

## Chapter Seven: And Then There Were Nine

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Only thirty minutes had passed since we heard the shouts and left the tunnels. The hallways had been chaos. Everyone had heard the screaming and had come running. There was shouting and pushing as everyone gathered by the door to the parlor room. Clay had taken over as soon as we got there. It was what they were trained for. My heart had been racing in my chest and I felt on the verge of throwing up. I couldn't stay. I didn't want to see. I knew it was dangerous to run off, but I did anyway.

I now sat alone on the balcony that Clay and I had been on less than a couple of hours ago. My legs were hanging off of the railing I was sitting on. There was a racing in my chest that I couldn't stop. I buried my head in my hands. I wanted this night to be over. Everything about this party had gone wrong, and if Mr. Mason's letter to Clay was right, it was only going to get worse.

"Oliver said you came down this way." A voice said quietly from behind me. I turned to see Clay standing in between the two wide French doors. "You really should be more careful on that ledge."

I didn't say anything but looked over them carefully. Like almost everyone else, Clay had finally taken the jacket off of their suit. They had the white sleeves of their shirt cuffed up neatly near their elbows and had loosened the maroon tie. However, I was more drawn to the splashes of crimson that were on their right pant leg. My heart skipped a beat in my ribcage.

"Who was it?"

Clay looked at their shoes instead of at me. "Grant. I couldn't save him. He lost too much blood."

"What? How?"

"The parlor was ransacked. All of the clues and the original letter are gone," they sighed and came to stand at the railing. "We were too wrapped up in finding the next clues to notice, but there was a hole in Grant's backpack."

"The knife fell out." My chest tightened with realization.

Clay nodded. "Park, there's something serious going on here. This was a coverup, and it's only going to get worse. Until we can figure it out, we're all in danger. I don't want anything to happen to you, just because I invited you to some stupid retirement party."

"Don't blame yourself. It's not your fault," I said firmly. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. We need to solve this. How do we find the last clue?"

“We need to go to the yard, but there’s a problem.”

“Oh great, *another* problem. Who could’ve imagined?” I sighed sarcastically. “What’s happened now?”

Clay pointed a thumb towards the door. “The others are freaking out and now that Grant’s dead, Emilia’s taken over.”

“No one’s questioned her for taking charge?”

“Unfortunately not. Harvey appears to be with her.”

“Harvey? I thought he was on our side.”

“There are no sides anymore, Park. I think everyone’s realized that. All there is now is survival.”

“What are we supposed to do?”

“Willa’s stayed with the group. She’s going to keep an eye on Emilia for us. It’s pretty much chaos. Everyone’s tearing the place up for the will. It’s each person for themselves.”

“And Flora?”

“Oliver’s watching her. She’s taking Grant’s death pretty hard, but I don’t know Park, I think she knows more than she’s letting on.”

“She lied before, and Harvey did say to look into her.”

“There’s more. When I said *problem*, there was more than just Emilia.”

“Clay-“

“The others have turned against us.”

“Excuse me?”

“After I handled the scene to prevent any tampering with evidence, and Emilia took over, she determined that we would only get in the way. She convinced everyone but Oliver and Willa that we’re dangerous.”

“They think *we’re* dangerous? We’re the ones trying to solve this!”

“Well, thanks to Emilia, they now think that we put on all that detective stuff to distract everyone while we looked for the will. She went so far as to suggest that we killed Mr. Mason.”

Anger was boiling in my blood. “That’s absolutely ridiculous!”

“Either way, they’ve believed her. They’re looking for us.”

“And if they find us?”

“They’ll make sure that we don’t get in the way.”

I didn’t know what the implications of that meant, but seeing that two people were already dead, it wasn’t hard to guess. “So now that we’re hiding, what’s the plan?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

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What an understatement. I didn’t just not like Clay’s idea, I absolutely *hated* it. However, seeing that we had to duck behind the French doors several times to avoid being spotted by Birdie’s beady eyes, it was the best option to get down to the yard quickly. She had been put in charge of looking for us, and was now patrolling the upstairs hallway. There was no way we could get past her to the stairwell, and outside, without using Clay’s plan.

“I hope you know that you owe me when this is over,” I muttered from where I was standing at the railing. “And I mean big time, Clay. I expect a full paid trip to Disney.”

“Park, if we make it through this party, we can go backpacking in Europe for all I care.”

I huffed under my breath. Clay’s *brilliant* idea was to take the white curtains off of the French doors and use them as a rope to climb down the railing and into the yard below. The balcony was on the second floor of the mansion. When I looked down the railing into the dark grass below, it made my stomach churn. I did not want to be dropping down from it.

Clay was taller than me by a landslide and was easily able to tear down the curtains. After that, we only had to rip them into strips and tie them all together. We were almost done, and a mess of torn curtain strips covered the balcony around us. I sighed heavily and tied the last strip to the rope. This did not look anywhere near as sturdy as I wanted it to be.

“This is one of the worst ideas you’ve ever had.”

“Thank you.”

They finished tying the curtains together and we both stood from the ground. I stepped back and crossed my arms, glancing from Clay to the doors behind us. I was look out while Clay finished the rest of our master, scratch that, *stupid* plan. The halls were quiet, but I kept looking back in case Birdie made another surprise appearance. It was quite apparent that Emilia had named her our personal seeker. Luckily, she wasn’t very good at her job. My guess was that she was a little more distracted with looking for the will than looking for us.

“Alright, do you want me to go first?” Clay moved away from the railing, brushing their hands off.

I looked over to see that they had carefully knotted the curtain rope to the railing and tossed it over the edge. It swayed in the slight breeze, dangling only a few feet off the ground. I glanced up at them with a pointed look.

“Is that even a question? Of course you’re going first. It’s your idea.”

They grinned, but they looked nervous. “I knew you’d say that.”

I sighed and went to stand by the edge. Without hesitation, Clay swung their body over the railing and grabbed hold of the rope. My stomach lurched as I watched them carefully hold tight to it and make their way down. I wanted to close my eyes because it was too stressful watching them almost fall, but someone would have to run to get Oliver and the first aid kit if they did. Much to my relief, Clay made it all the way to the ground. I watched as they jumped onto the grass, giving me two thumbs up, as if they had just passed a test and not climbed down a balcony.

My heart rate had increased drastically as I realized it was my turn, and my palms instantly began to sweat. I gripped tightly to the railing and struggled to climb over. I was shaking, and my heart nearly stopped as my shoe slipped slightly over the edge. I gripped the railing tighter and grabbed the rope dangling beside me. Once I was sure I had a firm grip, I gently swung myself off the balcony, leaving only the curtain to keep me from hitting the ground. My chest was tight as the curtain swung precariously.

“You’re doing great!” Clay called from down below me.

I had already squeezed my eyes shut and hadn’t moved from where I was clinging to the rope. My palms were starting to burn. I knew I had to start climbing soon or I was going to fall. My heart was pounding dangerously fast against my ribcage as I began to carefully make my descent down the rope. I kept my eyes closed the entire time. My only distraction was Clay calling out pieces of encouragement from the ground. I didn’t even know I had reached the ground until Clay was there, grabbing my arms and helping me onto the lawn. My heart was thudding in my chest as my shoes finally touched the grass. I blinked open my eyes, and shoved Clay away from me.

“If you ever make me do that again, Clay Jesse Easten, I will-I don’t even know! But you’ll be sorry!”

“Park, I promise you,” They had one hand up and one over their heart as if taking an oath. “I will never make you climb a rope down a balcony again.”

I sighed, the adrenaline starting to leave my body. “Good. Now where can we find this clue?”

Clay pointed across the yard to where I could just make out a croquet set up that was surrounded with more of Mr. Mason’s dim solar lights. Who knew that the man liked croquet? I released the breath I didn’t know I was holding and nodded, starting across the grass toward it. The night air was cold, and I rubbed at my arms as Clay walked beside me. I almost didn’t want to know what time it was. The closer it was to morning, the less time we had, and with a

murderer on the loose, that wasn't a good sign. Clay adjusted their glasses, peering across the dimly lit grass and over Mr. Mason's croquet setup. I had never played croquet before. I wasn't even sure how it worked really. After a few moments of pacing the grass, Clay finally came to an abrupt halt.

"Clay?" I said after they were quiet for several moments. "Clay, did you find something?"

They had a puzzled expression as they turned to face me, holding up a dark object that had been sitting in the grass. I squinted at it in the dark before the realization hit me. Clay quickly reached over and covered my mouth as I started to scream. In their other hand was a human skull.

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