

## Chapter Four: Into the Woods

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“Here is your tea, Mx. Easten and Mx. Finn.” Oliver announced, setting a tea set on the one part of the table that wasn’t covered in papers.

I assumed that the tea set belonged to Mr. Mason. It was made of white china and carefully decorated with pink roses, light green vines, and a few little blue birds. The tea set was well worn, and I couldn’t help but wonder how long it had been in his possession. There were little chips around the edges, and one of the cups had a broken handle that was glued back in place. It reminded me of an old tea set my grandmother had, and I wondered if Mr. Mason’s had been passed through his family as well.

“Thanks.” Clay responded politely.

We were once again sitting on the couch in the parlor. Clay’s notes from the evening, and our clues, were spread over the coffee table. It had taken us nearly twenty minutes to pick away at the information we had, and we hadn’t gotten any farther than before. Even though Oliver held a composed expression, his hands were shaking as he set down each cup of tea.

He folded his hands behind his back. “Can I get either of you anything else?”

“Well, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Why’d you lie about being upstairs? Mr. Mason keeps his cleaning supplies in the basement.”

Oliver’s jaw twitched. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. We reorganized.”

Clay was leaning back on the couch and I glanced at them carefully as they pushed their glasses up.

“He told you what was going to happen tonight, didn’t he?”

Oliver was silent for a moment before nodding. “I called the police to do an investigation, but no one would listen to me. Mr. Mason forbade me from going any farther.”

“Did he tell you who it was?” I interjected, the shock rolling through me.

“No. He gave me very strict instructions. I was to follow along with the evening and not interfere.”

Clay sat up straighter. “What about the will?”

“I didn’t know about that either. By all means, I assumed that he would leave his things to you.”

“Why Clay?” I asked, my brows furrowing in confusion.

“You were a good actor, Clay, and Mr. Mason knew how much you missed the theatre,” Oliver shrugged, looking remorseful. “I just figured he would’ve asked you to take over before retiring. I never imagined things would go this far.”

Clay’s face was blank, but they nodded. “Thank you Oliver. I’d like to talk to Park alone, now. I know you feel better when you’re keeping busy, so if you’d like you can take care of things in the kitchen.”

“Very well,” Oliver looked grateful. “Call if you need anything.”

I shifted so that I was sitting cross-legged on the couch and watched as Oliver closed the door to the parlor. My mind was whirling. I didn’t know what on Earth was going on, or who we could trust. When Clay had invited me to this party, I accepted because they were my friend, and I assumed we would only be here for a few hours to endure some mediocre food and painful small talk. I never imagined that I would be caught up in some retirement party murder plot. This was the last time I would *ever* attend a party.

“What are you doing!” I exclaimed as Clay picked up one of the cups of tea. “How do you know that it isn’t poisoned?”

“Oliver isn’t going to poison us.”

I grabbed the cup of tea out of their hand and set it back down forcefully. “You don’t know that. We are literally in the same mansion as a murderer, Clay.”

“He didn’t do it.”

“How do you know?”

“He never went upstairs.”

I blinked at him. “Excuse me?”

“Mr. Mason would’ve already had everything set up, and besides, the kitchen is on the opposite side of the house. He wouldn’t have had time to walk from there to the top of the staircase. Oh, and he happened to walk right by the hallway where we were in to go back to the parlor. You were too focused on the painting to notice.”

“Why didn’t you say anything in the beginning, when we were talking about alibis!?”

“Well, I didn’t know why he was there, and now we do. Which means we can cross one person off the list, besides ourselves.”

“Yeah, but that still leaves us with seven suspects and a few vague clues. We haven’t even checked the balcony, *or* the basement, for the next clue.”

Before Clay could continue, they were interrupted by frantic yelling coming from beyond the parlor door. We both stood up abruptly from the couch. A second later the parlor door burst open.

Willa’s suit was torn and her dark curly hair had fallen from her high bun. “Flora’s running.”

“What!” I exclaimed, but Clay was already moving toward the door.

“Where is she going?”

“She’s trying to get outside- to the woods.”

My heart was racing with panic, but Clay was already out the door. Willa and I exchanged a frenzied look before running after them.

There was more commotion coming from somewhere down the hallway behind us. I couldn’t tell if the other guests were fighting over the state of the will or heading after Flora like we were. There wasn’t time to find out either.

Clay had done a lot of cross country and track in their time at college and was already at the other end of the hall. I saw a flash of red hair and a swishing blue gown and knew that Flora must’ve been ahead of them.

I only made it halfway down the hall before I tripped over my undone shoelace and crashed into the wall. The breath rushed from my lungs and I felt a flash of pain in my forehead. There was a loud thud as I landed on the hardwood floors before an overwhelming creaking noise filled my ears. I stared in shock as the wall in front of me swung open, revealing a dark passageway.

My legs were shaking as I stood up to brush myself off. “Clay?”

The only answer I received was the slamming of doors, followed by abrupt silence. I turned to see that the hallway ended in a large set of white French doors, and that they were both pushed open. My heart thudded in my chest, and I glanced once more at the revealed passageway before running toward the doors.

The doors opened out into a dark garden and the rest of Mr. Mason’s cascading yard. It wasn’t until you looked far past the end of the neatly cut grass, that you could see the thick forest looming beyond.

I glanced forward to find that there was a narrow stone path leading from the doors, and small solar-powered lights to guide it. I only had to take one step outside to hear the commotion. Clay and Willa had managed to stop Flora. Her red hair was a mess, and there were mascara stains down her cheeks. She was sobbing, and I noticed right away that she was putting all of her

weight on only one leg, signaling that she had twisted her ankle on the path. Willa gripped her arm tightly, both holding her upright and keeping her from running.

“P-Please...it wasn’t m-me. I didn’t-I would never...k-kill Mr. M-Mason.”

Clay’s face was expressionless. “Why were you running then? Flora, do you know something?”

“N-No...”

“Flora.”

“Fine!” She exclaimed, breaking down further. “It’s Grant. He lied. He was never in the library with me. I d-don’t know where he was, but he, he wouldn’t h-have hurt M-Mr. Mason.”

“Can you take her inside, Willa?” Clay sighed after a moment. “Oliver can find the first aid kit.”

“Sure,” She answered, swinging Flora’s arm over her shoulders for support. “Let’s go then.”

“A-Are you going, to-to do anything?” Flora pulled back, continuing to cry.

“No one’s doing anything yet,” Clay reassured her. “We don’t have enough information for that. Just go inside. Oliver will take care of your ankle.”

Flora took a shaky breath, trying to nod, but continued crying as Willa led her back inside. I watched as the doors closed behind them and then took a few steps down the mossy stairs and onto the stone path. Clay’s suit was torn, and their glasses were sitting awkwardly on their face-almost falling off.

“You should be more careful. You’re lucky those aren’t broken.”

They adjusted their glasses. “It’s not my fault. She tripped me.”

“Well, now that everything is taken care of, I found something you should see.”

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By the time we got back to the hallway, the door had swung shut. Clay stood behind me with their hands on their hips as I tapped the wall with my fist.

“Park. Are you sure this is the right place?”

“I’m sure,” I muttered with frustration, and continued tapping on the wall. “Look, I’m not crazy.”

They coughed. “I never said that you were.”

I was about to give up, when I tapped hard on one side of the wall, and there was a loud creaking noise. Clay flinched as the wall swung open, revealing the secret door. There was nothing but darkness lurking behind it, but it was obvious that there was another hallway just before our eyes.

“I told you so.” I turned around with a smug expression.

They rolled their eyes and grabbed their keys from their pocket. A small flashlight was attached to the key ring. Clay flipped it on and shone it over the awaiting darkness. The light revealed a narrow hallway that was lined with wood and turned to stretch down a sharp corner. We exchanged a look and Clay stepped hesitantly into the passageway.

My heart was pounding in my chest. “What are you doing?”

“Going into the secret tunnel? What does it look like, Parker?”

“How do you know it’s not broken down *or* the home of a rabid animal *or* worse...what if it’s booby trapped?”

“This isn’t an *Indiana Jones* movie. Come on, it’s fine. I promise.”

I stared at them with my arms crossed for a moment. I knew this was a bad idea, but Clay was full of bad ideas. Hesitantly, I stepped into the darkness beside them.

Clay began walking along the passageway, pointing the flashlight around the corner, that only revealed another, longer hallway-sloping downwards. I stayed by their side and looked nervously around in the darkness. There were cobwebs dangling in every crevice. A chill ran up my spine. I hated spiders.

“I think these run all through the house,” Clay observed in awe. “Which means they could lead to different rooms, and even outside.”

“Why would Mr. Mason-“ I started, before tripping over something laying on the ground.

I landed on my hands and knees with a thud, groaning as the floor scraped against them. Clay whipped around at the sound. The rays of flashlight went everywhere as they stopped to help me up. It ached where I fell, and I winced as I rubbed my side. How many times was I going to trip on stuff tonight?

“Well, Park, you’re pretty good at this accidental detective stuff.”

“What do you mean?”

I stopped and turned to see them with the flashlight pointed at the floor. Laying on the ground was a small grey backpack. It was torn and covered in mud and black scuff marks. Without missing a beat, Clay picked it up and started going through its contents.

“Let’s see. Some books, the script for *Romeo and Juliet*, some director’s notes, highlighters, and...well, and a knife.”

“Excuse me?”

Clay held up an expensive custom hunting knife, moving the flashlight over the glinting blade. My heart skipped a beat. What was a knife doing here? My mind quickly flashed back to the tires. It was possible that this was the knife someone used to slash our tires.

“There’s an inscription on the hilt,” Clay observed, shining the flashlight over the carefully made handle. “Grant Theodore Brooks.”

My mouth dropped open, but before I could say anything, we heard a deep voice come from the hall.

“Flora? Flora where are you?”

Clay sighed. “Well, speak of the devil.”

There was no stopping Clay because they were already shuffling out of the hallway, backpack and knife in hand. My heart began to race as I realized I had no choice but to follow them. The hallway was much brighter compared to the passageway and I squinted against the new light. I could just make out Grant’s figure in the hallway, and he jumped as we stepped out from the passageway.

“Oh my gosh!” He exclaimed, taking a few steps back. “What were you doing in there?”

“The better question is what were *you* doing in there?” Clay responded, holding up the backpack.

Grant’s face became puzzled. “What are you doing with my bag? Did you break into my car?”

“Did you slash my tires?”

“What!” His voice was becoming raised. “I didn’t slash anybody’s tires. Now tell me what you’re doing with my bag.”

“We found this in the passageway,” I explained quietly. “We found a knife with your name on it.”

“You took my knife too?”

“We didn’t take anything, and we’re not the ones who should be answering questions, Grant,” Clay interrupted. “It’s your stuff that we just found in a passageway that leads all over the mansion, when there’s been a murder.”

Grant's face became angry. "I didn't kill Mr. Mason, and I didn't slash anyone's tires. I don't know what's going on, and I'm not going to stand here and be accused of a murder that didn't happen. Now where's Flora?"

"She tried to run away and sprained her ankle. Willa took her to Oliver." I looked at the ground.

He gave me a cold nod and then turned to walk away. Clay took a step forward. I reached out to grab their shoulder and pull them back, but they shrugged me off.

"We know you weren't in the library."

Grant suddenly froze, turning around slowly. "What?"

"You weren't in the library," Clay said calmly. "Flora told us. You lied."

Without warning, Grant whipped his head around and started walking back toward us. My heart began to race in my chest, and I grabbed Clay's arm. They didn't flinch but stood their ground as Grant stopped only a few inches from us. He pointed a finger threateningly at Clay.

"You don't know what you're talking about, kid," Grant growled. "And you better stay out of it, before anyone else gets hurt."

Clay stared him down. "Maybe you should watch your own step instead of telling me to watch mine."

I felt a rush of surprise at the fact that Clay had just openly threatened him, but when I looked at Grant there was only venom in his glare.

"Have fun solving your mystery. You're running out of time."

Before Clay could get another word in, Grant turned sharply on his heel and continued down the hall without looking back.

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