

## Chapter Two:

### Death Hides in the Worst of Places

*Written by: Jay Mosher*

I sit on the bench with Clay; my knees pulled up to my chest and my hand wrapped tightly around theirs. We haven't spoken much since realizing that it was likely that tonight's accident was really a murder. Instead, I sit silently and watch the scene unfold.

Most of the cast has gone home. Lewis MacGartney, the actor for Watson, was declared dead at the scene by paramedics.

I expected that the show would be immediately canceled. The lead actor dying on stage sounded like enough of an excuse--however, the director made everyone take a vote instead. With opening night being only two days away, most of the cast voted to continue the show for Lewis's sake. The director, Art, insisted that it's what Lewis would've wanted seeing that he was so passionate about the theater. Clay was one of the only ones who voted to cancel the show.

I bite my lip, holding tighter to myself. I don't know what to think.

I don't understand how this could have happened. I thought things like this were long over.

*We were supposed to be safe.*

"Are you okay?" Clay asks, gingerly tracing their thumb over the top of my hand.

I look away from them. "I don't know." I let my feet fall back on the tiled floor. "Shouldn't I be asking *you* that? You're the one who saw it happen."

"I work in criminal justice, Park. I'll be okay."

I sigh. My hand clenches into a fist at my knee. "I thought this was over, Clay. We said no more mysteries. I promised you that we would be safe after the--" I shake my head. "After the dinner party."

"We *are* safe, Park." They squeeze my hand. "Nothing bad is going to happen. It's just another case to investigate. I work cases all the time."

I cross my arms over my chest. I want to believe them. I want to feel as if everything will be alright, but the feeling of despair sinks deep into my stomach like a stone.

Before I can say anything else, we're approached by the director. Art is a tall man who wears expensive sweaters and has brightly dyed purple hair. His golden horn rimmed glasses sit low on

his nose. His eyes are crinkled tightly in weariness, and dark circles sit on his cheeks like bruises.

“Clay,” he sighs tiredly. “I’m glad you’re still here.”

Clay moves closer to me and puts their arm around my shaking shoulders. “What’s the verdict?”

“The police have deemed it an accident.” Art shifts on his feet.

“You don’t think it was?”

“No.” Art rubs a hand across his furrowed brows. “The police barely looked into it, and Blake confirmed that the ropes were checked. There’s no way this could’ve happened.”

Clay frowns. “That’s what I was thinking, too.”

“I hate to ask this of you, but can you please consider taking this on as a case,” Art asks, desperation tainting his voice. “If there really was foul play, I need to know the truth. I can’t let any more people get hurt.”

*Please don’t take the case. I squeeze my shaking hand into a fist. Please just say no so that we can go home to our dog and be okay.*

“I’ll take care of it, Art. Don’t Worry.”

My breath catches in my throat, and I look down at my shoes. I knew they were going to accept. Clay never turns down a case if they can help it.

“Thank you. I know you will put us in good hands.” Art massages his eyes. “I have to go. There’s still so much to figure out, and I have to play damage control.”

“I can handle things from here.”

“Alright. Thank you again, Clay.” He shifts the bag on his shoulders. “Goodnight to both of you. Let me know if you find anything important.”

I wait for Art to leave, taking deep breaths in through my nose. I need for my body to stop shaking. I need to be calm.

“Park.” Clay’s voice interrupts my thoughts. “Are you okay?”

I fidget with the sleeves of my jacket. “You could’ve said no. Art could easily find another detective. It doesn’t have to be you.”

Their face scrunches up with confusion. “Park, what is this about? Did you want me to say no?”

I look down at my hands. “I just want us to be safe.”

“It’s only a case.” They take my hand from my lap and hold it tightly in both of theirs. “If you really want me to decline, I will, but I promise that I’ll be careful--I always am.” They look at me intently, nervously biting the corner of their lip. “I only wanted to accept because it’s Lewis. He was a friend and a colleague. He deserves justice.”

“You’re right. I just...” I bite the inside of my cheek. “I’m worried, that’s all.”

“I know.” They kiss the top of my hand. “But we have each other, and we’ll be okay.”

I nod and lean my head against their shoulder. “Alright. Let’s do it.”

They chuckle against my hair. “Park, you’re not a detective.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not letting you do this alone.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.”

They take my hand and help me up from the bench. I’ve stopped shaking, and I hold tightly to them.

“Okay,” Clay says. “Let’s do some investigating then.”

We walk hand in hand back to the theater. I take a deep breath before Clay pushes open the heavy doors.

The theater is dark, with only a few ghost lights on to guide us. I wait nervously by a row of plush red seats as Clay turns on all the lights. The air smells metallically with blood, and I try to breathe through my mouth to avoid it.

I squint as we are suddenly flooded with light. The stage sits far down at the front of the theater. My stomach churns as my eyes pass over the fallen set piece--and more concerning, the blood still staining the stage. I fidget nervously with my hands.

“Try not to look,” Clay says gently when they appear at my side.

I turn my head away from the stage. “It’s hard not to.”

“I know.” They rest their hand comfortingly on my shoulder. “You can wait outside if you want. I just want to do a scan of the backstage wings and see if the suspect could’ve dropped any evidence.”

“I’ll be fine,” I lie. I’m trying hard to hold back my churning nausea.

“Okay.” Clay keeps their hand on my shoulder as we climb the stairs up to the stage.

I keep my eyes off the stains and pull my jacket up over my nose. Clay isn’t even phased by the prospect of a crime scene. They didn’t even flinch during the dinner party murders. They

just jump right into action; always trying to solve the mystery and save as many people as possible.

The stage wings are lit by a single lamp. Ghost lights are kept on for superstition. They're meant to keep the ghosts away from the theater and have to be kept on at all times.

I hold my arms tightly around myself. I don't believe in ghosts but it doesn't make the notion any less unnerving

Clay walks carefully along the edges of the wings, sticking close to where the wall of ropes are. One of the ropes has fallen and lays in a heap on the floor. Clay stoops to the ground and examines the end. I start to walk hesitantly toward them when the lights flicker off something laying on the stage. I stop and kneel down.

"It's just as I suspected," Clay says from the wings of the stage. "The edges of the rope aren't frayed. They've clearly been cut. Potentially with some sort of hunting knife. It's very clean."

"Hey." I pick up a large brooch from the ground. "I think I've found something."

Clay immediately comes to my side, sitting on his knees in front of me. I hold out my palms to show him the brooch. It's the size of a large coin and made from embroidery. A small bouquet of roses is sewn across the light green fabric. Tiny beads and sequins are adorned in the petals and flutter in the background.

"I haven't seen anything like this before." Clay takes it carefully from my hands. "It looks like some sort of heirloom."

"Do you think it could belong to our killer?"

"It's possible." They purse their lips in thought. "We should ask Joel. He would know if it's part of the show's costumes or not. Plus he might recognize it."

"Do you think he's working this late?"

"Joel is always working late."

"Okay, then." I stand from the stage, brushing off my pants. "To the costume shop."

\*\*\*