

Chapter Six:

A Needle in a Haystack

Written by: Jay Mosher

We arrive back at the costume shop at two o'clock in the afternoon. Clay's shoulders are tense, and I can tell that they're becoming more stressed with each passing hour. The more time that passes, the closer we get to opening night, and the higher the chances are that someone else gets hurt.

I tighten my grip around my coffee cup. Even though we're out of the fall chill, I can't shake the cold feeling clammering in my bones. I pull my jacket tighter around me.

"Are you sure about this?" I ask quietly.

Clay stops in front of the door. "What do you mean?"

My heart pounds roughly against my ribcage. The feeling of a stone in my stomach has now turned to feel like a brick. "I just have a bad feeling."

"It'll be okay." They put their arm around me. "I promise." My body shakes against theirs. "Park, you can sit today's investigation out. I don't blame you. Why don't you go home and work on your book?"

"No." I shake my head and then repeat more firmly. "No. There's not enough time. Opening night is tomorrow. Let's just get this over with."

"Okay." They frown. "If you're sure."

I don't answer and instead knock on the costume shop door.

"It's open," Joel calls back immediately.

Clay is silent as they follow me into the costume shop. It's just as chaotic and messy as yesterday. There are clothes and fabric items everywhere. Ziggy is sitting in front of a sewing machine and straightens when we walk in.

Andrea Hawkins, our next possible suspect, is standing on top of the stool in a pink ball gown. She stares at us with narrowed eyes. Her hands are on her hips, and her black eyeliner arches up in sharp wings.

Joel gives us a small wave from where he's standing beside her with a pincushion. Andrea continues to look condescendingly down at us as Joel adjusts the hem to her dress.

“What are you doing here, Clay?” She sneers, her voice curling into a sharp southern drawl. “Shouldn’t you be practicing your lines?”

“I need to ask you some questions,” Clay says coolly, pulling his notebook back out. “If you haven’t heard, we’re investigating Lewis’s death.”

Her face pales at the mention of Lewis. “I haven’t heard that.”

“We think it wasn’t an accident,” Ziggy pipes up from the table. “Someone from the cast must have cut the rope.”

“That’s despicable.” She fidgets with one of the pleats of her gown. “And let me guess, you think that it’s me?” She shakes her head. “I would never hurt Lewis. He was...a friend. I--I could never.”

“There’s no need to get upset,” I say gently, noticing that she’s on the verge of tears. I didn’t expect this after her snideness a few seconds ago. “We just want to ask a few questions.”

The tension in her face eases. “Okay. What do you need to know?”

“We found this on stage last night.” Clay pulls the brooch from his pocket. “It was near the ropes.”

“That’s my brooch,” Andrea says. “I’ve been looking everywhere for it. I noticed it was missing when I took my costume off yesterday.”

“Your scenes were done after the first hour.”

“That’s right.” She nods. “I took off my costume and went to go help Blake. She needed help unloading some props from her truck. We walked in a few minutes after--” Andrea inhales sharply. “A few minutes after the set piece fell.”

“Thank you, Andrea.” I try to read her somber expression. “Is there anything else you want to tell us? Any detail is important.”

“Well,” she starts and then shakes her head. “No. No, there’s nothing else.”

Clay and I both exchange a look. “Okay, well let us know if you think of anything,” they say. “We’re going to go talk with Blake.”

“I’ll come with.” Ziggy jumps down from the table. “The hem’s all done, Joel.”

“Thanks Ziggy.” He waves him off and returns to making adjustments to Andrea’s dress.

I throw my empty coffee cup in the trash and cling desperately to my coat. My stomach is churning. I can’t help but feel like there’s something off about Andrea. I don’t know if I believe she killed Lewis, but she certainly isn’t telling us the whole truth.

“Do you think Andrea’s a suspect?” Ziggy asks as soon as we’ve left the costume room.

I inhale sharply. It's not that I dislike Ziggy. He's always been very nice to me when I've come to Clay's rehearsals, and he can be very humorous. However, Ziggy can very easily get on someone's last nerves.

"Right now everyone is a suspect," Clay explains calmly. "We need more information before we can narrow the list down."

"*Oh.*" He nods. "That makes sense."

"You don't have to come with us to talk to Blake," I say. "We understand if there's something else you need to be doing right now." *Please take the hint.*

Not only is Ziggy on my nerves today, but investigating is a dangerous business. The longer he tags along with us, the more likely he is to be put into unexpected danger.

"That's okay!" Ziggy says brightly. "I'm free until seven."

I sigh, putting on a smile. "Great."

Clay masks their laugh with a fake cough.

Ziggy continues to babble on about possible suspects and rooms to investigate as we go to the theater. My stomach churns when Clay opens the door. The sight of last night is still fresh in my mind, even though the set pieces have been moved and the stage is now clean. The scent of disinfectant still hangs in the air. It's almost as if nothing has ever happened.

"Hey! Be careful with that!" Blake yells from the stage. She's directing one of the set crew carrying a large table. "*That's an antique!*"

The crew members' faces are white as they nod and carry the table out of the theater. Clay waves at Blake, and she walks down the stage steps.

I've met Blake a few times, and I've always liked her. She's very blunt and likes to get down to business. As soon as she reaches us, she puts her hands on her hips and stares us down with her bright blue eyes.

"It's the day before opening night. What are y'all doing in my theater?" She grins.

"We wanted to ask you some questions--" Clay starts.

"We're investigating Lewis's murder," Ziggy interrupts, stepping forward. "We want to know if you have any information."

Blake cocks a blonde eyebrow. "I was outside the entire rehearsal unloading props and getting everything ready for you hooligans. I didn't see anything until afterwards."

"Was Andrea helping you by any chance?" I ask.

“Indeed she was.” Blake drops her arms, looking deep in thought. “Listen, kids. Those ropes were secured by me and the senior stage manager. We check the ropes constantly and replace any troublesome ones. There’s no way this could’ve happened accidentally.”

“We know,” Clay says somberly. “The rope was cut. Someone killed Lewis and tried to make it look like an accident.”

She shakes her head. “I’ve heard of jealousy and fighting in the theater but nothing like this. It’s straight out of a movie.”

“Unfortunately murders are often completely unexpected. Finding evidence can be like looking for a needle in a haystack.” Clay adjusts their glasses. “But I intend to find the killer and get them behind bars.”

“Good.” Blake crosses her arms, frowning. “There will be no more murders in my theater.” She sighs. “Myself and several others will be backstage during the entire performance. If I catch even a whiff of something suspicious, I’ll pass it your way.”

“Thanks Blake.” Clay gestures toward the stage. “Do you mind if we take another look around? I don’t want to miss any possible pieces of evidence.”

“Sure, be my guest.” She shrugs. “I still have some work to do, but I’ll help you look. Four heads are surely better than three.”

Blake goes back to direct her stage crew, while the three of us split up around the stage. I keep by Clay’s side. I’m still shaking, and I can’t get rid of this feeling in my stomach. They hold my hand tightly in theirs and walk us both around the stage wings.

My foot catches on a chair leg, and I tumble forward. Clay grabs me by the arms and holds me upright.

They grin. “I see you haven’t gotten rid of the clumsiness.”

“Shut up.” I playfully shove them.

“Uh, Clay?” Ziggy calls from the other side of the stage. “I’ve found something weird.”

My heart flutters in my chest. Clay keeps their arm around me as we walk toward where Ziggy is standing by the ropes. He bounces nervously on his feet when we approach, his spiky blue hair falling across his forehead.

“Look there.” Ziggy points toward a corner of the wall behind the ropes. I squint and lean forward. A small piece of beige fabric is caught between a tear in the wall.

“That’s odd,” Clay muses. “This is near where the rope was cut.”

“Did y’all find something?” Blake asks, coming up from behind us.

“Yeah, there’s a piece of fabric here.” Clay plucks it carefully from the wall.

Blake's forehead crinkles as she squints at it. "That definitely wasn't here before. I would've noticed yesterday when I did my pre-rehearsal rounds."

Clay procures a small plastic bag from their suit. "My guess is that the killer tore their clothes while they were cutting the ropes. This could lead us right to them."

"We should check the rest of the stage and the dressing rooms," I suggest. "There could be other evidence. They could've even stashed their torn shirt somewhere."

"Good idea," Clay says. "It'll be easier if we all split up so that we can cover as much ground as possible."

"You got it, chief." Blake salutes him. "Or should I say Sherlock?"

"*Not Sherlock,*" Clay and I say at the same time.

Blake and Ziggy both give us confused stares. I wave them off. "It's a long story."
