

## Chapter Eight: A Party Can't Last Forever

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“Don’t worry, it’s just a stage prop.” Clay said, tossing the skull in my direction.

I stifled another scream as I caught it. My heart was still thudding in my chest as I turned it over in my hands. Clay was right. It was obviously fake, which brought me an intense amount of relief.

“It’s a nod to Hamlet, Mr. Mason’s favorite show. He always wanted to put it on, but never got the chance.”

“If this is the last clue, then what does it mean?”

Clay’s expression was hollow. “I don’t know. For the first time, Park, I have no idea.”

My stomach dropped. There was nothing I could think to say to them. Their expression had now turned to frustration as they sat down roughly in the grass. I watched as Clay buried their head in their hands.

“I don’t understand,” Their voice had become strained. “Why did he pick me to solve this, Park? Why did he throw this party at all?”

“Clay-“

“It doesn’t make any sense!” They threw up their hands in exasperation. “Why the party? Why the clues? Why any of this? And who would want him dead so badly that they’d kill him at his own retirement party? Sure, we could’ve said that Grant did it out of jealousy because he was the next director, but now Grant’s dead. There’s no explanation for any of this.”

Their voice was shaking, and I could tell that they were on the verge of tears. I didn’t say a word as I sat down on the cold grass beside them, laying the skull down in front of us. The skull’s empty eyes stared back at me like solemn voids.

Clay buried their head back in their hands. “It’s impossible, Park.”

I sighed past the tightness in my chest. Clay was always so brave, so determined. I had never seen them look so defeated. I didn’t know what to do. In my mind, I knew that there was nothing I could say to convince them otherwise. Things did seem impossible. We had two dead, and few random clues-most of which were stolen, some secret tunnels, and far too many enemies to count. I put my hand on Clay’s shoulder as they struggled not to cry. It was the only ounce of comfort I could give them right now. That no matter what happened at this nightmare party, they weren’t going to be alone.

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I wasn't sure how long we sat out on the dark lawn, and I didn't care. I would stay there forever if it meant that Clay had time to grieve properly. I didn't move from their side until there was shuffling in the grass along the other side of the house. Immediately, I jumped to my feet, pulling Clay up with me. My body tensed at the mere thought of being faced with Birdie trying to capture us, or even worse, being met with our deaths.

"There you two are," Willa called quietly from around a corner of the mansion. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

Clay quickly gained their composure, wiping at their eyes with the back of their hand. "Did the others see you?"

"No," She walked across the lawn toward us. "Not that it was easy. Emilia's looking for you herself now."

My mouth felt dry. "Why do they want to find us so bad?"

"They're convinced you're going to find the will before anyone else does. Plus my guess is she knows something about the murder, and wants it to remain a secret."

"Either way, we have the last clue." Clay held up the skull for her to see.

"What's that doing here?" Willa questioned, her brows cinching in confusion. "That's one of our Romeo and Juliet props."

I crossed my arms, looking toward Clay. "What would Mr. Mason be doing with that?"

"I don't know, but poor *Yorick* must be important," Clay had a thoughtful expression. I recognized Yorick as the name of the skull in *Hamlet*. "But it's time to finish this mystery. I'm afraid that if we don't, Mr. Mason's letter will be right. Whoever the killer is, they weren't just after Mr. Mason. We don't know who could be next."

"It's not safe with the others around," Willa commented. "But I think I know somewhere we can go."

"What do you mean?" I questioned.

"I found something while watching the others search for the will. That's how I got out here. The tunnels don't just connect at that one door. There's one that leads outside."

"Can you show us where it is?" Clay replied.

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