

Chapter Three:

There's Safety in Numbers

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The costume shop is a small room located a few doors down from the theater. The only frequent occupant is Joel Hayes, the resident costume manager and fashion major.

I yawn as Clay knocks on the door and pull a stick of gum from my pocket. It's getting far too late. Hershey will be beside himself when we get home. Our dog is a beast when it comes to food, and he will be anxiously awaiting his dinner.

"Come in," Joel calls from behind the door.

Clay opens the door for me and lets me walk inside first. The costume shop is a perfect example of theatrical chaos. There are costumes on racks, in tubs, and scattered over every available surface. The linoleum floor is covered in sequins, random buttons, and a suspicious amount of glitter.

The room is currently occupied by more than just Joel. Ziggy, one of Clay's castmates, is standing on top of a stool while Joel hems and makes adjustments to his suit. Ziggy's bright blue hair is a mess and sticks up in random spikes.

Joel's boyfriend, Floyd, is sitting at the main sewing table trying to sew some buttons to one of the show's dresses. He is a member of the cast, and his eyes are still red from crying.

"Good evening, Clay." Joel stands from where he's been crouching on the ground. There are dark circles under his eyes, and I'm pretty sure he's only running on caffeine. He pulls his long black hair into a tight messy bun. "What brings you to my office?"

"We have some questions for you," Clay answers, pulling the brooch from their pocket. "I was wondering if you've ever seen a brooch like this?"

Joel squints past his glasses at the brooch before taking it from Clay's hands. "Oh, yeah. This is Andrea's brooch for her costume. I had to get it from a vintage shop. It cost a lot of money but was worth it. I don't think there's anything like it out there." He hands the brooch back to Clay. "Why are you asking? If you're trying to return it, you might as well leave it here. She has a fitting tomorrow."

"Actually, we're doing an investigation," I interject. "It appears Lewis's death wasn't accidental."

Joel's expression drops. "*What?*" he asks in a horrified tone.

Floyd has looked up from sewing; his face has gone white, and Ziggy stares at us with wide eyes.

“We think that someone cut a rope during rehearsal,” Clay explains, their tone somber. “And I’ve found evidence that proves our suspicions are true. We just want to find out the truth and try to prevent anyone else from getting hurt.”

“Someone *murdered* Lewis?” Floyd says quietly. His expression is a contorted mixture of horror and confusion. I suspect that he’s still in shock from seeing the set piece fall. “Why?”

“We don’t know,” Clay says calmly. They’re good at sounding assuring. “That’s what we’re trying to figure out. We want justice for Lewis.”

“God.” Ziggy sighs, running a hand through his blue hair. “I never would’ve thought…” He sighs again. “Does that mean it was somebody in the cast? *One of our friends?*”

Clay nods once. “That would be the most likely explanation.”

“Lewis was our friend.” Joel flops down in the chair next to Floyd. He leans against his boyfriend for support. “We met through the theatre. The four of us have been friends for years. He was a good guy, and he didn’t deserve to die like that.”

Ziggy hops down from the stool. “There has to be something we can do to help. We can’t just stand by if Lewis has been murdered in cold blood.”

“Right now we’re trying to gather as much information as possible,” Clay says.

“Maybe you should look into the understudies,” Floyd suggests. His voice is shaking, and Joel puts his arm comfortingly around him. “It’s common for there to be jealousy in the theater. I’d like to think the best of everyone, but if someone really did murder Lewis…”

“That’s a good idea,” I agree

I can’t help but feel bad for Floyd. I know what it’s like to become an unwanted witness to a murder.

“I don’t mind talking to the understudies.” Joel chews his bottom lip. “I’m doing their final fittings tomorrow morning. They might be more willing to reveal an indication of their true thoughts with me rather than if they think it’s an investigation.”

Clay pulls out the notepad from their pants pocket and begins scribbling down bullet points. “I’d like to question Andrea. It was her brooch that we found on stage. There’s a chance it could’ve just fallen off her dress during rehearsal, but it’s best to explore all options.”

“Her fitting is tomorrow afternoon at two o’clock.”

“I’d like to be there during the questioning,” Ziggy interrupts. His brows are drawn with determination. “I need to help somehow.”

“Alright,” Clay hesitantly agrees. “You might be able to pick up on something we don’t. Especially if Andrea says anything after we leave. A lot of suspects will talk about the investigators behind their backs.”

Or to their faces, I think, recalling how defiant Emilia was to us at the dinner party. A small chill runs up my spine. I can still remember her nicknames for us; *Sherlock and Watson*. The stone of despair in my stomach grows heavier.

“With all of us working together, we should be able to get to the bottom of this,” Joel says, looking meaningfully at Floyd. “Lewis will get justice, and no one else will get hurt.”

“There’s a much better chance to find the truth with five of us,” Ziggy agrees.

“Then it’s settled.” Clay shoves their notebook back into their pocket. “Tomorrow begins the bulk of the investigation.”
