, but I’ve always been a quick thinker.” She smiled. “Like I said, the weather gave me some extra time, though tampering with all your cars in the pouring rain did kind of suck.”

“Forgive me if I’m not sympathetic,” Adam said dryly.

Keep talking, keep talking, keep talking . “I’m curious,” I said aloud. “It wasn’t until Victor died that I determined you found some way to get past the rest of us. Did you use the trellis off the balcony? It’s the only method I could think of.”

She glanced at Adam. “Your little girlfriend’s smarter than she looks. But yeah, when I didn’t want to risk someone hearing or seeing me in the hallway, I popped on down to the back door to the kitchen. Good thing no one thought to lock it.” Her nose wrinkled with disdain. “And, of course, I had to wait for you two fools to go to bed before going out on the balcony.”

“Here’s what I don’t understand,” Adam said. “What’s your goal in all of this? You can’t just disappear after killing us all, unless you think you’ll get off with an insanity defense.”

“Don’t you get it?” For a moment, Isabel’s calm facade crumbled. “I never planned to leave this place. Eventually, someone will come up here and find a house full of dead bodies, mine included. Whether or not they piece together the real-life mystery isn’t my concern. I needed to do this for Mia.”

He folded his arms across his chest. “You really think this is what she would have wanted?”

“I had to do something !”

Thoughts of how empty and devastated I would feel if Trina died flashed through my mind. Although I rolled my eyes at her antics sometimes, I struggled to imagine life without her. I attempted a more compassionate approach. “Think of how horrible you felt when she killed herself, and imagine if the situations were reversed. You already said she wanted you to have a better life.” I stepped out from behind Adam. “It doesn’t have to end this way. We can come up with some sort of explanation for the authorities, or we can help you escape. Whatever you want.”

Dampness appeared at the corners of her eyes again. “I have nothing left. When we were growing up, we were all the other had. I dropped out of law school when she died, my few friends deserted me, and I wake up every morning remembering how I failed her.” She brushed away the tears, and the hardness in her expression reappeared. “So yes, I do feel guilty about not being there when she needed me the most.” Gritting her teeth, she raised the hand holding the gun and aimed it Adam. “Now it’s time for both of us to atone for our mistakes.”

“Hold on.” Adam positioned himself between us again. “Veronica didn’t have anything to do with this. Do what you will with me, but let her go.”

“Adam, no!” I reached for his arm.

He twisted it out of my grasp. “Veronica, get out of here,” he shouted.

I’d never be able to forgive myself if I abandoned him to a murderous lunatic. “I’m not leaving you alone with her.”

Isabel laughed. "Suit yourself. I'm a pretty good shot, but I'm not promising anything." She adjusted her stance, the barrel of the gun pointed squarely at Adam's head. "I'll figure out what to do with you after I dispose of this disgusting excuse for a human being once and for all." Her arm drifted several inches in my direction, and she glanced back and forth between us. "Hmm. Or maybe I should let him watch you die first for some additional torment. Decisions, decisions."

A deafening gunshot echoed throughout the room. I screamed and collapsed to the floor, tucking my face into my lap. Tears spilled over my cheeks and I sobbed hysterically, afraid of what I'd see if I dared to look up and what fate might befall me next. I covered my head, unsure if I tried to protect myself or block out everything while facing imminent death.

Someone touched my shoulder, and I yelped again. "Veronica, it's okay."

"A...Adam?"

I turned to see him crouched beside me. Tiny red droplets splattered his face and shirt, but he appeared otherwise unharmed. Behind him, Isabel lay on the floor, unmoving. Across the room, the sight of a figure standing in the doorway made my jaw drop. Impossible!

Victor strode into the kitchen, holstering a gun at his hip as he moved toward us. Despite his rumpled hair and the dark circles under his eyes, he maintained his usual air of authority. "Are either of you hurt?" he asked.

"I'm fine, I'm fine." I scrambled to my feet and stared at him in astonishment. "You're supposed to be dead!"

"I'm all too aware." His brow creased. "I still have a nasty headache, but I'm sure it will pass."

Adam's wide-eyed expression matched my own. "What the hell happened?"

"I wish I could say for certain. Unfortunately, some of the details are a bit fuzzy, and I'm not sure if I'll ever remember everything." He gingerly brushed the back of his head. "I woke up very confused and disoriented, yet somehow I sensed the danger around me. Eventually, I remembered the killer on the loose, and I realized they intended for me to be the latest victim."

Adam nodded. "Come to think of it, by that point, Paul had stopped checking for signs of life every time we came across a new body."

"Which turned out to be very lucky for me." Victor's chin jutted out. "Though I found it hard to separate myself from the rest of you, I thought pretending to be dead was the best chance I had at being able to help somehow. If I figured out the murderer's identity, perhaps I'd then find a way to stop them." His gaze traveled to where Isabel lay in an expanding pool of blood. "Since she attacked me from behind, I didn't know who struck me. I sat at my door for hours and hours, listening for any potential clues and occasionally opening it a crack to observe you all." Guilt deepened the lines in his face.

I tried to reassure him. "I don't think any of us ever suspected her. She had us all fooled."

He smiled, though it was tinged with melancholy. "There's something I've been hiding. Believe it or not, I'm actually a retired detective who took this job for fun a couple years ago." He patted the gun at his side, and the smile vanished. "Apparently, I'm not a very good one. I feel like I should have been able to solve this mystery long ago, and I could have saved some more of the others."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Adam said. "I'm sure most police officers go their entire careers without having to deal with a serial killer like her."

“I worried about the best time to act. Too soon, and she wouldn’t have revealed herself. Too late, and she might have achieved complete success.” His shoulders sagged. “When everyone started going into the kitchen and no one came out, that’s when I decided to risk leaving my room. Then, once I heard her confessions, I had to wait until she was distracted enough to move in without further endangering either of you.” He closed his eyes and clasped his hands in front of his mouth. “I almost arrived too late. And I should have been able to do so much more...”

Adam clapped him on the arm. “You did your best with the resources available to you. I know I’m forever grateful for everything you’ve done.”

“Me, too.” More tears rolled down my cheeks, though they stemmed from relief. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to thank you enough.”

Victor opened his eyes and exhaled. “You don’t need to thank me. I hope someday, I’ll be able to believe your kind words.”

He turned to peer out the window. “The storms seem to have passed, and I believe the road is dry enough for us to walk safely, despite the steep slope. At least we should be able to get far enough for our phones to work again and we can summon help.” The image of the calm, capable butler reappeared as he bowed slightly and motioned toward the door. “Shall we?”

I wiped my face with my sleeve, but the tears kept flowing. Accepting I had survived this nightmare overwhelmed me, and my entire body started to tremble. Adam circled his arms around me, pulling me close to his chest.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice muffled. “I just...I mean, I can’t...”

“It’s over. We’re safe now.” He kissed the top of my head, holding me tight. “Let’s get out of here.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:55 pm

For all the unkind thoughts I'd ever had about my sister, I had to admit Trina stepped up to the plate and took good care of me following my escape from the mountains. The idea of staying alone worsened my anxiety; not only did she move me into her spare bedroom, she handled all the details of subletting my apartment. She comforted me when I had nightmares, helped me find a therapist, and provided everything I needed. In the past, she'd always fled from responsibility and serious situations, but her newfound sense of duty allowed me to see her in a new light. Although I loved her no matter what, I enjoyed how our relationship grew stronger.

I kept to myself at the beginning and didn't venture outside unaccompanied. Little by little, I felt more confident and eventually took a walk around the neighborhood or went grocery shopping without thinking unknown attackers were waiting to cause me harm. I knew I'd never forget everything I'd witnessed at the lodge, but I didn't have to let it define me.

During my recovery from the traumatic events, I thought about Adam. We'd been separated at the police station when giving our statements about what happened, and I hadn't seen him before going home with Trina. I wondered if he was okay, if he experienced the same things I did, the fear and the acceptance.

Selfishly, I wanted to know if he thought about me in return.

Though curious about his well-being, I needed to focus on myself. I couldn't stay with Trina forever, even if she never showed any frustration toward me. I had to rebuild my own life and show the world I was the same strong, capable person I'd always been.

Trina came into my room one day as I caught up on emails from former clients inquiring when I'd be available for more work. I raised an eyebrow at the odd expression on her face. "Hey, what's going on?" I asked.

She scrunched up her nose. "I'm not sure if I should tell you."

"Let me guess, you're running off to Vegas to elope and you want me to stay here and keep an eye on the place."

"Very funny." She produced an opened envelope she'd been holding behind her back. "I got a letter from that guy you were with at the lodge. The younger one, not the retired cop."

My heart threatened to explode out of my chest. I hadn't told her about what transpired between us, and I couldn't tell if she'd figured anything out. "Adam? Why did he contact you instead of me?"

"It says he wasn't sure if hearing from him directly would upset you, so he asked me to use my best judgment." Trina tapped the envelope against her palm. "He wants to see you, but only if you feel comfortable."

I swallowed. "When? And where?"

She passed me the letter. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"No, I'll be fine." I tried not to shake when I took it from her.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." I smiled. "Thanks, though. I mean it."

"Let me know if you change your mind," she said, leaving the room.

I pulled out the sheet of paper and scanned it. The letter didn't contain much more than what Trina had already told me. In the note, Adam suggested meeting Friday afternoon and had included the address of a coffee shop. Before I got to the bottom of the page, I'd made my decision.

The next few days seemed to crawl by. I lay awake at night, but the nightmares no longer kept me up. I wondered how I'd feel when we saw each other in a more ordinary setting. Would it be everything he'd once promised me? Or had the terrible ordeal we'd endured extinguished any sparks between us?

Friday finally rolled around. The coffee shop he'd recommended was located in a town about twenty minutes away from Trina's apartment. I left plenty of time to drive over to find the place and had no difficulties. Despite arriving early, I entered the café to find Adam waiting for me at a small table in the back.

My pulse raced as I approached him. He stood when he saw me, but didn't reach out for a hug or a handshake or anything. "I'm so glad you're here," he said, pulling out a second chair. "I wasn't sure if you'd come."

I took a seat. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Oh, I can think of plenty of good reasons." He sat across from me and frowned. "First, I need to apologize to you."

"What for?"

"Everything that happened at the lodge occurred because of me. Isabel plotted out her whole crusade because of my actions and decisions." A lengthy sigh left his lips. "Some of her accusations may have been true. I regret a lot of things and wish I'd handled them differently."

I shook my head. "You're not to blame for any of this. She was crazy, irrational,

disturbed.”

“Yeah, my therapist keeps telling me the same thing. Maybe one day I’ll believe her.” Adam sat back and rubbed his eyes. “I’ll spare you all the details about what the police learned from searching her home and belongings, how she followed me out here and established her own life, all while waiting and planning for the perfect moment to exact her revenge.” Dropping his fists to the table, he stared at me. “You must think I’m a monster if someone hated me so much. Or because of everything with Mia.”

Some of what I’d heard during our final confrontation had concerned me, but the raw emotion I’d seen from him convinced me he’d never intended to hurt anyone. “I don’t think you’re a monster. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“Well, that’s nice to hear.” The tension eased out of his face, and he leaned toward me. “Anyway, I didn’t invite you here to soothe my ego and listen to me whine all afternoon. How have you been holding up? And be honest with me.”

“I’m okay.” I raised my palms and shrugged. “Some days are better than others, but I’m not so paranoid anymore. Trina’s been helping me out a lot.”

“About her...” He chewed on his lower lip. “I hope I didn’t bother your sister or freak her out by looking up her address, but I didn’t want to risk causing you any more distress. I couldn’t come up with a better idea.”

“I don’t think she minded.” The familiar flush rose to my cheeks. “And I’m happy you decided to reach out.”

Adam grinned, flashing the genuine smile that had captured my heart the first time I’d seen it. “Veronica, I’m just going to lay it all out here. I knew you must have a hundred reasons why you’d never want to see me again, and why you should forget about all the horrible things we went through and leave them in the past.” He slid his

hand across the table and rested it atop mine. “But then I remembered the incredible way I felt with you, and the connection we shared. And I needed to take a chance and see you one more time to find out if it was still there.”

His touch sent a ripple of exhilaration throughout my core. Although the bad memories would never fade completely, when I looked at him, I saw nothing but the man who had made me feel more alive than I had in years. The reminders of our intimate encounter were etched into my soul, their effects undeniable.

I turned my wrist and squeezed his fingers. “I don’t want this to be the last time we see each other.”

He let out a long breath and laughed. “So, what now? It seems everything about our meeting and getting together has been strange and out of order. I’m not sure where to go from here.”

“This is a good start.” I glanced around the quaint café. “The only thing missing is the dumb guitar-playing college kid you told me about.”

“And the coffee. I told the barista to leave us alone until I was sure you were all right.” Adam clasped my hand in both of his, affectionate warmth lighting up his hazel eyes. “We both still have a lot of healing to do. I don’t want to rush anything or ever cause you to feel uncomfortable. You set the pace, and whatever you need, I promise I’m here for you.”

His words resonated pure and heartfelt and let me believe we could accomplish anything together. I trusted him.