

Chapter Five: We're All Mad Here

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"I don't know how anyone can stand Grant." Clay huffed under their breath. "He's insufferable."

"It doesn't matter. What matters is solving the mystery. We still need to look for the next clue." I said, even though I completely agreed with them.

It had only been a few minutes since we confronted Grant in the hallway, about his bag, and more importantly-the knife in it. The bag was in the tunnels, which meant someone else knew about them other than us. The hunting knife in the bag was most likely the one that had slashed all of our tires.

Beyond the bag, Clay was more than right about Grant being insufferable. He had been nothing but condescending and threatening to us since the murder happened and the hunt for the will began. In my mind, he was the most likely to be Mr. Mason's killer. However, our suspicions didn't mean much until we had proof, and talking badly about him in the hallways of a murdered man's mansion was not going to get us anywhere.

Clay sighed. "Well, if the next musical is *Phantom of the Opera*, then like I said. My best guess is either the basement in reference to the Phantom's lair, or the balcony in reference to 'All I Ask of You' in the movie adaptation."

"And I said, we should try the balcony first. Which is where?"

"It's upstairs. We'll have to take the staircase again."

"Then I guess we better start walking."

Clay simply nodded and started showing me the direction down the hall. They shoved Grant's knife into the front pocket of the bag and swung it over their shoulders. I was surprised that Grant hadn't taken the bag from us originally, but maybe that was just an act: therefore showing he had nothing to hide. Either way, it was evidence now.

The hallways on the way to the stairwell were empty and eerily silent. I assumed that everyone else in the mansion had become scattered among the residence. However, it was clear that a search had taken place. Everywhere I looked things were thrown around on the ground and misplaced. Even the paintings and frames on the walls had been tampered with. It was a sad sight. Mr. Mason might've been gone, but this was still his house. It felt wrong to have it be so messed up, and so soon after he had died. I knew there was nothing I could do about it really, but I still stopped in the middle of the hallway where a frame was lying on the ground. It was a beautiful oil painting of a scene from an opera. I didn't know which one or the names of the faces portrayed, but my heart still broke at the sight of it resting on the ground. Clay stood a few

feet behind me and watched as I stooped down to pick up the frame. It felt heavy in my hands as I carefully hung it back up on the wall.

I didn't know the others well, but I knew that they wouldn't stop until the will was found. A heavy feeling gathered in my chest. No one here seemed to really care about solving the murder other than Clay and I. Almost everyone else was too wrapped up in the will. The only ones who seemed to care even the tiniest bit, were Oliver, Harvey, and Willa, but they too were nowhere in sight.

We hadn't crossed a single person on our way up the stairs and by the time we reached the doors to the balcony. I had closed my eyes as we once again passed Mr. Mason's body, and tried to focus on the task at hand.

The upstairs hallway that led to the balcony ended in large white French doors, practically identical to the ones leading outside. This time they were propped wide open and led out to the white balcony, blocked only by soft white curtains that blew in the wind. I could see the night sky hanging darkly behind it, lit only by small twinkling fairy lights around the railing. The sight looked like one of Mr. Mason's beautiful paintings.

As soon as we approached the doors, I heard the voices, and realized that there were two dark figures standing out on the balcony. Clay grabbed my arm as soon as they heard the noise and pulled me off to stand behind the large doors. My heart pounded in my chest as we huddled together in the dark.

"I know exactly who you are," Birdie's voice floated from the balcony. "I knew it as soon as I walked into the parlor."

Claude's voice was high with worry. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because dear, I can't offer you anything without a little incentive."

"What do you want?"

"I know you're after the will, just like the rest of us," Birdie replied cautiously. "But unfortunately, we both know it's not addressed to either of us."

"We don't know that."

"Don't be naïve, Claude. August was a smart man. Smarter than you know. Do you really think he was fooled by your family's clever little ruse?"

"He sure acted like it."

Birdie huffed loudly. "There's only one person here that August would give his inheritance too, and we need to make sure that doesn't happen."

"What are you proposing?"

It was at that moment that I tried to shift where I was standing, and stumbled *again* over my shoelace, that managed to come undone no matter how many times I knotted it. There was a loud thud as Clay scrambled to keep me from toppling over. A long pause followed from the balcony.

“We can’t talk here.”

Clay held tight to me, holding us both behind the doors, as the footsteps came closer. My heart raced in my chest as I watched Birdie and Claude walk back into the hallway. Birdie peered around carefully; her eyes narrowed in suspicion. They stood there a few more minutes, looking for the source of the noise before they both disappeared down the hall together.

Clay sighed with relief. “That was close.”

“What were they talking about?” I questioned as we walked out from behind the door. “Who would Mr. Mason leave the will to?”

“I don’t know, but I’m afraid we’re running out of time to figure it out.”

Clay held up their wrist to show me their watch. My heart skipped a beat. It was midnight already. Mr. Mason’s letter claimed we only had until morning. Without any further conversation we both walked onto the balcony.

The air was chilled, and I rubbed my hands over my arms to stop the goosebumps that were appearing. There were no signs that Birdie and Claude had been here, nor was anything misplaced. It was completely bare. There weren’t any deck chairs or tables sitting out. I sighed and went to the railing, peering over the edge. The yard was dark, and I barely could make out the forest looming in the background. I turned in time to see Clay standing on the part of the railing closest to the house.

“What are you doing!”

I rushed over to their side, reaching my hands out to steady them. Clay’s arms were outstretched as they struggled to grab at the only thing out there other than the fairy lights—an ornately detailed clock on the side of the house. I watched in shock as they pulled a paper rectangle from behind it and hopped down nimbly from the railing.

“Clay, that better be a clue, and you didn’t just do something stupid for nothing.” I put my hands on my hips.

They held the small paper up to reveal that it was a playing card. An ace of hearts. “Don’t worry, it’s a clue.”

“It’s a card.”

“Exactly,” They grinned. “It’s a heart.”

“And?”

“It’s a reference to Alice and Wonderland.”

The only Alice and Wonderland I was familiar with was the children’s cartoon that I had been terrified of when I was little. There was something about the Cheshire cat’s freakish smile and the Queen of Hearts trying to kill Alice, that made five year old me cry for most of the movie. Clay was the only one who had seen the theatre versions and the movie. We both agreed on the fact that the premise of Wonderland was that Alice had accidentally discovered and fallen down a tunnel to get to Wonderland when she was chasing the white rabbit. Luckily for us, Mr. Mason’s mansion wasn’t short on strange and unusual tunnels.

However, when we made our way back to the hallway, I wasn’t expecting the door to be open and for Willa to be standing there. She had taken off her torn suit coat, and had pulled her hair down from it’s bun. Her dark curly hair now sat gracefully on her shoulders, over her white shirt and black tie. Clay and I both stopped in the middle of the hallway to avoid being seen, but it was too late. Willa heard our footsteps and immediately turned toward us.

“I see I’m not the only one who knows then,” She crossed her arms. “How’d you find it?”

I blinked at her cautiously. “I tripped and opened it by accident.”

“That explains why it was open when I walked by with Flora.”

“Well we found something in there.” Clay answered, holding up the backpack.

“Isn’t that Grant’s?”

“It is. We found his knife in there too.”

Willa frowned. “You don’t think it was him, do you? He wasn’t in the library.”

“It’s possible,” Clay shrugged. “It appears that the tunnels lead all over the house. He could’ve made it upstairs in time to push Mr. Mason.”

“You mean you haven’t been in the tunnels yet?”

“No. Have you?”

“No, I just figured you would have as soon as you found it,” Willa pushed the door open wider. “We should explore and see if it leads to the stairwell.”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Do you have a flashlight?”

Clay snapped the flashlight off of their keychain and tossed it to her. I watched as Willa flicked it on and stepped into the tunnels. Clay began to take a step toward the doorway, but I pulled them back.

“Can we really trust her?” I whispered with concern. “How do we know she didn’t do it?”

“Oliver walked her to the kitchen, remember? She wouldn’t have had time to get there either.”

“Unless she knew about the tunnels already.”

Clay frowned. “I went to school with Willa. I trust her. She wouldn’t have killed Mr. Mason.”

“I don’t think we should trust her, Clay.”

“Do you trust me?”

I exhaled sharply. “Of course.”

Before we could continue, Willa called back from inside the tunnels. “Are you two coming or not?”

“We’re coming!” Clay called back, giving me a reassuring look before stepping through the doorway.

I sighed, the uncertainty gnawing at me. There was no part of me that wanted to trust any of the people here. I had only known them for a few hours, and in those few hours, a man had been murdered. Besides, I had seen enough movies to know that trusting anyone in a situation like this was a bad idea. Just because Willa hadn’t been interested in the will, didn’t mean that she was innocent. Either way Clay was the one who dragged me into this mess, and I wasn’t going to leave them alone with a possible murderer. Which was why, despite the fact that I knew it was a bad idea, I still walked through the doorway into the tunnels anyway.

It was just as dark as before. The only light came from the flashlight, which Willa was holding several yards ahead of us. Clay wandered the edges of the tunnels carefully, observing each wall and corner. My heart was pounding in my chest as I followed closely behind Clay. They were my only reminder of why I had entered a dark endless tunnel in the first place.

The tunnel stretched off for a few yards before turning down a sharp corner. I had no desire to turn down that corner but had no choice but to follow Willa and Clay, who had gone down it without hesitation. This part of the tunnel was much narrower. Even though I was no longer afraid of *Alice and Wonderland* as I had been when I was five, I was still more afraid than I would ever speak out loud. The truth was, I was claustrophobic, and had been ever since a family cave expedition years after I got over *Alice and Wonderland*. My parents were forced to cancel the weekend of cave exploration after I broke down sobbing in the first cave before we even got very far.

That memory hung dangerously in my mind as my palms began to sweat. I focused on the sound of our footsteps, rather than the increasing pounding of my heart. It was too dark to see how far this part of the tunnel went, even with the flashlight. We could only see a few yards in

front of us. This only made me more anxious to leave. I couldn't help but wonder why Mr. Mason would invest in tunnels around his house, but not get lighting for it. As if they could sense my nervousness, Clay reached behind them and stretched out their hand so I could grab it. I held onto them tightly, knowing that if I didn't, I would run straight back out of these tunnels.

"I wonder what the point of these tunnels are." Willa muttered under her breath in awe.

Clay glanced around us. "Mr. Mason probably didn't have one other than the aesthetic."

"That's true. He probably based it off some play or musical he liked."

Without warning, a large black spider dropped from the ceiling on a thin strand of web. I screamed as it landed right in front of my face. I jumped back in fear and hit the wall with a thud. There was a loud crash, and the fear flooded me as I realized I was falling backward. I landed on my back with a loud thud. The air rushed from my lungs, and I groaned, gasping painfully for breath. A moment later both Clay and Willa were at my side.

Willa tried helping me to my feet. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I sighed, rubbing my back. "Just tired of falling."

"Oh my gosh, Park. You've done it again!" Clay exclaimed excitedly.

"What are you talking about-"

I cut off as soon as I looked up and realized what had happened. I was sitting on top of the fallen panel of the trick wall. Behind me was a large dark space, that was clearly a hidden room. My heart skipped a beat. How many hidden spaces did this mansion have?

Clay walked into the room immediately as Willa helped me all the way up. They disappeared into the darkness as they felt along the wall for a light switch. A moment later the room was flooded with light. I stared at it in shock, my mouth falling wide open. We had stumbled upon Mr. Mason's secret study.
