



# Monsters Within

Valerine Carretta

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## Chapter One

“Lexi! Will you hurry up?! I want to get on the road before rush hour,” Cameron yelled from the back of the BMW.

“Calm down, Cam. If you were in such a hurry, you should have taken Aidan up on his offer,” Alexia called back from the door.

“Will you two keep it down? It’s six in the morning!” Lillian said helping Alexia with her luggage.

“Sorry, Mom. Let me get that,” Cameron said sheepishly. He took the bag Lillian was struggling with.

“Sorry, Mom,” Alexia said.

“Well, if you had finished packing last night, Maria and Jackson would have had everything packed before they left for their vacation,” Lillian reminded her.

“I said I was sorry.”

“Alexia, don’t pout. Try not to give your brother any trouble, and Cameron, don’t provoke your sister.”

“Mom, stop worrying. You’ve got your own trip to pack for, so get going,” Cameron said exasperatedly.

“Alright, alright. Are you sure you have everything?” Lillian conceded.

“Yes, Mother, now go!” They both said shooing their mother back into the house.

Alexia climbed into the passenger seat of the silver luxury car. She clicked her seat belt in place and began fiddling with the passenger side settings.

“Don’t touch the sound system! I finally have it the way I like it! Bye, Mom,” Cameron yelled over his shoulder and stepped into the driver’s side.

Lillian dropped down to Cameron’s window to blow kisses to her kids and wave good-bye. Cameron rolled his eyes while Alexia waved enthusiastically.

“Bye!” they both chorused as they drove down the long winding driveway out of their New England mansion.

Lillian stood waving until she was sure they were completely out of sight. She dropped her hand slowly with a heavy feeling pressing down on her chest. She rubbed at the pain distractedly worry creasing her brow. She drew a deep breath and shook her head and the worry away. She

drew another breath and turned back to the front door. She did indeed have a great deal to do before their trip.

“Gerald! Have you found your golf clubs yet?” she called as she disappeared into the house.

## Chapter Two

“Lexi, did you call to confirm our reservations?”

“Yes, Cameron, you really need to learn to calm down. You’re getting as uptight as Dad.”

“Lexi, why are you so immature?” Cameron said matter-of-factly.

“Cam, why are you such a prick?” she retorted.

“I can see this is going to be a wonderful road trip.” Cameron sighed.

“Oh, alright, truce?”

He eyed his sister’s extended hand and then her apparently innocent smile. He sighed and moved his right hand from the gearshift and extended it to Alexia’s extended hand. Her smile widened as she grabbed Cameron’s hand.

“Truce,” Cameron said.

“I brought my iPod,” she said excitedly as she reached into her designer purse and pulled out the MP3 player.

“Wait, I already have mine hooked up and cued to the playlist I made for the trip.”

“Alright, let’s compromise. You get control of the music until we reach Virginia, then I take over. Deal?”

“Deal,” Cameron said with a smile and turned on the sound system.

British Invasion pop bands played for the next several hundred miles. Alexia did not mind too terribly, although she did not really know most of the bands or songs. She preferred music she could sing or dance to. At a rest stop just over the border into Virginia, Alexia was finally able to exchange music players. The rest of the trip was filled with pop singles ranging from hip-hop, dance, and pop music.

Cameron rolled his eyes at his sister’s unrefined music taste, but he kept his opinion to himself. Lexi had at least listened to his music without complaint for the last several hours. The least he could do was return the favor. He allowed himself the rare pleasure of listening to his sister’s music without letting on how much he liked the stuff.

This trip was meant as a present from his grandparents for his college graduation. They had paid for a trip for two. He had intended on bringing his girlfriend, Amanda, but her parents had sent her off to California for two weeks with her sister to stay with some great aunt. At the last minute, his parents had pressured him into taking his younger sister. He liked her alright, she

just seemed so shallow and materialistic sometimes. Lexi's ignorant statements could so easily set his teeth on edge. He had begun to wonder lately if she said those things only to irritate him. She never said any of that crap around anyone else, except their parents. This last time at dinner Lexi spouted out some outrageous thing that just made him want to throw his plate at her. He was ready to launch into it with her when he noticed his mother quickly hide a smirk. He had been so outraged that his mother would find humor in Lexi's words that he had swallowed his speech and sat dumbfounded in his chair.

He now realized what his mother's smirk had probably meant. With a cooler head he remembered that his mother did not have an offensive bone in her body. Lexi must have been trying to provoke him. Cameron shook his head. All these years he had believed that Lexi was nothing more than an air-headed and ignorant teenager. He should have known that his parents would not have tolerated Lexi turning into such a foul-mouthed creature. She had simply been goading him all this time. He shook his head in wonderment.

He looked over at his mousy sister and realized she was smarter than he had given her credit for. She would hate to learn that he thought of her as mousy. His friends had assured him recently that his sister was indeed quite good-looking; a babe, Frank had called her. His little sister, a babe? He could not see it. After the laser eye surgery, Lexi had stopped needing glasses. She took up dancing in the last couple of years and had lost the last of the baby fat, but a babe? No, he did not think so.

"What are you thinking about over there? You haven't said two words since we left Richmond," Lexi interrupted his thoughts.

"Nothing, just paying attention to the road. Looks like we're almost there," pointing his chin to the GPS.

"You want to pull over for some dinner or plow on for the next hour to get to the resort?"

"Let's keep going. I just want to get there already."

"Fair enough," he replied.

He accelerated slightly and moved left again on the highway. Lexi watched him for a moment. She had to admit her brother was a bit on the good-looking side. She still could not understand why her friends drooled all over him every time they saw him in the halls. He had dark hair like her but a little lighter more brown than black. He had their grandfather's blue eyes, but their father's strong features, a square jaw, thin lips, and high forehead. They had both inherited their great-grandfather's Spanish olive skin tone.

She shrugged and turned back to her book. She had been looking forward to this trip to catch up on all the fun reading she could not do during the school year. The resort they were headed to sounded really boring without a boyfriend. She figured Cam would go his separate way when Aidan and Frank showed up tomorrow. They were both obnoxious, especially Frank. He spent most of the time leering at her. Frank gave her the creeps. Thankfully, the pamphlet the

grandparents had sent with Cam's itinerary showed the place had plenty of sports to keep the boys away from her. That meant that she would have to keep herself entertained somehow. Becca and Carrie would not be there until Thursday. That left her with two days to fend for herself.

"So your friends, Becky and Cammie..."

"Becca and Carrie," she corrected.

"Whatever, they're showing up before the end of the week, right?" he asked irritably.

"Yes, what do you care?" she asked a tad peevisly.

"Wow, and I almost did something nice for you," he said.

"I'm sorry, Cam. I was just thinking about that. I can't believe they would leave me alone for practically a week because Becca wanted to go the spa! Like there isn't one at Seabrook!"

Cameron could sympathize. Adrian and Frank were too busy chasing after a starlet who ignored them at every opportunity, to show up at Seabrook.

"I was just wondering if you would prefer I called the guys and tell them to show up on Thursday?"

"Really? What would you do with all the extra time?"

"Hang out with you, you dork."

"Oh. Well, ok sure, if you want," she said none too excited at the prospect.

"Did you want to see Frank that badly?" he asked in exasperation.

"No, I was hoping to avoid Frank, thank you very much," she said.

"Then its just hanging out with me that you object to," he said, a note of hurt under his voice.

"Hey, Cam, it's not that ..." she said her voice fading away.

"Hey, it's cool, you probably just want to sit by the pool without your older brother ruining your whatever," he said with a hint of anger.

"Well, something like that, but you're right. It would be our chance to bond before you go off to law school," she said carefully.

"Look, don't go doing me any favors. If you don't want to hang with me, it's fine. I will find something to do with myself tonight and go off with the guys tomorrow, ok?"

“Cam, don’t be like that. Now that I think about it, it would be kind of cool if it’s just the two of us for a couple of days.”

He seemed mollified by that, so he said, “Alright, I’ll call the guys once we get to Seabrook. They probably don’t remember they’re supposed to show up tomorrow anyway.”

Alexia noted his bitter tone. Looks like Cameron’s friends were about as reliable as hers. She decided not to give him a hard time for the rest of night.

“Shit! Missed the exit!” Cameron let out.

“Hello?” Alexia said into her cell phone and rolled her eyes at Cameron’s temper.

“Oh, hi, Mom. What’s up?”

She paused while she listened to Lillian.

“Oh crap! Well, what are they doing for us?”

Another pause and then, “So, it’s a different property? Is it crappy?”

“Yeah, alright. What’s the address?”

Alexia jotted down the address, “Thanks, Mom.”

Alexia ended the call and turned to Cameron.

“What is it?” Cameron said still upset he had missed their exit.

“Well, it looks like it doesn’t matter we missed the exit. The Seabrook Resort is closed for renovations. Grandma finally called to let us know. They’re offering an alternative resort. I have the new address here. Pull over a moment, so I can update the GPS.”

Cameron pulled over to the shoulder while Alexia entered the new address.

“So where did Mom say we were supposed to stay?”

“Um, something Plantation. Looks like we take the next exit anyway.”

Alexia secured her seatbelt back in place and sat back. Cameron pulled out into traffic and they were back on their way. The computerized voice led them out into small back roads and over narrow bridges. The small back roads turned into country lanes with willow trees lining the side of the road.



Alexia found the view was quite lovely, albeit a bit on the creepy side. The trees barely let any light through to the road, not that there was much light at the moment.

“Looks like we’ll arrive some time after sundown. I hope they have a restaurant at this place. If the place turns out to be a dump, we can head down to Florida tomorrow,” Cameron offered.

“Florida is pretty muggy in June. We could go to Myrtle Beach, find a hotel on the beach. What do you think?”

“Sure, makes no difference to me. We can talk about it in the morning,” Cameron said.

The GPS device had been silent for quite a while, so when the electronic voice chimed in to turn in a quarter mile, it startled them both. They approached the turn, but even with the soothing voice guiding them, they still nearly missed it. The small white sign was covered in Spanish moss, barely legible. Cameron backed up the BMW slowly and turned down the narrow road. They were not holding too much hope that the place would be anything more than a run down old hotel after the first few yards of pitted asphalt.

The car followed the narrow, dark road. It wound around large trees and patches of what looked like swamp land. Neither of them were expecting much of this place after that. So when they rounded the last bend, they were both surprised to see a grand plantation like they had seen in Civil War era films. The façade was white washed, reflecting what was left of the sunlight. As the BMW neared the building, Alexia could make out a gorgeous wraparound porch and what looked like several building additions behind the building. The additions were connected through open-air hallways with white thin pillars supporting a dark tiled roof.

“I don’t see a parking lot, do you?” Cameron asked Alexia.

“No ... There’s someone coming out,” Alexia pointed to the front double doors.

A uniformed man ran out through the doors towards the BMW.

“He must be the valet,” Cameron said.

A few hours later, Cameron sipped his gin and tonic at a conversation height table. He surveyed the lobby beyond the bar area. There were palm fronds and white everywhere he looked. White pillars surrounding white wicker benches, guarded by palm fronds in white vases atop pale ivory carpets. The place felt at the same time new, unused and ancient. He could still detect a slight odor from fresh paint. The ivory carpets were pristine and the table he was leaning on still had the smell of newly polished wood. The lobby was mostly empty. He suspected that there were still people confused about the new location. Lexi was blessedly out of sight, so he had a few moments just to himself.

“Hi,” a very pretty blonde said as she approached Cameron, “I’m Susannah Buchanan.”

There was a slight southern drawl in her voice which instantly grabbed Cameron’s attention.

“Hi, Susannah, I’m Cameron Ashefield. How long are you staying at the Plantation?” Cameron said.

“Oh, I’ll probably be staying through the rush. Daddy wants me to learn the business, so I’ll be hostess for the duration of your stay,” Susannah said offering her right hand.

Cameron shook the lightly tanned hand and noticed the smoothness of her palm. Miss Susannah was most definitely a genteel southern lady.

“Well, in that case maybe you can tell me more about this illustrious hotel your family has installed us in,” Cameron said trying to for teasing and coming off more like a jerk.

Susannah did not seem to mind though because she immediately said, “My family is so terribly sorry about the way things turned out this season for our guests. We had an accident with the sprinkler system at Seabrook a week ago. Every single room was flooded. Daddy was just beside himself, but he is nothing if not practical. The Plantation was going to be opened for business in another month or two, so he just moved all Seabrook’s summer reservations here. Virginia, that’s my sister, says there are still people showing up at Seabrook who have to then be routed here. It is a right nightmare!”

Her voice rose a bit on the last sentence. She lowered her head a bit in embarrassment, “But you don’t want to hear about all our troubles at Seabrook,” she said with a bright smile.

“Let me show you around the grounds,” Susannah looped her arm through Cameron’s and began pulling him away from the conversation table.

“Hey, Cam, is Amanda coming down or not?” Alexia said with an impish smile, her earlier promise to not tease her brother forgotten.

Cameron’s face tightened a bit, but said, “No, Amanda isn’t coming. It’s why I brought you, remember?”

“Amanda?” Susannah said.

“His girlfriend. She was supposed to be here instead of me, but her parents shipped her off to California. Cam got stuck with his baby sister instead,” Alexia was enjoying Cameron’s discomfiture.

“Well, that is a shame that your girlfriend couldn’t make it. Why don’t you join us ...”

“Alexia,” she answered.

“Alexia, what a pretty name. I was just about to show your brother around the place. Did you want to join us?” Susannah said with a charming smile.

Alexia was impressed. Susannah definitely had class. Her charming southern belle smile nearly disguised the irritation at Alexia's information.

"Sure, my friends won't be showing up for another few days, so I have nothing better to do," she said before Cameron could suggest it.

Cameron sighed and offered his other arm to his sister. He knew when he was defeated.

"This house has been in our family for over a hundred years. These portraits are all of the great men and women of my family. That one there is Augustus Buchanan. He was the one that founded the new family business, and he started with this very property," Susannah pointed to a portrait of a severe looking dark haired man.

"This was a pretty swinging place back in the fifties. After the resorts started opening up along the beach, the Plantation lost its appeal. After a few years, Grandfather decided to close the Plantation. After retro became a trend, Daddy thought opening up the old Plantation again would be a sure bet. It certainly helped to have the place renovated, especially after the flooding at Seabrook."

"Flooding?" Alexia broke in.

"Yeah, there was a sprinkler problem at Seabrook," Cameron explained to forestall another long winded explanation from Susannah.

"Oh, well that explains the last minute change in our reservations. I guess it is lucky this place was ready."

"So is there a pool on the property?" Cameron asked.

"Oh, Yes! There's a pool house with a large heated pool," Susannah said.

"I think I'll be taking a morning swim. Care to join me, Cam?"

"Oh no, after that long drive, I'm sleeping in," Cam said smiling.

"Alright then can we meet for breakfast after my swim?" Alexia asked.

Susannah watched this interchange for a moment with a bemused smile.

"Well, if Cameron can't meet you for breakfast, I will."

"In that case I'll be there," Cameron piped in.

They both laughed and continued on their tour.

“The hotel has been added onto over the years. These colonnades were added to connect the main house and the additions. This one leads to additional rooms. The second one leads to conference rooms and a gym. This one leads to the pool house. Beyond the pool house is another addition with games rooms and theater. Daddy was planning on adding on a spa.”

“Is there a restaurant on site?” Cameron asked.

“Not yet, I’m afraid. Room service is all we can offer until the dining room is finished. However, we can serve you two out on the veranda,” Susannah said enquiringly.

“That would be nice. We haven’t eaten anything in hours,” Alexia exclaimed.

“You read my mind,” Cameron said.

“Excellent. Why don’t you two go on ahead. I’ll call the front desk and get someone to set a table for you and bring you some menus,” Susannah said shooing them in the direction of the lobby.

“This place is huge!” Alexia said as they turned away.

“No kidding! You should be glad you’re with me, little sis. Otherwise, you would have been lost in a minute!”

Alexia punched Cameron in the arm with mock anger. She knew he was right. She would have been lost but only because she had been too busy looking at everything else around them to pay attention to where they were going. She often did that when Cameron was around. She knew she could count on his sense of direction while she enjoyed the scenery.

The hallway they walked down was dimly lit. The light emanated from wall sconces situated in the recessed portions of the wall. The designers may have been going for a romantic look, but it was more eerie than anything else. Alexia shook herself. She was always imagining things when she let her mind wander. She took a deep breath and slowed her pace to match Cameron’s. He probably thought she was actually upset with him.

They made it out to the veranda in time to see the last of what must have been a spectacular sunset. A couple of waiters were already setting up a table for the two of them a few feet from the main entrance. The view from their seats was spectacular. When they had driven earlier, neither had noticed the beautiful landscaping of willow trees and colorful flowers. A bird trilled in some far off tree. It was an idyllic scene, yet Alexia could not help but feel a shiver. They were very far from the rest of civilization here on this beautiful plantation. She shook off the feeling and sat down when Cameron pulled a chair out for her.

Cameron sat opposite her, but quickly stood up with a startled expression. Alexia turned to see what had given her brother such a start. Amanda Whitman. It figures. Alexia pasted a large grin on her face and stood to greet Amanda. As expected, she was already complaining.

“Cameron, why on Earth didn’t you just come out to California?” was the first thing Amanda said.

“Mandy! What are you doing here? I thought you were stuck watching over your little sister and elderly aunt for the summer,” Cameron said also approaching his girlfriend.

Amanda stood at the bottom of the steps to the veranda in four inch heels and waited for Cameron and Alexia to meet her there. There was no meeting in the middle with Amanda.

“Obviously I got away from the both. I have never been so bored in my entire life!” She looked around with a sneer curling her lip, “Of course, this doesn’t look like much of an improvement!”

“I love it!” Alexia piped in, “It’s so historic and charming.”

Alexia was doing her bubbly idiot impersonation. Cameron had only recently realized that it was an impersonation and not his sister’s actual personality. He tried not to laugh since he was sure she was doing it for his benefit.

“Ugh, whatever. Cameron, darling, would you be a dear and have someone take these up to my room?”

“Your room? Aren’t you staying with me?”

“Cameron, sweetheart, you must understand a girl needs her space. Besides your sister will be in the adjacent room, and frankly that gives me the creeps!” Amanda said as she swept past the siblings and climbed the steps up to the veranda and through the French double doors.

“I guess she won’t be joining us for dinner?” Alexia said hopefully.

Cameron laughed and slung an arm over his sister’s shoulders. They climbed the stairs to find Susannah waiting for them at their table. Cameron’s smile still in place, slipped a little. He had sinking suspicion that Susannah had witnessed the whole scene. He could not help but feel a bit embarrassed in front of this southern belle.

Susannah smiled and suddenly Cameron regained his good mood.

“George, please take Miss Whitman’s luggage to room 204. Thank you, George,” Susannah said in a firm but pleasant voice.

After a mumbled, “Yes, Miss,” George scampered down the steps to retrieve the luggage. Another uniformed bellhop followed George down the steps. Between the two of them, they managed to pick up all the bags. They both scurried up the stairs and quickly disappeared to what Cameron assumed was a side entrance.

“Thank you, Susannah. How about you join us for dinner?” Cameron said.

“It would be my pleasure. Raul, please have the porter bring another place setting.”

“Yes, Miss,” he inclined his head and walked inside.

He returned with a chair followed by another waiter carrying a tray with plates and cutlery. A third waiter followed with a water pitcher and menus. It looked like they were showing off for the owner’s daughter. Alexia did not hold much hope that they would continue to have this level of service once Susannah left them to tend other duties. In the meantime, she was going to revel in it.

Cameron looked at the please look on his sister’s face. He was glad Amanda’s sudden arrival had not upset their plans over much. Susannah and Alexia seemed to get along pretty well. He had secretly been relieved that Amanda would not be around this summer. Now that she was here, he felt conflicted. On the one hand, he was glad that she had come all this way just to be with him.

He decided to put Amanda out of his mind and just enjoy his dinner with his sister and Susannah.

“So why exactly did they close this place down? Even with the beach resorts, this place would still have those people who just want peace and quiet away from the teenagers,” Alexia questioned.

“There really isn’t anything else. The Plantation just had fewer and fewer until it was more expensive to keep the place open. We should have renovated earlier, our rooms were too small, our amenities couldn’t compete with the other hotels in the area.” Susannah shrugged.

“Hmm, that’s too bad. I was hoping for a more entertaining story,” Alexia said looking at Susannah through her eyelashes.

She had a feeling Susannah was hiding something. If the Plantation had a tragic past, she could understand the owner’s daughter not wanting to scare away clientele with gruesome stories. Then again, there is certain type of clientele who would pay money to stay in a haunted hotel. Still, it depends on what kind of clientele you are marketing.

The waiter came back to take their order. Just as he finished writing it all down, Alexia heard Becca’s obnoxious laughter. Alexia turned around to find Becca and Carrie approaching from the cab that had just dropped them off.

“Ah, the bimchette twins have arrived,” Cameron said snidely.

“Don’t call them that, Cam,” Alexia said standing up.

“Carrie! Becca! You made it!” Alexia yelled as she took the stairs at a fast clip.

“Hey, Lex, I hope this place looks better on the inside. That road was a nightmare!” Becca whined.

“The place is gorgeous inside. There’s even an indoor pool,” Alexia said placatingly.

“So are your brothers friends here yet?” Carrie asked in between chewing her gum.

“No, thank God! They aren’t supposed to get here until Thursday if they got Cam’s message. Otherwise, they’ll be here tomorrow,” Alexia responded in disgust.

“Bummer. So where are the bellhops, anyway? I’m not carrying all these bags up the those steps,” Carrie said.

“Yes, someone will be here to pick up your luggage. You are so lazy, Carrie. Anyway, what are you guys doing here? You said you wouldn’t be here until Thursday.”

“The spa got boring. We wanted to go to the beach. I didn’t find out we weren’t going to be any where near the beach until we got to Seabrook! What a total crock! Oh well, we’ll stay the night and then try and find a place to stay in Myrtle Beach. You game?” Becca said.

“I’m happy here for now. Maybe I’ll join you guys in a few days. Especially if Frank becomes too obnoxious.”

“Frank just has the hots for you, but suit yourself. I’m starving. Is there a restaurant here?” Carrie said.

“No, but we’re eating out here. Why don’t you join us? We just ordered.”

“Never mind, we’ll just check into our rooms and order room service. I can’t wait to take a shower!” Becca said as she and Carrie followed the bellhop inside to check in.

“Oh, then I guess I’ll catch up with you guys later,” Alexia said with slight disappointment.

She returned to the table. Cameron saw how her shoulders drooped and decided to try to cheer her up.

“Hey, how about I join you for your morning swim?”

“Yeah? That’s great!” Alexia tried to interject some enthusiasm into her voice.

“There’s a really nice boutique I was going to visit tomorrow. Do you want to go with me?” Susannah asked.

Cameron was grateful for her intervention. There was nothing worse than a mopey Alexia.

“Sure, that sounds fun,” Alexia said with a little more cheer.

They chatted for a while until dinner came. The food was so good there were several moments of silence. They finished soon thereafter and each wandered off in separate directions.

### Chapter Three

Alexia wondered the halls in a robe and bathing suit trying to remember the way to the pool house. The Plantation was very quiet at that hour. She had not been able to rouse Cameron no matter how hard she knocked on his door. So here she was lost and scaring herself silly imagining all sorts of things were hiding in the shadows of the dimly lit hallways. She finally stumbled across one of the colonnades she remembered from their brief tour last night. Alexia knew that the pool was at the end of one these, but was this the one? She decided to check. There was no use standing there dithering about it.

The glass door keeping all the lovely air conditioning inside opened smoothly and glided close behind her without a sound. The moment she stepped out onto the colonnade, Alexia felt goose bumps pop up on her legs and arms under her robe. South Carolina was not supposed to be this cold in May. She shivered and rushed across to the other side. She did not notice the mist curling around the columns and snaking down to the terracotta tiles below her sandaled feet.

Moments later Alexia was alone in the large pool house swimming lazy laps up and down the length of the pool. After a few laps, she flipped on her back to float in the water. She made circles with her arms as she gently propelled herself along surface. Alexia felt quite peaceful in that moment and was glad no one had come to join her on her swim after all.

There was a splash that brought Alexia upright suddenly.

“Who’s there?” she called angrily. She was convinced it was Cameron who had jumped in the pool to scare her.

She felt something brush against her leg. She let out an involuntary squeal. She looked down through the clear water, but there was nothing around her legs. Another splash had Alexia nearly jumping out of her skin.

Raucous laughter met her startled scream. She knew that laugh. Alexia groaned. Frank had arrived. She turned to find Frank climbing out of the deep end of the pool still laughing. She followed him with her eyes until he stopped at one of the lounge chairs to grab his towel. She eyed him sideways for a moment before trying to find the source of the second splash. Adrian, of course, he was idly swimming toward the other side of the pool. She had no problem with Adrian generally. He was just such a groupie. Alexia figured she felt sorry for him. He always did what Frank told him even if it meant pissing off a starlet’s boyfriend or bodyguard by stalking the poor woman all over New York. She spotted Cameron coming in at that moment. He had a towel slung over his shoulders. He started taking off his white t-shirt and kicking off his sandals before the door fully closed.

The boy had no sense of cold sometimes. It had taken Alexia fifteen minutes to feel warm enough in the humid heat of the pool house to take off her robe, let alone climb into the pool. Cameron was in the pool and halfway to the other side before Alexia realized it. She was nearly



to the closest ladder when the door opened again to allow two shivering teenagers to stop through.

“Why is it so cold?!”Becca whined.

“Don’t worry, Becky dear,” Frank said with a leer.”I’ll keep you warm.”

“You’re so disgusting, Frank,” Carrie said.

“It’ll warm up soon enough. It’s just a little morning chill. That’s why there’s mist out there,” Cameron said pointing his chin toward the floor to ceiling windows. They all turned to look out the windows to find a roiling wall of white and gray wisps.

“You call that a mist? The fog doesn’t get that thick at home!” Alexia said as she continued her swim.

The relaxed and peaceful moment was over, but at least she could enjoy the warmth of the water while her friends entertained Frank. The fog had made her feel cold all over again. She increased her speed to warm up again.

Cameron shrugged and dove back under to continue his swim. Soon everyone was back in the pool. There was no room to swim laps, so Adrian, Cameron, and Alexia broke off to join their friends. They were horsing around and goofing off. Alexia soon lost the cold feeling that had overtaken her earlier and joined in on the fun.

They found dressing rooms at the far end of the pool house. They took turns changing out of their wet swimsuits and into shorts and t-shirts. The fog had burned away some by the time they were done. When Cameron opened the door leading back to the colonnade, they found that temperature had risen several degrees. The humid air felt fine after their swim. They were all in a good mood as they filed down the colonnade and into the main building.

Cameron led the way to where an impromptu dining room had been set up in a meeting hall off the lobby. A breakfast buffet was set up along one wall covered with sweet breads, fruits, jams, cereals, warming plates with sausage and bacon. A chef station was set up at the end of the banquet table making eggs to order. An espresso machine sat at a table next to the bar tender Cameron saw last night.

“Wow,” Alexia said excitedly as she ran to be first in line.

There were other guests already eating at the tables set out in the room. Cameron spotted Susannah talking with some of the wait staff. She looked up at that moment and waved to him with a smile. She turned back to her staff once Cameron waved back. He was not sure why he felt snubbed. It had been a perfectly polite exchange. He shrugged and turned back to the buffet table. He could not count that Adrian and Frank would not eat all the bacon and sausage they could fit on their plates.

“So where’s Amanda, Cam? Didn’t you say she showed up last night?” Frank said with all the tact he could muster.

“She’s sleeping in, I guess,” Cameron said.

Frank shrugged and went back to devouring his breakfast. Alexia caught Adrian looking at Cameron with a strange expression. He had heard the same undertone Alexia had caught in Cameron’s voice. Something was definitely up in Amanda land. Her respect for Adrian rose a notch. Maybe Adrian has a semblance of independent thought after all. He caught her looking at him and quickly lowered his head to his food. She filed the exchange away to think over later.

Susannah came over soon after to enquire over their meal.

“Oh, the food’s the delicious,” Frank said around a mouthful of sausage.

“Thank you,” just barely disguising her look of disgust. Alexia was really starting to like Susannah.

“How did you find your rooms? Is there anything we could do to make your stay more comfortable?” Susannah asked.

“Our room is huge! I wasn’t expecting a full living room between Cam’s and my rooms!” Alexia said excitedly.

Cameron was really starting to appreciate what he had missed seeing his little sister only briefly during his infrequent visits home. She was bubbly, but intelligent. Their family had stayed in suites twice the size of their current room, but she still makes it sound like their room was the biggest she had ever stayed in.

“You guys have been silent,” Susannah nodded her head to Becca and Carrie, “Were your rooms not up to your expectations?”

“My room was fine. Plenty of privacy and a great view,” Carrie said politely. She was hoping Becca would catch on to her cue. She hated it when Becca went on one of her tirades.

“Yeah, it’s fine. I decided to stay here the rest of the week,” Becca said without looking up from her plate.

However rude that may seem, both Alexia and Carrie were surprised at how polite Becca had just been. They exchanged small grins before turning their attention back to their food.

Alexia said, “I’m glad you decided not to leave early, after all. This place is so nice, especially the pool house!”

“Yeah, the pool house is great. Hey, didn’t you say you would join us for breakfast today?” Cameron said.

“I can’t,” she said with true regret, “I am sorry, but we have a huge influx of guests arriving today. As you can see,” she waved her arm to indicate the nearly full breakfast room, “there were a great deal more guests that checked in after you two went to bed.”

Now that she mentioned going to bed, it did not appear that Susannah had gotten much sleep herself. She must have stayed up with the rest of the staff to get everyone checked in and situated.

“Does that mean we won’t be going shopping?” Alexia asked.

“I’m sorry, Alexia!” Susannah said genuinely distressed.

“Don’t worry about it and call me Lexi. Alexia is way too formal. Besides, I’ve got my buds here to keep me entertained. If you need to take a break, though, come track me down.”

Susannah gave her a grateful smile.

“Sure thing, if I have two minutes to rub together, I will definitely try to spend them with you,” she teased.

“Hey, I was just saying!”

“No, I would love to. I just don’t anticipate my having a spare moment today. How about tomorrow? There’s usually a lull on Tuesdays,” Susannah offered.

“It’s deal! But I understand if you have to cancel. You’ve got a business to run after all.”

Becca and Carrie exchanged mocking glances at Alexia’s attempt at grown up conversation. Susannah was obviously humoring her. The two decided then that they would keep Lex away from the poor woman.

“We wouldn’t want to keep you from your other guests,” Becca piped in.

Susannah’s mouth turned slightly down before she recovered her composure. She smiled broadly and said, “Of course! I won’t keep you from your meal. There’s an indoor gymnasium around back of the pool house and a games room off the south wing to keep you entertained. Bye now.”

Cameron gave Becca an incredulous look. He could not stand how rude Becca could be sometimes. Frank was as usual oblivious to the whole thing and Adrian always followed Frank’s lead. Lexi was glaring at her friend who had turned back to Carrie to plan out their day. He was glad his sister was in his camp where Susannah was concerned. He genuinely liked her and so did his sister, apparently. He stared down at his half eaten breakfast and contemplated why that was so important to him now when it had never mattered before.

Amanda chose that moment to breeze in through the open double doors to demand her breakfast.

“A buffet? How quaint. Cameron, be a dear and get me a plate. You know what I like,” she said as she sat at the next empty table.

He turned quickly to see the reaction of those at the table. Lexi was just turning from giving Mandy a dirty look. The idiot twins were pretending to hide their giggles behind their hands. His friends had not seemed to notice, although, Adrian did appear a little stiff. He could not discern whether Adrian was trying not to laugh or was trying not to say something equally rude. Cameron sighed. He either stood up for himself and cause a scene or just get the harpy her breakfast. He was seriously rethinking their relationship. Mandy was getting more and more domineering lately. He was not sure as to the cause, but he was sure he did not like it.

He stood up and got Mandy her damn breakfast. Cameron barely stopped himself from slamming the plate down on in front of her.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” she was saying but Cameron had already turned away and was on his way out the door.

“Well! The rudeness of the man,” Amanda said incredulously.

At this Alexia and Adrian burst out laughing. They both beat a hasty retreat under Amanda’s glare. Becca and Carrie sat in shocked silence. Frank had not even lifted his head from his plate. Amanda wondered if he was simple or just hard of hearing. She decided she would deal with Cameron later. It was time to turn on the charm again. It would not do to spoil her plans now. She had become too comfortable with Cameron’s eager to please attitude. She had most definitely miscalculated this morning. Perhaps she should have invited him to her room last night. She sighed. Cameron was starting to become more work than it was almost worth.

“That was incredibly rude of him,” Becca said as she sat down across from Amanda, Carrie right behind her.

“No, I was the one being rude. I do not sleep well away from my own bed. I’m afraid I am a bit tired this morning. I’ll make it up to him later,” Amanda said already setting down her story.

“Of course, but he should have realized that. Some guys just don’t understand how difficult a cheap place like this can be on a woman,” Becca said.

Amanda eyed her speculatively. She had known for some time that Becca had a crush on Cameron, but she had never considered her much of a threat. It was true that she was younger, but the little gold digger was still just fresh out of high school. Still, it never hurt to be cautious.

“Now, Becca, is it? This is a perfectly nice place. Cameron seems to have warmed up to it,” she said.

“The place or the staff?” Becca said shrewdly.

“The staff?” Amanda said with a raised brow.

Becca and Carrie exchanged a conspiratorial smile.

“We couldn’t help but notice how chummy he is with the owner’s daughter,” Becca nodded her head over to Susannah.

“She seems to be working on him pretty hard, even pretending to like Lexi. Nothing against, Lex, but she’s not the type to attract intelligent business women,” Becca said maliciously.

“Alexia is a wonderful young lady, so full of life. You know that Becca. I doubt I have to worry about the hostess. Cameron is a darling and very loyal. If she is interested in Alexia, it’s probably because she can be such a distraction when one is so stressed as she appears to be,” Amanda said.

“Of course, Lexi is always fun,” Becca said conceding this battle.

The left Amanda to her breakfast and followed Frank who had finally finished stuffing his face out through the double doors. Becca would have to think of some other way to get Cameron away from that harpy. Everyone could see she was no good for him, especially after she humiliated him in front of everyone.

Alexia found herself alone with Adrian and for once she did not mind. Adrian was proving to be a much better human being than she had given him credit for. He was quiet, but then he was usually quiet. She did not mind that either. She wanted time to think. She had never really liked Amanda but neither did she dislike her. Amanda had always just been there every time Cameron came home for Christmas or Thanksgiving. Amanda just never made much of an impression before now. From the moment she arrived last night, though, she has been a royal bitch. Alexia wondered where this new attitude had come from or had she always been this way. She could not imagine Cameron would have stayed with her long if she had behaved like that from the beginning.

“Amanda must be very sure of Cameron to let herself behave like a spoiled brat,” Adrian said quietly.

His voice startled her for a moment. She had gotten so absorbed in her own thoughts that she had forgotten he was still walking beside her. There was no one around this part of the hotel, which was strange, considering how crowded the lobby and the breakfast room had been.

“What do you mean, sure of Cameron?”

“Nothing, just an observation,” he said.

“Oh no you don’t. Tell me what you meant,” Alexia said stopping in front of him.

Adrian sighed. He knew he should have kept his opinion quiet. No one was ever happy when he expressed it.

“I just meant that, Amanda has been hoping Cameron would propose. If she’s allowing herself to behave like this, it must be because she thinks he’s going to propose soon. That’s just my opinion, I don’t know anything for sure.”

“Cameron hasn’t mentioned anything about a proposal. I would think if that was where his mind was going, he would have had a talk with the parents first. I doubt he’s about to propose, but what makes you think that’s what Amanda is after?”

He shrugged and would not say another word. He knew better than to have opened this particular can of worms with Cameron’s sister, but it was too late. She might let it drop now, but she will start asking. Cameron was a fool. He has no idea how much his family looked out for him, and he especially had no clue how fiercely protective Lexi could be. He thought of her as a bubbly airhead. He could not be more wrong. Lexi was as intelligent as they come. She had brains, good looks and common sense. She was also decent. A boring description, but so refreshing after the girls he had grown up with. Most were conceited Daddy’s girls or just plain mean. It was difficult to find someone who was just plain nice, not for gain but because she was a good person.

Adrian knew he would never have a chance with Lexi. He could see how she looked at him with pity. He could admit he was weak, but it was more laziness than weakness. It was easier to follow Frank and Cameron than it was to make up his own mind about anything. Chasing super models and starlets for kicks? Not his idea of a good time, but Frankie liked it. Frankie just did not have the charm to get away with it, so he needed Adrian. That was the bulk of Adrian’s friendships. Guys who needed him for something they themselves lacked, money, good looks, charm, intelligence. He had it all except the ambition or the imagination to do anything with it. Cameron was the first friend he had ever had who did not want anything from him.

“Alright, if we can’t talk about Amanda and Cameron, why don’t you tell me why you guys showed up early?” Alexia said to break the now uncomfortable silence.

“Frank got bored with the girl we were chasing. Frankly, I was bored before we set out to New York, but Frank’s not an easy guy to turn down,” he shrugged.

“Sure he is, I do it all the time,” Alexia countered.

Adrian smiled, “True, but that’s only because he knows Cameron would bash his face in if he crossed the line with his little sister.”

“Are you saying I couldn’t look after myself?” Alexia said angrily.

“Not at all. Just that Frank doesn’t no for an answer, which I’m sure you’ve noticed. The only time he does, it’s only ‘cause he’s biding his time. He knows Cameron would never let anything happen to you, but once he’s in law school, he won’t be around to stop him.”

“Are you warning me or trying to scare me?”

“I think maybe what I’m saying is that I should let Frankie know Cameron isn’t the only one who would bash his face in if he crosses that line with you,” Adrian said quite seriously.

“Now don’t go getting all Neanderthal with me, Adrian. I can handle Frank. If he lays even one finger on me in a way I don’t like, he’ll know about it,” she said grimly.

Adrian did not doubt it. She almost scared him; she looked so fierce. Alexia brightened quickly, though.

“Hey, I think this is the way to the games room! I wonder if they have a pool table. Do you play pool, Adrian?” she had rushed on ahead and now turned back to him with a grin.

That smile packs quite a punch, so it took him a moment to respond.

“Yeah, I shoot some pool every once in a while. I’m okay at it. If there’s a table, do you want to play?”

“Yes, of course, dummy. It’s why I asked if you played,” she rolled her eyes and continued ahead.

Adrian quickened his step to catch up with her.

Frank stepped from around the corner behind them and stood watching as Adrian and Alexia rushed towards the billiards room. He had already explored the place fairly thoroughly before crashing last night. He knew a few places where he could quickly step out of sight. They had not seen him when he followed them out of the dining room. Getting rid of the idiot sticks had been a delay, but nothing he could not handle. All he had to do was remind them how much Cameron like tennis and off they went like a couple of dodo birds. He could not stand those two, but he tolerated them. They were part of the package that was Alexia (LastNameHere).

He had been wondering when Adrian would develop a backbone. He had not expected it to be on this trip. Damn that Amanda and her tantrum at breakfast. She was supposed to keep Cameron and Adrian occupied. Frank knew that if Amanda could not land Cameron, she would soon turn her sights on Adrian. It was in her best interest to keep both men happy. Instead she had to go show her true colors on her first day! He slammed his fist into the marble column he had been leaning against. Frank was too angry to feel the pain.

He was going to have to alter his plans slightly. There were innumerable places he could be alone with Alexia to show her what a real man was like. He was about to turn away when he decided it was best to put Adrian back in his place in Alexia’s eyes.

He followed after the laughing couple, donning his jovial idiot guise. He stepped through the doors at the far end of the hall and stepped out into a hot South Carolina summer day. He caught sight of Alexia and Adrian as they entered the building on the far end of the colonnaded walkway.

He tried to maintain his pace although he was eager to storm in there and punch that rich boy right in the face. A small mean smile materialized on Frank's face. The little rich boy thinks he could take him. It was laughable and a little pathetic. Adrian was a weakling. The only one he had to worry about was the brother. Cameron could put up a fight, but that's not what worried Frank. He could beat Cameron in a fight; had in fact done so. No he was worried about Cameron's connections. A rich man like Cameron and Cameron's family would spend a great deal of money to take care of just about anything.

That was the only reason he had waited this long. The opportunity had appeared as if a gift or a sign. First Amanda taking off to California, then Cameron's parents announced their trip to Australia. Then he learned Alexia would be there with Cameron. Alexia would finally be far enough from Mommy and Daddy. In a resort town anything could happen to an unwary freshman on summer vacation. The moment he had arrived in this shithole everything started falling apart. Their reservations were moved to this secluded, ancient hotel. Then Amanda shows up acting like the rich bitch she is, and now little Alexia was being warned by none other than the dickless Adrian.

He needed Amanda or Susannah or hell even the bimbo twins to keep Cameron busy long enough that he could get Alexia right where he wanted.

Frank stepped through the doors Alexia and Adrian had disappeared through moments earlier. The place was a maze. He heard Alexia's laugh off to his left, so he followed the sound. Frank turned the corner and was confronted with more doors and halls to choose from. He stopped and waited. Adrian's quiet voice led Frank down the third hall entrance. He almost missed the room. The entrance was partially recessed, the lighting feeble in this corridor.

Alexia stopped laughing the moment she saw Frank's dark blonde head appear atop his six foot three body builder frame pop in through the door. His features were twisted in his signature sneer. He was looking for trouble. She glanced over to Adrian who had fallen silent. He looked grim. There was no help coming from that quarter. She gripped the pool cue she carried in her left hand. Sometimes she wished could just act out what she saw in her imagination. In her mind she performed a flying kick over the pool table and into Frank's solar plexus. Just as he bent down to clutch his abdomen, she would strike him across the head with the pool cue.

Frank watched Alexia as her face went from mutinous anger to wicked grin. He knew he was the cause for the first. He wondered if perhaps he was the cause for the second reaction and just what she had in mind.

"Frank, you looking to play a game?" Adrian said into the thick silence and flicked his head in the direction of the pool table.

"Sure, why not? Who's the first victim?" he said as he picked out his cue and turned back to his audience.

"I don't feel much like playing anymore," Alexia said and put down the pool cue.



“Why not, baby sis, you afraid I’ll win?”

“I’m not your ‘baby sis’, Frank, nor am I afraid of you. I simply do not wish to play,” Alexia said deliberately drawing a line in the sand. She refused to rise to the bait.

Maybe what Adrian had said had finally penetrated or maybe something about Frank was different. She did not feel safe in that room so far away from everyone in the main building with only Adrian between her and this meaner version of Frank. All she knew was that she needed to get out of that room and back with everyone else.

Tamping down the menace, Frank let out one of his obnoxious laughs. He had succeeded in unnerving Alexia and showed her what a coward Adrian was. Then, Adrian did something unexpected.

“Leave her alone, Frank,” Adrian said stepping between Frank and Alexia.

Frank’s expression darkened before he was able to control himself. He put on his biggest fake smile.

“Oh, come on, Adrian. You know I’m just playing around. Alexia, you know that, right? You’re the little sister I never had,” He was afraid he had laid it on a little thick with that last bit, but she seemed to ignore it.

“Boys, I’m not interested in whatever pissing contest you’re about to enter. I’m heading back to the house,” she turned waving behind her.

Alexia was grateful for Adrian’s intervention. It had given the exact thing she needed to get away without looking like a scared rabbit. Perhaps Adrian could back up his brave words from earlier. She shrugged. She did not feel like dwelling on the negative feelings pressing in on her chest. She expelled a breath and shook the encounter right off her back and mind.

As she ran back down the hall toward the lobby, she nearly ran into one of the hotel staff.

“Raul! I am so sorry. Can I help you with that?” Alexia said.

“Oh, no, miss. I can take this,” he responded.

“Well, if you’re sure...” she finished uncertainly.

“Oh yes, miss, I sure,” Raul said.

“Where is everyone? The place was packed at breakfast,” Alexia asked.

“Miss Susannah take everyone to beech,” he said at Alexia’s puzzled look he added, “to swim.”

“Beech, oh the beach! I didn’t hear about that excursion. It’s a good idea, though,” she shrugged, “Thanks, Raul. Later!”

Raul adjusted his burden and continued on his way. Alexia found her way back to the now deserted lobby. She was starting to get a sense of the place. The lobby felt cold, eerie without all the people.

## Chapter Four

That night in their suite, Alexia and Cameron sat in front of the television. Alexia was trying to read while Cameron flipped through channels. He finally settled on the national news. He sat back on the couch, placing his head on his hand, his elbow on the arm of the sofa.

The wind had picked up outside. The rain and thunder had started hours earlier, so there was not much they could do. It was not wise to go outside even if the colonnades connecting the additions were covered. Most of the guests who had gone to the beach with the tour bus had not come back and were probably not going to venture out in this storm to return. Susannah was too busy trying to find all the guests on the excursion some place to stay for the night to hang out with them.

“Where are your idiot friends?” Cameron said.

“What?” Alexia roused from her book.

“Your friends, where are they?” Cameron repeated.

“Becca and Carrie disappeared after breakfast. They never told me what room they were in, and don’t call them that,” she said without much heat.

“Sorry,” Cameron said without much sincerity.

“Where are your idiot friends?” Alexia said sarcastically.

Cameron gave her a wry look before replying with, “Adrian and Frank aren’t speaking to each other. I don’t know where the hell they are frankly.”

“And to think we were looking forward to their being here,” Alexia said.

“Tell me about it. I don’t even know where Mandy disappeared to. I know the place is big, but I can’t imagine any of them leaving the main building in the middle of this storm.”

“What is it with her, anyway?”

“What do you mean?” Cameron said uncomfortably.

“You know what I mean. Please tell me she doesn’t behave like this all the time,” Alexia said disbelievingly.

Cameron sighed, “I don’t know. She’s never behaved like this before. I mean sure, she’s had her moments, but nothing like this.”

“Huh,” Alexia said falling silent.

“What?” Cameron said defensively.

“Just that Adrian said something earlier that had me thinking,” she said.

“Well, are you going to tell me what he said?”

“I’m sorry, I just don’t know how to say this without sounding like I’m sticking my nose in where it’s not wanted,” she said.

“Speak, woman!”

“Alright! Were you thinking of proposing to Amanda?”

“What? Where did you get that idea?”

“From Adrian, I said,” she said indignantly.

“Where did Adrian get that idea from, then?”

“I don’t know. Is it true?”

Cameron sighed, “I – I don’t know. I’ve been thinking it was time to maybe start looking to my future. I wasn’t thinking of getting married exactly just, you know set things in motion. So when I graduate from law school in a few years, everything would be all set up.”

“Wow how romantic,” Alexia said in semi-disgust.

“Oh shut up. I don’t even know why I’m telling you this anyway.”

“No, you’re right. I’m sorry. You want what Mom and Dad have, but are you sure Amanda can give you that? Are you sure she wants that?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe she could be, once. Now? I’m not so sure,” he said.

“Have you talked about any of this with her?”

“No, not exactly.”

“Has there been any talk about your future together, anything?”

“Well, yeah, we’ve joked about what kind of kids we’d have, where’d we go on vacation. Stuff like that, but nothing concrete.”

“Wow, and you were already making wedding plans?”

“I told you they weren’t wedding plans exactly. Just plans, is all.”

Alexia shook her head disbelievingly.

“You’re incredible!” Alexia said, “I love you big brother, but you have some evaluating to do.”

“Thanks a lot, little sis,” Cameron said and went back to the news.

The national news was interrupted by the local newscast.

“We break now to tell you of Tropical Storm Irene has now escalated to a category 1 hurricane. Authorities are urging caution. Hurricane Irene is expected to make landfall some time tonight around midnight. Strong winds from the first bands of Hurricane Irene have already started to affect many people along the coast. Folks are encouraged to minimize non-essential travel at this time.”

The television cut off suddenly. The lights flickered and then went out.

“Great,” Alexia said, “it was just getting good.”

The lights came back up just quickly as they had gone.

“Looks like we have a generator here at the grand old plantation. I’m going down to the lobby to see what is going on,” Cameron said.

Their phone rang just as Cameron was getting standing up.

“I’ll get it,” Cameron said.

He walked around behind the sofa to the sofa table where the hotel phone continued to ring.

“Hello.”

Cameron fell silent as he waited for the person on the other line to speak.

“Uh-huh, yeah, ok.”

Cameron hung up, then turned to Alexia, “Looks like someone has resurrected. That was Amanda. She’s freaking out. I’m gonna go over to her room and keep her company. You gonna be okay here by yourself?”

“I’ll be fine, but I might go ahead and go downstairs to the lobby. I want to what’s happening.”

“Yeah, ok just be careful,” Cameron said.

“Be careful? What are you worried about? We’re practically the only guests in this hotel,” Alexia said scoffing at his concern.

“Don’t make fun of me, just do me a favor and be here when I get back?”

“You’re being really weird, but okay I’ll be back safe and sound ensconced on the couch with my book before you get back, if you get back,” she said under her breath.

“What was that?” Cameron asked.

“Nothing, go keep Precious from her nervous breakdown. I’ll see you later.”

She shooed him out of the room, turned off the lights and television, then closed the door behind them both. Cameron turned left to go up the stairs to the next floor. Alexia turned to the large staircase to the right of their room. She loved the grand staircase. It made her feel like a southern lady in an old movie.

She spotted Susannah scurrying over to the front desk as the phones were ringing like crazy. She decided not to bother Susannah just then. She saw several people coming down from the elevators. It was foolish of them to get into an elevator when they were operating on generator power only.

“What is going on here?” a belligerent sounding red-faced man bellowed.

“Yeah, what’s going on? The power went out right in the middle of my favorite show!” a short She could only assume it was the belligerent man’s wife.

Other people began yelling and demanding answers.

“Now everyone please calm down. We have enough generator power to last us through the storm if we all try to conserve. The elevators will become inoperable shortly to preserve power. The power has been cut to the other wings of the property. We will move anyone who has a room out there to an available suite here in the main building. Now, I urge you to return to your rooms and turn off any non-essential appliances, televisions, and lamps.

Once you’re done, you can come back down. We’ll have coffee and films screening. The staff is at this moment installing shutters. There is nothing to be concerned over, so please return to your rooms. Thank you,” Susannah finished her speech.

The small crowd grumbled about the elevator and the idea that they would not be able to watch television.

The belligerent man started bellowing again, “Now listen here, missy. I didn’t spend my hard earned money to have my vacation turned upside down at every turn. Now I’m not about to go sit in my room in the dark nor am I gonna spend the night with a bunch of strangers. Now what are you going to do about this, missy?”

“Sir, I understand your frustration. We will be accommodating everyone the best we can. We should have power again sometime tomorrow. I’ve been on the phone all day with city officials

about the upcoming storm. They have reassured me that they have crews ready as soon as conditions allow to restore the power. Now I apologize for the inconvenience, but if could cooperate and return to your rooms. I do not ask that you sit in the dark, only that you try to use a minimum of power.”

Alexia felt Susannah handled that pretty well. She had managed to remind the man that he was being a jerk without outright saying so. The girl had class. Alexia waited until the crowd had dissipated before approaching Susannah.

“Hey,” Alexia started.

“Oh, hi, Lexi. I don’t have time to hang out right now-“

“Don’t worry, I just came down to find out what was going on. I won’t be a bother. You need any help?”

“No, Lexi, but thanks. I think we’ve got everything covered. Why don’t you try and keep yourself and your friends occupied. That would actually be a great help.”

Alexia tried not to take Susannah’s condescension too personally. She was frazzled and just wanted Alexia out of her hair.

“Yeah, sure, Suse, I’ll get right on that,” she could not help the snide tone that had crept into her words.

“I’m being a bitch, aren’t I? I’m sorry. I-“

Alexia cut her off, “No, don’t apologize. I know what you’re dealing is super stressful. I just want to help. I can handle telephone calls or helping people down here in the lobby. You know I’ve worked as a hostess at a restaurant last summer. Dad insisted I had to before he would buy me my first car,” Alexia admitted.

“Ok, but there’s not much that needs doing right now. There are only the four phones here, and someone assigned to each one. I have the entire wait staff here handing out food and drinks. I know! Come with me,” Susannah said suddenly going around the front desk to the rear office.

She opened the hidden door and stepped aside to allow Alexia through. Susannah closed the door once she stepped into the room. She led Alexia to a stack of magazines and newspapers.

“Here, take these out to the lobby and put one or two at each side table. Stuff like this is still arriving and we haven’t had a chance to put any of it out.”

“I can handle that,” Alexia said as she picked up an armful of periodicals.

Susannah picked up another armful and juggling with the magazines managed to open the door. She held it open for Alexia, hooking a foot around the door to close it.

Someone had brought over a serving trolley probably for the coffee they planned to distribute later, but Susannah conscripted it for their purposes. She placed the pile of magazines she held in her arms onto the trolley. She took Alexia's armful and stacked that on top.

"Here you go, use this and then bring it back here. We have plenty of carts, so don't worry how long it takes. Thank you, Lexi. It's one less thing on my check list," Susannah said with genuine relief tingeing her voice.

"I'm glad I could help, Susannah. This won't take me too long," Alexia said with pleasure.

"Okay, I've got a million things to do. If you don't feel like you can finish, just bring the cart back here. Someone else will take care of the rest," Susannah said as she walked around the front desk.

The night went fairly fast for everyone. Alexia eventually saw all of her friends at one point or another in that hectic night. She had finished distributing the magazines and newspapers after a few short hours and found herself helping out wherever she could. Becca appeared first then Carrie appeared shortly thereafter.

They did not stay long. After a few exchanged insults, they were bored and wandered off. Adrian appeared at her side and helped for a while. She was grateful he was there when Frank showed up. He was back to his usual, which was less than crazy but still obnoxious. He left them alone after a while, since neither was rising to the bait.

The only people she did not see were Amanda and Cameron. The two must have made up because by the time Alexia made it back up to her room, sore and exhausted, Cameron had not come back. She did not bother turning on any lights as she made her way to her room. She took off her tank and shorts and crawled into bed.



## Chapter Five

Cameron arrived a few hours later. He felt like he should be smiling. Amanda had explained everything. They had made up. He should be feeling great, but all he felt was confusion. He had never felt this conflicted about anything. He decided to let things drop for now, and just go to sleep. He stopped at his sister's door. He was about to knock, but he decided against it. He did not want to wake her. He turned back to his room and slipped between the sheets. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Alexia woke to darkness. She was disoriented and sore. She felt like the day after first and last time she drank too much. Her head was pounding. Alexia pulled on a robe and grabbed a change of clothes from the suitcase she had not bothered to unpack and stumbled into her en suite bathroom. She caught a glimpse of the clock on the wall and groaned. She had overslept by several hours. Alexia hated oversleeping like that. She always felt terrible when she woke up like she a mouthful of cotton.

The hot spray of the shower felt good on her pounding head. Alexia stood there for several minutes just letting the water soothe her sore limbs.

Cameron came awake at the sound of the shower running in his sister's room. He felt better if only for the few hours sleep he had gotten. He looked at his watch on the nightstand and was shocked out how late it was. There was no light coming from outside at all. He climbed out of bed to look out of the window. He was confused for a moment wondering if he had forgotten to draw the curtain aside, but there it was in his hand. All he could see out of his window was a white and gray wall. There were shadows moving out there, but he could not make them out before they disappeared into the haze.

Cameron let the curtain fall back in place and turned to get dressed. He had promised Mandy another chance at breakfast. Considering he had not heard anyone at the door or the phone ring, he figured Amanda was probably not awake yet. He waited until he heard Alexia turn off the water in her room. There was no guarantee that the plumbing in this old place allowed for more than one shower to run at the same time when they were so close. He would rather avoid dumping cold water on his sister first thing in the morning or rather afternoon. He felt like an idiot when he noticed the on demand water heater device just above the showerhead.

Alexia toweled off in a daze still not quite recovered from her over long sleep. She dressed slowly emerging from her room to realize that Cameron's shower was now running. She wondered for a second how late he had come in, then decided she did not care that much. She got the electric kettle going for a morning cup of black tea. She could not take the bitter taste of coffee, but still needed a shot of caffeine to come fully awake in the morning. She felt cold in her shorts and tank. She had not brought much else expecting to be sitting by the beach for the most part of her two weeks in South Carolina.

She gripped the mug of tea with glee as the heated ceramic cup warmed her cold hands. The first few sips were heavenly as she felt the cold begin to dissipate. Cameron emerged from his shower looking completely refreshed. She hated him a little in that moment. No one should look that chipper after the kind of night she had had.

“Hey, Lexi. Sleep ok?” Cameron said as he prepared himself coffee.

“I slept like the dead. As a matter of fact, I feel like one now,” she responded sourly.

“That sucks. Did you find out what all the hullabaloo was about last night?”

“Yeah, the storm knocked out the power. The back up generators kicked in right away. We should have power as soon as the storm passes, which by the look of things doesn’t appear to be the case,” she nodded toward the darkened windows.

“No, I think the storm is well on its way. That outside is fog, thick and with little to no visibility.”

“You’re kidding me? I’ve never seen fog block out sunlight completely!” she walked over to the window.

She turned around and looked back at Cameron when he said, “I think the fog has some help from the storm clouds still hovering above us. I’m sure it will clear out soon enough. Come on, let’s get some breakfast.”

“Yeah, ok,” Lexi said as she placed her nearly finished cup of tea on the counter behind them.

Cameron did not bother starting the coffee maker. There would be fresh coffee down in the breakfast room downstairs.

“I’ll meet you down there. I’m going to grab my cardigan,” Lexi said as Cameron made for the door.

“I’ll wait. The coffee isn’t going anywhere.”

Alexia rolled her eyes and grabbed the cardigan she had thrown over the chair when they arrived the first night. She slipped the Kelly green sweater over her gray tank and tan shorts. After a moment she kicked off her flip-flops and slipped into her favorite ballet-like shoes.

“I’m ready, let’s go. I’m starving!”

“After you,” Cameron said in his worst French waiter accent.

Alexia laughed as she passed him and walked right into Frank. Her good mood, which had begun to flourish, died instantly upon the realization of whom exactly she had bumped into.

“Frank! What a pleasure,” by which she meant it was not.

“Frank, what brings you to this floor? I thought you had a room out in the addition.”

“The hotel moved me to a room in the main building because of the storm. I figure I’ll have to move back to my room once the other guests start coming back. In the meantime I’m gonna enjoy every minute of the big suite I’ve got. You guys going down for breakfast?”

“Yeah, we’re on our way now. You joining us?” Cameron asked.

“Nah, I already ate. What about you, sweet cheeks, you get scared with the big bad storm out there?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I slept right through it,” Alexia said as she stormed past.

“Why are you always goading her?” Cameron asked.

“Oh come on, Cam, you know I’m only teasing her. It’s like having a little sister,” he said.

“You don’t at her like a little sister. As a matter of fact there’s nothing familial about the way you look at my sister,” Cameron said somewhat seriously.

“Well I can’t help it if I notice her finer qualities,” Frank wagged his eyebrows.

“Her finer qualities, huh?” Cameron just shook his head. He never knew when he could take Frank seriously.

“Come on and sit with us,” Cameron said.

“No, man, I want to roam around the place. I feel all cooped up being stuck inside,” he said.

“Alright, what room do they have you in right now?” Cameron asked.

“In 304, see you around,” Frank said and walked away.

“Later!”

“Why did you insist in having him join us? You know I can’t stand him!” Alexia said once Cameron caught up with her.

“Oh come on Lexi! He’s my friend. I haven’t had a chance to really hang out with him on this trip.”

“Well, why don’t you invite him to play pool with you later. There’s a pool table and a darts board and stuff. Adrian and I found it yesterday. Frank found it, too. He’ll know where it is and that way I’ll know to stay away from the area.”

“Lexi, you’re all heart, come on,” Cameron said as Alexia laughed.

They found Amanda sitting with Susannah in the breakfast room. They seemed to be immersed in a pleasant conversation, but Cameron still felt uneasy at the sight.

The siblings filled their plates at the buffet table before joining the two women at their table.

“Hello, darling!” Amanda said.

“Hi, Mandy, Susannah,” Cameron said nodding to each in turn.

“Hey ‘Manda, Hi Susannah,” Alexia said.

“Hello, Lexi,” Susannah responded.

“Oh, hi,” Amanda said without taking her eyes off Cameron.

She realized her mistake when she noticed Cameron’s expression tighten. How to recover?

“Susannah and I were just talking about that fearsome storm. Do you know that the road into the property is completely blocked by fallen trees?” Amanda said to them both.

“No, we both just woke up, actually. Is that going to be a problem for deliveries and supplies?” Cameron asked with mild concern.

“Oh, no. It won’t be a problem. We received a week’s worth of supplies just before your arrival, and that was a week’s worth when the hotel was full. Unfortunately, none of the people who went on the expedition yesterday will be able to get back, so we’ll have more than enough,” Susannah said reassuringly.

“So how did the shutters come down so quickly? We were able to see right out the windows in our room this morning,” Alexia asked between bites.

“I’m afraid it was more dangerous for our staff to put up shutters on the upper floors than it was to leave them down. Thankfully, the trees around the property kept most of the wind gusts at bay,” Susannah said.

“Oh,” as she contemplated the fact that she slept so soundly while the only thing that separated her from the storm was a double pane window.

“What’s with this fog, Susannah? You can’t see anything out there,” Cameron asked.

“Well, I will say that fog like that is unusual, but I’m sure it will burn off soon enough,” Susannah reassured them.

“Guess what?!” Becca said slamming her hands on the table between Cameron and Amanda.

Everyone at the table jumped in their seats. Amanda managed to spill her orange juice all over her lap, while Cameron tried not to choke on a piece of bacon.

“Why you-!” Amanda started before she regained her composure.

“I’m going upstairs to change,” she said leaving in a huff.

No one missed the malicious smile on Becca’s face.

“That was awful of you, Beck’s. You should apologize,” Alexia said.

Cameron was finally able to clear his throat enough to say, “You know I didn’t think much of you before, but now I’m wondering if you’re just simple minded. How could pull such a childish prank while people are eating?”

“Now Cameron, don’t be so hard on the child. She’s obviously excited about something,” Susannah said.

“I’m not a child,” Becca bit off angrily.

“You certainly behaved like one,” Cameron said wiping some of the spilled orange juice off his arm with a large cloth napkin.

“I’ll go apologize,” Becca mumbled and walked away.

“Hey!” Carrie said as Becca stormed past. She could see the tell-tale sign of tears brimming in her eyes.

“Becca!” Carrie said helplessly.

“Leave her be, Carrie. She’s on her way to apologize to Amanda for scaring her. Do you know what she was so excited to tell us?” Alexia asked.

Carrie looked after Becca’s retreating back uncertainly. She knew that Becca would be upset if she told her story before she could.

“Oh come on, Carrie. Live a little. Becca is just having a tantrum. Come sit down and tell us the story,” Cameron said.

Carrie dithered for another moment before she sat down. She would make it up to Becca later.

“We were messing around on the internet looking up something fun to do once the storm cleared when we stumbled across this site about local legends,” Carrie said.

“Don’t tell me you found something about the Plantation? You know you can’t trust any of those sites,” Susannah began.

“Susannah, there’s nothing wrong with a story,” Cameron admonished.

“Look who’s back,” Alexia said.

Amanda walked in through the door wearing a different blouse and a fresh skirt.

“That was quick,” Cameron commented.

He stood up to meet her at the door and brought her back to the table. Becca, who carried a bag with the plantation’s logo, followed behind her.

“The boutique opened this morning. We already had all our merchandise, we just hadn’t had a chance to stock the shelves yet,” Susannah explained.

“Ah, well that explains how she got back so quickly,” Carrie said with some relief. Now that Becca was back, she could sit back and enjoy her storytelling.

“It looks like we’ll need a bigger table,” Adrian said as he sauntered in.

Well, why don’t we go sit out in the lobby? We’ll be much more comfortable out on the sofas there,” Susannah said.

“I’m almost done with my breakfast. I’ll join you out there in a few minutes,” Alexia said.

“How rude of me, of course, we’ll wait for you,” Susannah said.

Everyone settled back in their seats. Adrian, Becca and Carrie moved to the next table. A waiter came by with coffee and filled everyone’s empty cups. It kept Cameron and Alexia from feeling rushed to finish their meals.

Just as everyone was getting up to go to the lobby, Frank arrived.

“Frank, glad you could join us after all,” Cameron said with a big smile.

“Where’s everyone headed?” Frank asked.

“Just out to the lobby to hear Becca and Carrie’s story,” Cameron responded.

Becca elbowed Carrie, “Did you tell them?”

“I only told them about the website,” Carrie said rubbing her side.

“Good, it’s my story and I’ll be the one to tell it,” Becca said.

“Alright, alright! Sheesh, you didn’t have to hit me!”

“Don’t whine so much, Carrie,” Becca said, “Now come on.”

“So what did you tell Amanda that she’s so pleasant now?”

“Nothing, I apologized and offered to buy something new from the shop we saw when came down the stairs this morning. She graciously accepted, the bitch,” Becca answered.

“Why do you hate her so much?” Carrie asked bewildered.

“Because she’s a phony. She hangs of Cam’s arm like she owns him pretending to be this sweet thing while underneath she’s nothing more than a conniving gold digging bitch.”

“She’s hardly a gold digger, Becca. She’s an only child in one of the wealthiest families in New England.”

“Fine, whatever. She’s after Cameron’s name then. She’s not interested in him, that’s for damn sure.”

“What do you care? It’s not like you to worry about other people’s relationships,” Carrie said.

“You know I’ve loved Cameron for ages,” Becca said quietly.

Carrie sighed, “I know. I thought maybe you would have gotten over him by now. He’s never looked at you in that way.”

“Thanks for reminding me, Carrie. I know he doesn’t think of anything more than a child; just one of his little sister’s little friends. I was hoping to change all of that on this trip. It’s why we came early, you know that.”

“I know that when you heard Amanda wasn’t coming you jumped on the next flight out. I barely made it on the same plane! But Amanda did show up and they seem to have made up after that flare up yesterday morning. When are you going to stop pining for what you can’t have and start looking at what you can?”

“Oh, and just who would that be?” Becca asked mockingly.

“Never mind, let’s go, they’re waiting for us,” Carrie said red tingeing her cheeks.

“What the hell?” Becca said as she followed after Carrie.

Everyone else had arranged themselves around several rattan sofas surrounded by palm fronds and small white end tables.

“So tell us your story already,” Alexia said impatiently.

Susannah did not look too happy. She had tried to forestall this particular story as much as she could. She had hoped they would have lost interest by now with all the interruptions. Instead it had only made them impatient to hear it. That is probably best, though. The truth will seem much less interesting after this huge build up.

“Alright, how much did Carrie already tell you? Never mind, I’ll just launch into it,” Becca said settling down on an armchair.

“According to local legend, this plantation is cursed. About two hundred years ago several plantation owners quelled a slave uprising. They slaughtered hundreds. Some were left to rot for days in the open fields. Eventually, more slaves were brought in and forced to bury the bodies. It was meant to teach them all a lesson. Most were buried where they lay, but a few were buried here on the plantation lands.

“Then about thirty years ago, there was a terrible accident. It wasn’t the first, just the most wildly publicized. There had been several small incidents for years. After the owner’s daughter fell out of three-story window about fifty years back, they decided to move away and sell the property. A nephew who lived in New York decided to buy it from his uncle for a song. He turned the place into a hotel.

“During the renovations, several construction workers died in strange accidents. Some fell off scaffolds, others were hurt by falling debris in areas where there was no work going on above. Some of the men were electrocuted when they could have sworn the power had been cut off.

“The renovations finished a few years later. There were a few years in which there were no accidents or strange deaths. The Plantation eventually became the most popular spot on the island. No one made anything of staff members going missing or strange gardening accidents.

“Then thirty years ago, several of the guests were killed after an electrical fire started on the second floor. There was little damage to the building, but the fire produced a great deal of smoke. Some were found fast asleep in their beds on the third floor. Those were the lucky ones. On the second floor, where the fire broke out, people were found at the doors trying to scratch their way out fear twisting their faces into terrible masks. No one could explain it. None of the doors were locked or stuck. They opened easily. It was almost as if in their panic, they couldn’t figure out the lock.

“After that, the place was shut down. No one would stay at the Plantation again after that. The place had been pretty much abandoned until last week. There was little mentioned in the article of any accidents here during the last few months of renovations, so most believe the curse never really existed.”

Becca sat back with anticipation dancing in her expression. No one spoke for several moments until Susannah finally broke in.

“Well, that is a great deal of supposition, most of it a total fabrication. It is true that my great-great grandfather bought the Plantation from his uncle and renovated it into a hotel. Of course,



there were accidents during construction. There never was anything like a curse. At the time there weren't the safety measures there are today. There were always deaths in construction back then. As for the fire, that is true there was a fire, and yes some guests were injured, but no one died. The place was shut down until the wiring could be brought up to the then current code. It's true the Plantation never recovered from that closure. It was around the time of the big new resorts on the beach. This small, secluded hotel could not compete. That's all that happened," Susannah said and walked away in a huff.

She hated that website. All they did was spread rumors that were only going to hurt her hotel. After Susannah had stormed off, there was an uncomfortable silence.

"I'm sorry, I was just wanted to entertain everyone with a good scary story. I didn't anything that wasn't in the article. I didn't mean to..."

"It's ok, Becca. It was a good story. We know you weren't trying to be malicious," Cameron did not add 'this time' but he thought it.

"You actually frightened me for a moment," Alexia said.

"How about we go shoot some pool out in the games room?" Adrian suggested.

"That's a great idea," Alexia said, "Wait, what about that thick fog? We won't be able to see our two feet in front of us."

"The colonnades have lighting. They're all turned on right now. It should be enough so that we don't wander off the path," Frank said.

"You really have been exploring," Cameron said, "So is everyone in?"

"I don't know," Amanda started.

"I'm game," Becca said.

"Yeah, me too," Carrie said.

"Well, alright. If everyone's going, I won't be the wet blanket," Amanda said.

She could not leave Cameron to sympathize with Becca. She needed to give her another chance to show off just how immature and shallow the girl was.

## Chapter Six

As they gathered themselves to head to the games room, they heard a commotion from the front lobby. They could hear a woman crying begging for help and the murmur of the crowd. Alexia spotted Susannah coming from the back room.

“I wonder what that’s all about?” Becca said her morbid curiosity creeping in.

“I think that’s the lady from last night,” Alexia murmured.

“What lady from last night?” Cameron asked.

She shook her head, “Oh, um, there was this really obnoxious couple making a lot of noise about the power outage. I think that was the wife.”

“Huh, so what is she so worked up over now?” Adrian said.

“Who cares? Let’s go,” Becca said impatiently.

“We should at least find out what all the fuss is about,” Alexia said.

“Oh she probably ran out of shampoo in her room. Let’s go,” Frank said impatiently.

Cameron became impatient with the whole group of them and tapped the closest person to him on the shoulder.

“Do you know what all that’s about?” Cameron asked the older woman.

“It’s just dreadful. Her husband’s gone missing. She said he went out for a walk and never came back, poor dear,” she said.

“Why would that be cause for alarm? He couldn’t have gone far,” Cameron said bewildered.

“Sweetheart, he went out last night! She hasn’t seen him since this dreadful fog rolled in. They’re saying it’s just as bad as a blizzard’s white out effect. He could be just mere feet from the hotel and wouldn’t be able to see it!”

Cameron exchanged a look with Alexia. They had seen how thick the fog had been this morning even as high up as their room.

“That is a problem. What could have possessed him to go for a walk in this?” Cameron said.

“Who knows? I can understand feeling all cooped up with the storm and wind knocking the trees across the road. It happened fairly early in the storm, you know,” she nodded sagely.

“I guess I can understand that,” Cameron said in a low voice.

He exchanged another glance with his sister. She looked concerned as she stared at the hysterical woman now being comforted by Susannah. She remembered how rude the lady had been last night and how belligerent her husband had been. A part of her was glad at their misfortune and that disturbed her. She comforted herself by remembering that she did at least feel concern amongst the other inappropriate emotions. Alexia tuned into her brother's conversation with the older woman.

"They're trying to organize a search party, but the hotel staff hasn't figured out a safe way to do it. It wouldn't do for the staff to go missing while looking for Mr. Harrington."

"No, I suppose it would be difficult even for someone who knew the grounds to find his way in this pea soup," Cameron responded.

"Oh, look! They've figured something out after all," the woman said pointing to two uniformed staff members carrying a coil of rope.

"Of course, it makes perfect sense. They can tie the rope to a fixed point and then around each other. That way they could keep from becoming separated from each other and still be able to find their way back. Well, I wish them luck. Thank you for the information, Mrs.- Well, how rude of me. I didn't even ask you your name!"

"You dear boy, my name is Agnes Fishburne," she said smiling, "I came here as a child with my parents. I was a tiny thing," she said reminiscently.

"Don't go telling tales. You were a teenage girl, fresh out of high school and looking for a beau!" An older man interrupted.

"Oh William, let an old woman alone," she said hiding a smile behind her severe tone.

"Don't you 'Oh, William' me, young lady. There's nothing old about you," he smiled down at Agnes.

Cameron could only assume that the two were married and probably met right here.

"It's our anniversary. We met here forty years ago today, and haven't looked back since," William said proudly.

"Congratulations, Mr. Fishburne," Cameron said.

"And who might you be, young man?" William asked.

"Please forgive my rudeness. I'm Cameron Ashefield. This is my sister, Alexia and my girlfriend Amanda. These two are Frank and Adrian and the two surly ones are Carrie and Becca," Cameron said.

"Well, nice to meet you all. Will you all be staying long?" Agnes asked.

“Just until the end of next week,” Cameron responded.

“That’s a shame, then. I don’t expect this fog to lift for another day or two. I hope you can find something to entertain yourselves with,” Agnes said as she took her husband’s arm.

The couple wandered off into the crowd.

“Are you done playing with the grandparents? Can we go?” Frank asked again.

“Sure thing, Frank. Lead the way,” Cameron said with forced gaiety.

Frank delivered a one finger salute and strolled out of the lobby toward the south annex. There was a smattering of giggles and rolled eyes from the girls and an indifferent shrug from Adrian. They followed Frank talking amongst themselves. When they entered the corridor leading to the southern exit, they all stopped suddenly. No lights were on in the hallway. It was dark before with the diffused lighting, but now they could not see anything. Frank’s footsteps could be heard far ahead in the gloom. They each waited for their eyes to adjust to the darkness. Slowly as their night vision began to assert itself they could make out shapes of side tables and decorative chairs along the wall. They followed Frank’s receding footsteps tentatively. After a while, they gained some confidence that no one would stub a toe or ram a knee or shin into anything in their path and picked up their pace.

Everyone caught up with Frank at the far end of the hall. He waited before opening the door. It looked like the emergency lighting out here was still on. He was glad of that for the time being. He did not relish getting lost out here like that idiot woman’s husband. He had not had enough time to scope out the terrain to feel comfortable going out beyond the colonnade’s perimeter in this.

The group scurried from glowing orb to glowing orb. They could barely make out each sickly yellow bulb as they made their way across. At first everyone was laughing and joking to keep the oppression caused by the fog at bay. It did not take long before the damp chill and the lack of visibility sapped their mock gaiety. Their world compressed to a single glowing, sickly yellow light. Alexia looked behind them at one point and could not tell how far they had gone. She shuddered involuntarily. She could not tell how much further they had to go either. She could not help but imagine some malignant spirit in the whirling wisps of white and gray. She could swear she saw shapes out in that dense fog. The tendrils of mists wrapped around her until she felt she was being suffocated.

Frank could see her distress. He relished it. He somehow knew the fog was responsible. He looked at the faces of their companions. They each shared the same somewhat anxious expression, but none seemed to be affected as much as Alexia. He himself felt empowered by the roiling clouds, invisible and therefore invincible.

At last they arrived at the far entrance to the southern annex. They stumbled into the corridor with a collective sigh of relief. Alexia found herself leading the way now. She just wanted to get

away from that awful choking feeling engendered by the fog. She quickly found the room she and Adrian had had so much fun in before Frank ruined the good mood.

“Nice job, Lexi. I already love the place,” Cameron said as he surveyed the room.

The pool table was off to the left with a low hanging light centered above it. The green felt glowed in the dim light. Off to the right there was a dart board and card table with a deck of cards and chips laid out artfully in the center. On the back wall directly in front of them were vending machines with cold drinks and snacks. When Cameron walked around the corner from the cards table, he saw that the room was even larger. There was a ping-pong table, a few arcade games mostly classics, and a foosball table.

“I thought they said they were going to turn off the lights to the additions,” Carrie asked.

“Huh, that’s right. Susannah mentioned that last night. I wonder if the power’s been restored?” Alexia said.

“I don’t think so, or else the power would still be on in the corridor leading here,” Adrian pointed out.

“Huh, I guess it doesn’t matter. I’m just glad the lights are on out here. It would’ve sucked to go through all that only to play by candlelight when we got here,” Alexia said with a big smile.

“Hey, who wants to play table tennis?” Cameron said poking his from around the corner.

“No, way, there’s table tennis table here?” Amanda said joining Cameron.

“Cool,” Cameron said as his head disappeared back behind the corner.

They could all hear the pinging of the ball hitting the table or the paddles a few seconds later. Alexia shrugged and turned back to the group.

“Who’s on for pool?” she said.

Adrian walked over to the rack and picked out a pool stick.

“You’re on,” he said as he turned back to look at her.

She grinned at the challenge in his voice and hurried over to pick out her own pool stick. The two set about racking up the balls and calling out rules.

“Well, I guess that leaves just three of us, ladies. How about a game of poker?” Frank said as he turned to Carrie and Becca.

“Yeah, okay,” Becca said without much enthusiasm.

Carrie just shrugged and walked over to the table. A short time later, another group of college kids had found their way into the games room.

“Excellent, fresh meat!” Frank said enthusiastically, “Any of you want to be dealt in? We’re just shy of the number of car players we need.”

A petite brunette raised her hand at the elbow and said, “Sure I’ll play. What’s the game?”

She sat at the table and made eyes at Frank. Carrie and Becca looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

“I’m Vicky. What’s your name?”

“Nice to meet you Vicky. The name’s Frank. You ladies don’t mind if we just start over? We barely got started after all,” he said.

“Whatever,” Becca said in a bored tone handing over her cards.

Frank set about explaining the game as he dealt the cards and each player a stack of chips. The rest of Vicky’s friends set up a darts game. One of the guys in her group noticed the arcade games and foosball table. He smacked his buddy on the arm and pointed out the rest of the room. Those two wandered off to the foosball table. Soon the room was filled with cacophony of youthful voices bantering, yelling, and generally having a good time. A crash of the pool balls as they ricocheted off each other and the sides of the pool table, the pinging of paddles hitting ping-pong balls, the thwack of darts hitting the dart board, and the whorl of spinning foosball players masked the sound of the phone ringing out in the hall. The phone fell silent after several rings.

The lights went out. Someone screamed, the guys cursed, and one of the girls whimpered.

“Shut up!” Frank’s voice came from the darkness, “Don’t everyone panic.”

He flipped open a Zippo lighter and ignited it. His face was strangely illuminated for a moment, then all anyone could see was the light bouncing off his hand.

“Don’t anybody move. I’m looking for the flashlight I saw last time I was in here,” Frank said.

Everyone stayed tensely silent watching the movement of the lighter’s flame. After a few minutes, a brighter light shone and the lighter flame went out. It was more like a lantern than a flashlight, so it cast more light into the room than a flashlight would have.

“That’s better. Did anybody hear a phone ringing a few minutes ago?” Frank asked.

He looked around the room filled with blank expressions.

“I guess not. I wonder if it was the front desk checking if anybody was here,” he mused.

“It’s likely. It just means we need to find the phone and call them back, so they’ll turn the lights back on,” Cameron said matter-of-factly.

“Makes sense,” Adrian said, “Frank lend me that lighter. I think I saw a phone out in the hallway.”

“Sure here,” he tossed the lighter Adrian who caught it easily.

He waited until he was at the door before igniting the lighter. While Adrian searched, the others gathered around the single source of light in the room.

“They must’ve realized they missed one,” Alexia said.

“Hello, Captain Obvious,” Becca said snidely.

“Now Becca that’s not helping,” Amanda said.

Becca fell silent. She seemed to be losing ground with Cameron at every moment that Amanda was present. It rankled her how easily Amanda could do that. She kept quiet except for a muttered apology.

Carrie watched the byplay silently. Amanda was so much smarter than Becca when it came to playing the game. It was not necessarily an admirable trait, but it was the truth. If only Becca would stop pining for Cameron, but no that would never happen. Not until Becca met someone more connected than Cameron or at least prettier. That certainly would not help Carrie over much, but it was better than this. Was it only because of his money or was it because he was unattainable?

“What’s taking him so long?” Frank said in irritation.

“I kind of like it,” Vicky said.

Everyone turned to stare at her incredulously.

“What? It’s nice just being so close to everyone,” she said trying not to be obvious about wanted to be close to only a certain someone.

“Weren’t you the one that was whimpering before?” one of the other boys said.

“No!” she answered too quickly.

“Enough,” Cameron said wearily.

“As soon as Adrian gets back we can go back to goofing off if he manages to get a hold of anyone. In the mean time, why don’t you guys introduce yourselves?” Cameron said.

“I’m Vicky,” she said perkily.

One of the guys rolled his eyes, “I’m Jonathan. This is Robert; we call him Bobby. That guy there is George, and the quiet one over there is Melissa,” he nodded his chin at the girl who had gone heretofore unnoticed girl standing as far away from everyone as she could.

“I’m Alexia. These are my friends Becca and Carrie. This is my brother, Frank, and Adrian went out into the hall. Amanda, she’s my brother’s girlfriend,” she made the round of introductions on their side.

“Nice to meet you all. Now that didn’t take long enough. Are you sure he’s okay out there? He has been gone quite a while,” Jonathan said.

“Well, unless one of you has another flashlight or lighter, we’re just going to have to wait for Adrian to get back,” Cameron said.

“Alright, I wasn’t trying to be a dick. I was just wondering if your friend got lost or something,” Jonathan said with a hint of a whine in his voice.

“Sorry, this is making me a little tense. I don’t like being cooped up like this,” Cameron said contritely.

“Hey man, you’re not the only one who’s freaking out here. Let’s try to distract ourselves. Where do you all go to school?”

“I’m heading for Princeton Law School in the fall,” Cameron said with a sigh.

“I’m attending to Cornell with Becca and Carrie at the moment,” Alexia piped in.

“I still have another year at Columbia,” Amanda said.

“What about you, Frank?” Jonathan asked.

“UPenn,” Frank said.

“What about you guys?” Alexia said.

“We’re all attending Brown actually. That’s how we all know each other. I take it you guys grew up together?”

“Pretty much. Adrian and have been friends since grade school. Frank I met in middle school. I think Lexi’s been friends with these two since the first day of preschool,” Cameron joked.

“Where did you two meet,” Vicky asked pointing at Cameron and Amanda.

“Amanda? We met at a party her sorority house was hosting,” Cameron said.



“That’s cool,” Vicky said already bored.

“So is there anything between you and Adrian?” Vicky asked.

“Me?” Alexia said uncomfortably.

“Yeah, you, come on tell us all about it,” Vicky said enjoying her discomfort.

Frank noticed it. He was starting to like Vicky. He smiled up at her as she leaned against his shoulder. She definitely had a nice rack for such a little thing. She was definitely his kind of woman, flirtatious, buxom and not looking for more than a little fun. He just might give her a little fun later that night. She smiled back at him. He just might give her exactly what she was looking for.

“No, there’s nothing between Adrian and me. I’ve known him forever. He’s almost like a brother to me,” she said.

Adrian stepped back in at just that moment. The moment grew rather awkward until he finally spoke.

“Unfortunately, they can’t turn the power back on in here for another hour. The generators are low on diesel. They have to turn them off by turns to refuel them. I’m afraid we’ll be stuck in the dark or we’ll have to head back to the main house,” he said.

“Did they happen to mention whether the emergency lights are still on in the connecting corridors?” Frank asked.

“Yeah, those are battery operated LED lights. We should be fine,” Adrian said.

“Then I see no reason why we shouldn’t head back. We can take a deck of cards and have a game in you suite,” he nodded to Cameron.

“True enough. You guys game?” Cameron asked Jonathan.

“I’m game,” Vicky said quickly.

Jonathan and his friends groaned. Melissa remained silent.

“Yeah, sure. Without the heaters on in the pool house, I don’t relish going for a swim. There’s not much else to do if the power’s out at the gym too.”

“Then it’s settled. We’ll head out to the main house. I got a deck of cards, let’s go,” Cameron said.

Frank grabbed the electric lantern and led the way to the connecting hallway. The group filed in behind him staying as close as possible to avoid becoming separated. Alexia sought her brother’s

hand for comfort but found him entangled with Amanda. Just she dropped her hand back to her side Adrian had taken hold of it. She looked up at him somewhat startled, but the understanding look in his face relaxed her. She clutched his hand more securely and turned away after offering him a shy smile.

When they arrived at the door to the colonnaded corridor, Frank extinguished the lantern and placed it on a table nearby. It would be of little use outside in the fog and someone might need it later. They tripped over each other as they stumbled out into the walkway.

## Chapter Seven

There was a moment of panic when they realized the glow from the nearest emergency was not visible.

“Stop you’re hysterics! I counted our steps between lights. The next one is only a foot away. It should become visible shortly,” Frank said.

“Are you sure, Frank,” Vicky said clutching his arm tightly.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Now let go of me. I can’t maneuver without tripping on you. Here, Jonathan, why don’t you hang onto your friend,” Frank said pulling Vicky off his arm.

“I’m fine,” she said miffed.

She stepped away from Frank and went to stand away from the group. She stood there pouting and casting hurt looks in Frank’s direction. He ignored her so he could concentrate on getting across the colonnade.

“Now everyone stay close. We should be able to get across without losing our way. Remember to pay attention to where you step. If you feel something other than concrete under your feet, you’ve strayed off the path.”

“Alright already, it’s not that hard to walk in a straight line,” Vicky said snidely.

It looked like Vicky was going to be more work than she was worth. It was too bad really, but it only meant his appetite for sweet little Alexia was all the bigger.

Vicky waited until the group had moved a bit before following. She wanted to show she was not frightened of this stupid fog. After all, she and Jonathan had made managed to get across without bothering with the lights. Frank just liked playing the hero. It would make things all the sweeter when she showed him how well she could take care of herself.

She was so busy congratulating herself, that she allowed herself to lose visual contact with the rest of the group. She was not overly concerned with that fact. After all, Vicky knew that she could get across without help. She could keep one foot in front of the other. The fog was much denser than it had been when she had come out earlier. Her confidence began to diminish. Maybe she should have stayed closer.

Vicky decided to quicken her step. When she did not bump into anyone right away, she started to feel the beginnings of panic. It pressed on her chest like a wait. It churned her stomach and quickened her breath. She began to shiver uncontrollably. She tried to take a deep breath, but the fog felt as if it were trying to suffocate her. Vicky broke out into a run. The others were just up ahead; she just knew it.

The ground underneath stop making a clicking sound when her heels hit the ground instead she felt her shoes begin to sink into dirt. Vicky felt like such a fool once she realized she had strayed from the hall. She turned around to return, but she could see nothing. She could not hear anything. It felt as if she had a heavy blanket wrapped around her eyes and ears. She could feel the panic returning. She ran again in the direction she thought she had come from. Vicky ran for several minutes. She should have reached the columns of the connecting hall by now. She pressed harder only to slip and fall.

Vicky inhaled deeply. After a moment, she stood up only to fall again in pain. She had hurt her ankle somehow. It was stupid to run in heels anyway, but more so on unpaved surfaces when she could not see even the hand in front of her face. She sat back defeated. Vicky would just have to wait until someone realized she was missing and came looking for her or until the fog lifted. Somehow, she doubted it would be soon enough.

Cold tendrils of mist wrapped around Vicky causing her to clutch at herself to try and keep warm. Her breath began to mist. At first it melded with the fog that surrounded her, but eventually she could make out a small difference. At the sight, she began to shiver.

Vicky called out for Jonathan or Frank, anyone who could possibly hear. She tried to remember the name of the man who had gone missing, but could not. Vicky felt utterly alone and terrified.

Alexia was the first to notice that Vicky was no longer visible behind them.

“Frank?”

“Yeah?”

“I think we might have lost Vicky,” Alexia said.

“Alright, we’ll stop and let her catch up,” Frank said mildly irritated.

It was beginning to feel rather muggy and uncomfortable out here. The fog had thinned enough now that they could see the glowing light of the next emergency lamp. He was anxious to get back and cursed the bimbo under his breath.

They heard footsteps then running, but Vicky never materialized. The clicking of high heels against concrete stopped altogether. They knew it meant only one thing; Vicky had left the concrete walkway. They waited, but heard nothing. Each held their breath for a moment hoping to see her appear out of the mist chagrined but all right.

“Jonathan? Frank? Anybody?” they heard.

“Vicky!” Jonathan called back.

No one could be sure where the sound had come from. Was it off to their left or right? They argued about what to do.

“I say we go on and get help from the staff. They’ve got a system with ropes and stuff,” George said.

“Shut up, George. You’re not the one who’s gonna have to explain to my aunt and uncle that I lost their precious Victoria. We should go look for her. If we split up, we should be able to find her quickly enough,” Jonathan said.

“Not such a good idea, Jonathan. We’d only get lost ourselves. I say we wait for a moment longer. Maybe she heard you,” Cameron said matter-of-factly.

“Look she’s a big girl. It won’t do her any harm to sit out there for a few minutes while we get help, so just calm down,” Frank said with his usual consideration.

“Nice Frank, let’s just leave the girl out in this crap alone and scared. Why don’t two of us stay here to see if Vicky makes it back on her own. In the meantime, the rest of you can go on ahead and get help,” Alexia offered.

“Makes sense,” Cameron agreed readily.

“Why don’t you and George stay here, while the rest of us go back for help?” Cameron told Jonathan.

“Who made you in charge?” Jonathan said belligerently.

“Fine, then Adrian and I will stay behind and you go on ahead and get help,” Cameron said wearily.

“No, it’s alright. I’ll stay. George, you game?” Jonathan said begrudgingly.

“No, man, this stuff gives me the creeps. She’s your cousin; you stay.”

“Thanks a lot, buddy,” he stressed the last word.

George looked away in shame but did not volunteer to stay.

“I’ll stay,” Melissa said suddenly.

It was the first time most of them had heard her speak, so they were a bit startled when she finally did.

“You sure?” Jonathan said.

“I’m sure. She’s my cousin, too.”

“Thanks,” Jonathan said quietly.

“Then it’s settled. We’ll head back to the main building and get help. You guys stay put. We don’t want to have to look for you too,” Cameron said.

He waited until he saw Jonathan and Melissa nod. Melissa quickly bobbed her head. Jonathan looked at him mutinously. When Cameron’s expression changed to one that said, ‘come on,’ Jonathan jerked his head in a quick nod. Satisfied, Cameron turned to follow Frank again.

Everyone froze at the sound of the scream.

“Vicky!” Melissa and Jonathan exclaimed at the same time.

Jonathan turned to run in what he hoped was the direction of the sound. Cameron and George tried to stop him, but he just shoved them aside.

“Jonathan!” Melissa called out, but he ignored her.

He had to get to Vicky. His family would never forgive him if something happened to her.

Jonathan quickly disappeared into the mist. They looked at each other, but no one could quite meet anyone’s eyes. There was nothing they could do. If they stepped from the walkway, they too would be lost. They stood there fretting unsure of what to do.

They heard another scream that sent gooseflesh rising on Alexia’s skin.

“Vicky...” Melissa whispered.

They heard more screams each more terrible than the last. Jonathan’s voice could be heard yelling Vicky’s name with increasing panic until there was silence.

The screams ceased. They stood waiting tensely, but heard nothing more. Jonathan had stopped yelling. The silence now had a weight to it that pressed on their ears and shoulders.

“Vicky,” Melissa’s voice broke on a sob.

She slid to the ground as her knees gave way under her. George came to her side and wrapped his arms around Melissa. She stayed frozen looking out where she had last seen Jonathan willing for him to appear with Vicky at his side.

Eventually, after several agonizing minutes, Jonathan reappeared. No one had noticed in the interval that the fog had cleared enough to see several feet in each direction. Jonathan’s face was pale, almost ghostly. He’s eyes stared ahead disbelieving what he saw.

“Jonathan?” Melissa stood up and stepped away from George at Jonathan’s arrival.

“She’s gone,” was all he could say before his features screwed up into an ugly mask of grief and anger.

He punched the closest pillar leaving behind several layers of skin and a little blood. He did not seem to notice.

“Jonathan?” Melissa’s voice increased in pitch with near hysteria.

“Jonathan, where’s Vicky? Jonathan where is she?”

He looked in her direction. For a moment she could not tell if he was even seeing her.

“Jon! Speak to me. Where’s Vicky?”

“She’s gone,” he repeated albeit more quietly.

“What do you mean she’s gone? Where? Where did she go?”

“She’s dead,” his features had settled into a blank, absent expression.

Jonathan was no longer with them. He was envisioning what he had seen moments before. He was trapped in the nightmare of Vicky’s death. There was so much blood. Her eyes, oh God her eyes! There was something, but no there couldn’t be, could there? Some creature made of mist and cloud... It was so cold!

They all stared at him in horror. He obviously did not realize he had been speaking aloud. Melissa’s sobs shook her entire body. The three cousins had grown up together. They were like siblings. Jonathan’s horrific babbling washed over her like waves of fire. Each sob felt as if she were going to break in two. George held her helplessly not realizing the tears running down his own paling features.

Frank watched it all in detachment. He was surprised and a little excited at the way Jonathan’s words made him feel. He understood now why the fog had felt so empowering. He struggled to hide his emotions. These sensitive rich kids would, could never understand. They lacked the character, the backbone to comprehend true power. His eyes fell on Alexia’s horrified expression. Such a little treasure she was. His eyes slid past her to the sniveling girl on the ground. His lip curled in mild disgust. He never could take the sight of such a show of emotion.

A thought came to mind that had Frank turning around to hide his smile.

“I think we should get back inside as quickly as possible. There may be a wild animal loose out there. We’ll get to the hotel staff and they’ll call the authorities,” Frank said.

He knelt down by George and the still weeping Melissa. She shied away from him immediately. Melissa did not want him anywhere near her. It was his fault Vicky had gotten separated from them. If he had just been a little nicer to her, she would... Melissa began to cry again too tired for the sobs. The pain shook her body instead. Bobby who had remained silent throughout everything stepped in and embraced Jonathan. He rocked his friend as if he were a child. He made shushing noises, repeating, “It’s ok, man, it’s ok.”

It was not ok, but eventually whatever Bobby was doing had the desired effect. Jonathan stopped babbling. He took a deep breath and went nearly limp in his friend's arms. Bobby appeared to have been expecting Jonathan's near collapse because he was braced to take his weight. Cameron went over to help Bobby.

The scene seemed to help break whatever fit had over taken Melissa. She stopped shivering, her cries little more than hiccups and a few loose tears still finding their way down her cheek. George helped her to her feet. Once standing, she leaned into him. She knew she should go to Jonathan, but she could not be strong for him right now. It would just have to be enough to be strong for herself.

Frank stood as well. He assumed his previous position as point and led the very silent and scared group back to the main building. The darkened corridor on the other side of the door felt like a homecoming. They all stepped through the door and just stood there. They all felt their knees weaken with relief. All except Jonathan and Melissa. They each were in their private hell of loss and disbelief.

The lights came at that moment. One of the hotel staff stood at the end of the corridor. Alexia was not certain being so far away but she thought it could be Jorge.

"Hello?" he called out.

Susannah stepped into view next to the valet.

"Cameron? Lexi?" she said her voice showing worry as she approached them.

She took in the varying degrees of dismay and shock on each of their faces. She noticed with alarm how the others were supporting Jonathan and Melissa.

"Was someone injured?" she rushed forward to inspect the two.

Jonathan chuckled then began cackling hysterically at Susannah's question.

"Jonathan!" Melissa said reaching out to her cousin but not daring to touch him.

"What is it? What happened?" Susannah asked.

Jorge had joined them by now with two other staff members. Susannah looked at Cameron for answers. Jonathan had doubled over with crazy laughter releasing Bobby and Cameron from supporting his weight.

"We're not sure. His cousin got separated from us while we tried to make it back across the walkway. We heard screams-" he paused afraid his voice would crack before he could continue, "Jonathan ran out to find her. He said he something attack Vicky. He thinks she's dead."

His voice cracked on the last word. He looked down at the floor hoping to regain his composure.



“I don’t think I saw anything! I don’t think she’s dead! I know I saw something and it killed Vicky!” Jonathan broke off his hysterical laughter to say.

“Calm down,” Frank said.

“You calm down! It’s your fault she’s dead. If you hadn’t been suck a prick to her, Vicky would still be alive!” Jonathan ranted.

“I can’t be held responsible if your cousin had a tantrum. I told her just like I told all of you to stay close.”

“You’re blaming her for this?” Jonathan’s voice raised another few decibels.

“I didn’t say I blamed anyone. I only said that I can’t be responsible for her actions,” Frank said and walked away. He was more than finished with the little shit and his girly hysterics.

“You come back here! I’m not finished with you,” spittle was flying from Jonathan’s lips.

Jonathan’s hysterics had drawn a crowd by now. Frank easily weaved his way through and away from it all. He was not comfortable with crowds nor with being the crowd’s center of attention. He left that behind him with the crazy guy. That Melissa would be quite tasty. He had seen the hatred in her eyes. She would be much more fun than the poor late Vicky. His lips pressed into a cold smile. She will want a moment alone away from all this noise. He would be waiting for her. He climbed the stairs to his floor taking the steps two at a time. He had to figure out what room she was staying in. A quick call down to the front desk would solve that problem.

## Chapter Eight

“Cameron what the hell happened out there?” Susannah asked as he and Adrian sat in her office.

Jonathan had been taken to his room after the hotel’s doctor gave him a sedative to calm him. The good doctor had not intended to be at the hotel that day, but he had been trapped by the storm just like everyone else.

“Like I said; Vicky got separated. When Lexi noticed, we stopped and waited for her to join us. We heard her running toward us, but in the fog she must have gotten disoriented because we couldn’t hear the clicking of her shoes on the concrete anymore. We heard her call out. We tried to respond, but I don’t think she heard us. We were on our way back here when we heard her scream. Jonathan ran out to find her. He came back a short time later babbling about some creature in the fog attacking Vicky. He said-“ he paused, “He said she was dead, that there was a lot of blood. He went into more explicit detail, but it’s hard to tell what was truth and what was the ramblings of a man in shock.”

Cameron stood from the visitor’s chair in Susannah’s office.

“Why are we just sitting here? Where is the police? The search party?” Cameron said pacing.

“The phone lines are down in our area, but I did manage to get enough cell phone reception to contact the Sheriff’s office. The only access to the hotel is the main road that everyone came in through. That road is now littered with downed trees. Crews are working around the clock, but there’s only so many of them to go around. Every tree cutter in the area down to Florida and up into Virginia is booked solid. It will be a few days before they can dig us out of here.”

“What about a search party? We can’t just leave her out there!” Adrian said.

“No search parties. I’ve already lost two men out there looking for Mr. [belligerent]. If there is some kind of wild animal out there, I especially will not send any of my staff out there. They are not trained for this sort of thing, and I won’t ask them to put their lives on the line to do it.”

Susannah was adamant. Cameron could see that she would not budge from her position. He could not blame her. If what Jonathan said was true, Vicky was already dead. What good would it do to send more people out there to die?

“Did you ever find him?” Cameron said more quietly.

“Who? Oh, Mr. [belligerent]. No, we haven’t found him. This has been such a nightmare!” she exclaimed.

Adrian and Cameron exchanged a knowing look.

“I’m sorry. I won’t bore you with my problems. I will send out a search party as soon as this fog lifts and not before. In the meantime, I would really appreciate it if you and your friends stayed in the main building. I’ve posted people at each of the exits. I can’t lock the doors, but I will try my best to keep everyone inside. There is no power out to the annexes at this time, so there’s no reason to go out there. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal,” Cameron said dryly.

“Alright, I guess there isn’t much more that can be done at this point. Just keep an eye on each other, okay?” Susannah said escorting them both to the door.

“Sure thing, Suse, but who’s gonna watch out for you?” Cameron said.

“I can take care of myself, Cameron,” she said as she closed the door.

She turned back to her now empty office. She stepped over to the couch and allowed herself to sink into it.

“Oh, Daddy, this has been one hell of a trial by fire,” she buried her face in the cushion and stayed that way for a very long time.

The third floor corridor was empty. Most of the guests had returned to their rooms or were gathered down at the bar. Alexia walked with Melissa to her room. She had wanted some time to herself, and she knew she would not get it if either Bobby or George walked her to her room. Alexia had offered just as she had been trying to figure out how to escape without their noticing. Under different circumstances, they probably would have become good friends. Now, though, Melissa could not imagine a more exhausting enterprise. All she wanted was to crawl into her bed and curl up with the covers over her head to block out the rest of the world if only for a few minutes.

She was glad she had decided to get a separate room. Sharing a suite with Jonathan right now would have been impossible for her. Alexia was thankfully silent. She did not seem to need to fill the air with nonsensical chatter, and for that she was unaccountably grateful.

“Well this is it,” Melissa announced.

“Ok, you got your key?” Alexia asked.

“Yep,” she said she held up an old fashion key.

“Alright, well, you know my room number if you need to talk or are just tired of being alone,” Alexia said as she turned away.

“Thank you,” Melissa said.

Alexia nodded. She seemed to understand what Melissa meant. She did not need to elaborate.

There they were where, together! The two juiciest morsels in the entire hotel and they were right under his nose together and alone. The temptation was great, but he persevered. He knew that given the right circumstances he could have them both, but here it was too dangerous. He could not be sure that one of them would not be able to yell out before he could stop her. No he would wait until he had Alexia alone and he would savor it.

He watched her walk away. She glanced back, but he had pressed back away from sight. He was certain she had not seen him. Her brow had not done that involuntary crinkle at the sight of him that she would try to smooth away the moment she noticed it. Nonetheless, he waited a few beats more after she had disappeared through the door to the stairwell. He approached Melissa's door quietly. He had already been in her room, planted what he needed. He had even rigged the door so that she would not be able to lock him out. The renovation crew had not gotten around to installing the dead bolts on this floor, so that would not stop him. It was the signal he needed to continue with his plans for the evening.

His smile grew. He would enjoy this it so much more this time. They were rarely so raw from trauma, so irrational in their hatred of him. He hoped she was stronger than her wimp cousin otherwise it would all be over so much faster than he wanted.

The door opened easily. It made no sound. Frank stepped through closing and locking the door behind him. The lock made only the briefest of clicking sounds before sliding into position. He could hear Melissa in the bathroom. The sound of the shower had masked any sound he may have inadvertently produced. He fished out a small plastic packet from his pants pocket. He dropped roughly a quarter teaspoon into a teacup he had placed there earlier.

"What are you doing here?" Melissa said angrily. She clutched at the neck of her robe.

"I thought I'd bring you some tea," Frank said turning around holding the steaming cup, "I knocked when I didn't hear anything I tried the door. It wasn't locked."

"I must not have pushed the door in all the way," Melissa said uncertainly.

"So you let yourself in? You've brought the tea, thank you, but I'd rather be alone right now," she said as she approached the door.

"I made a cup for myself, too. We don't need to talk. I just- I feel bad about what happened out there. What if Jonathan is right and it's all my fault?"

Melissa stared at his apparently sincere expression. She did not trust him, but she relented in the face of his show of vulnerability.

"Okay, one cup of tea and then you have to leave," she said as she sat down on the stool at the small kitchenette counter. This felt much less intimate than sitting at the small table by the balcony doors.

"One cup, I promise," Frank smiled.

Melissa was taken aback by the childish gratitude behind that smile. Maybe she had been wrong about him. Vicky may have been coming on a little strong. He should not have led her on then! Her mind and emotions were too tattered to dwell on the incongruity between this Frank and the one she had first met earlier that night. She absentmindedly sipped from the steaming cup of herbal tea. Had it only been a few hours since Melissa had last seen Vicky? It did not seem at all real.

Frank was true to his word. He did not try to engage in conversation or offer meaningless platitudes. He stood there on the other side of the counter and stared out of the pitch-black window. Melissa wondered what it was he saw. She had no desire to go anywhere near the window and that sickening fog. She blamed the fog for Vicky's death just as irrationally as she blamed Frank. She was angry with Frank, the fog, Jonathan, and Vicky, but most of all she was angry with herself. She should not have let Vicky stall so long just so she could prove how independent she was.

Melissa understood her cousin better than maybe Vicky had understood herself. It no longer mattered. Vicky was gone. She felt so tired; her limbs grew heavy.

"Frank, I think you should leave," Melissa said.

"Finish your tea, you'll feel better soon," was all he said.

"I know I said you could stay for one cup, but I'm really tired and I want to go to sleep," her speech began to slur. She was having trouble focusing.

What had been in that tea? She stood up clutching the counter. She needed to get away, but from what and where would she go? She was so confused. Melissa clutched at her head. She fell in a heap on the floor.

Frank picked up the cups of tea and washed them in the sink. He meticulously dried them making sure there was no lipstick on the rim. He stepped around Melissa to her bathroom. He turned off the shower that she had left running when she came out to investigate. It had been a stroke of pure luck. Now no one would know that there had been anyone else in the room. The shower had masked their voices from the other rooms' occupants.

He was taking a risk doing this in a hotel full of guests, but he was getting itchy. It had been too long. He walked to the dresser where he had stashed his toys. He had checked, but as he had imagined, Melissa had not unpacked. All her things were still in the suitcase, miraculously still neat and organized. There would be nothing neat about what he planned to do to her.

## Chapter Nine

Melissa came to in bed. Her head was pounding. She felt disoriented. She looked around the unfamiliar room trying to figure out what she was doing in a hotel room. Memories flooded back of the trip with her cousins to the beach resort on the island of Seabrook that had turned into a nightmare with Vicky's death.

She tried to lift her hand to massage her head and found she could not. She looked at down at her hands at her sides. They were tied with rope; her wrists were wrapped with soft towels. She tried to call out but it felt as if her mouth were wired shut. She began to panic. She tried to move her legs and could not. She looked wildly around, but found nothing that would help her get out of her bonds.

“Shh,” she heard from the shadows of the balcony.

The doors were open, but she could not see a thing. The light from the room did not penetrate the wall of mist just on the other side of the French doors. Frank stepped through and with him tendrils of grey and white mist followed wrapping gently around his ankles and up his legs. The closer he got to the bed the more the tendrils resembled tentacles. They used his body as an anchor until he was at the foot of the bed. The mist tentacles slowly drifted off Frank and onto the bed over the sheets that covered her and up to her face. She took in a deep breath to scream, but only managed to inhale the tentacles. She tried to cough but could not open her mouth. She choked on the imagined feeling of snakes writhing in her throat.

Frank stood by and smiled. He could not see the tendrils that had hitched a ride on him, but he saw their effects. He waited. He somehow knew that the fog was on his side. When Melissa stopped choking, he removed the brace that had been wrapped over her face and jaw. She immediately tried to scream, but she made no sound. It was a pity he would not have the pleasure, but it was the more practical course. He smiled at the panic rising in her eyes. He had hoped for her hatred of him to boiling up first. It would come eventually. None of them could ever stay panicked for long. Eventually the need to survive would take over and then the loathing. He relished that phase in his escapades, but alas it did not last. They all break before he could finish. That was when he disposed of them.

This time though he would not need to trouble himself. There was a creature on the loose. The open French doors would be all the explanation anyone would look for. By the time they thought to look any further, he would be long gone. He turned back to his newest toy. He so hoped she would not break too soon.

When he was done, he collected his toys, untied the ropes around her wrists and ankles. He had to rush. She had not had enough of the tea to keep her under as long as he needed. At first glance, there did not appear to be any visible bruising where he had tied the rope. The bruises would show up, but hopefully not until much later. He set about wiping down surfaces, doorknobs, sinks and handles. He took off his bloody clothes and placed them in a plastic bag. He quickly changed into his vacation attire.

He brought out a small hand vacuum and passed it over and around the bed. The vacuum was quiet enough for his purposes. The fog still muffled a great deal of sound. It would not get all the fibers and hair he may have lost in the night's fun, but it would be enough. He would have to wait until the maid service had begun their rounds of this floor. He had deliberately placed the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door. Once the vacuums began running in other rooms, he could run the vacuum he had borrowed from the broom closet. He had been doing this for a very long time now. He had learned a trick or two along the way and a lot more about people and human nature.

He smirked at the thought. Human nature indeed, most were no better than sheep. He at least was honest with himself. He could at least live with his true nature and thrive on it.

He made sure to leave the French doors open. It would give him some leeway as long as he helped spread the rumor that whatever had killed had struck again. He smiled as he stepped out through the adjoining room. He had made sure to unlock both sides earlier. No one would know he had ever been there.

## Chapter Ten

The fog did not lift that night or the next day. Jonathan was still under sedation, and Melissa had not come down from her room. Alexia and Cameron sat in the breakfast room staring at their glasses of orange juice. Neither spoke. They were both in two separate worlds. Cameron had come back to their room late last night to find Alexia wide awake and staring at a blank television screen.

“Go to bed,” he had told her.

“Can’t sleep,” she returned.

He sat next to her on the sofa and the two stared at the blank screen together. Eventually, Lexi had laid her head on his shoulder and after a few more moments fell asleep. He had not been so lucky. Perhaps lucky was not the right word. Whatever sleep she may have gotten while on his shoulder it did not appear to have been restful.

“Hi,” Becca said tentatively.

“Hey,” Alexia said without looking up.

“Hi,” Cameron said staring intently at his glass.

“Mind if I sit down?” she asked.

Talking seemed to be too much for either of them so they shook their head to say they did not mind. Becca sat down with her plate of fruits and cup of coffee. She did not seem to want to eat it, though. She picked up a loose grape and fiddled with it before she put it back down onto her plate. She pushed it away from her and pulled the coffee cup closer. She cupped it with both hands as if to warm them. She stared deeply into the murky depths. She realized she had forgotten to pour in cream. It did not matter. She was not going to drink it anyway.

“Have you heard when the authorities will arrive?” she asked.

Cameron shook his head again. He had not seen Susannah this morning. After he had finally calmed down Amanda last night, he had made his way downstairs to the lobby. He was not ready to return to his room. He hoped Alexia would be asleep before he had to return. It had not turned out that way, but in the end it had not mattered.

Susannah had been sitting alone at the front desk. She had sent the rest of the staff to bed. There was no one checking in or out until the road had been cleared. The phones were mercifully quiet; the lobby deserted. They were alone for the first time since they met. Had it only been two days ago? It felt like a lifetime ago now that he and his sister had left home. He realized that neither of them had called home since their first night. He consoled himself with the fact that neither had his parents. They were probably well out of cell range by now.



He had walked to the counter and leaned on it until Susannah looked at him.

“Have you slept?” he asked.

“No, I don’t think I could,” she said stoically.

“No, I don’t think I could either.”

“I’ve run through all the remaining guests we have staying here. There’s only a few dozen. You would think with that few guests, I would have little to worry about,” she tried to joke but it fell flat.

Neither felt much like laughing.

“How many staff do you have?” he asked.

“I had a full complement, but I’ve noticed that many left just before the storm. Most of my employees have lived around here all their lives. They know when to make their escape. I figured I could fire them if they ever bothered to show up again. I should have had the place evacuated,” she dropped her head between her arms, her forehead touching the desk.

“I’m tired Cameron,” she said.

“I know,” he could not think of anything else to say.

Susannah dropped her arms and folded them under her chin.

“Tell me about your family, Cameron.”

He indulged her. He knew all she wanted was to think about something, anything else, so he told her about his parents and about Lexi. How he had begun to understand her better since they left home just a few short days ago. He talked about his plans for law school and maybe getting married. He told her how everyone expected him to work for his grandfather’s law firm in New York. He told her about his uncertainties and dreams. He had flirted with the idea of joining a nonprofit group at one time. At one point he wanted to join the Peace Corps or go on a mission to teach English in Africa. His parents had indulged him on every whim knowing that eventually he would just go back to school in the fall and continue on his way to his law degree.

When he could not think of anything more to say about himself, he asked her about her family and her dreams. Susannah told him how this Plantation had always been her dream to one day renovate and run the place. She had run the entire project. She even had the grand opening ceremony all planned out. The mayor would be there and the city council, even Judge Richmond who was Godfather would be there. She could picture how her father would beam at her with pride as he stood by her side. Her mother would be beside herself wiping away proud Mama tears.

She could see that dream crumbling at her feet. None of those fine politicians would want to be associated with a place where so much tragedy had occurred. Her father would never allow her to run another property. She would be married off or sent to Europe with her Aunt Millie.

Cameron smiled at Susanna's inventive albeit melodramatic portrayal of her punishment when everything came to light.

"I doubt your father would banish you for what ultimately was an act of nature. The storm was only supposed to be tropical depression. It would dump a few inches of rain but never quite make landfall. The storm swung deeper west than anyone could have predicted. Think how much worse it would have been if everyone had been stranded at Seabrook. The damage from the winds would have been much more extensive and the danger far greater."

"Tell that to Vicky Mr. [belligerent] and my two guys who are still lost out there," she said.

He instantly deflated. She was right in that regard. She would have been able to find a place for everyone to stay had they been stranded at the beach resort. There would have been no risk of a fog and people going missing.

"I'm sorry. I was just trying to point out that you could not have foreseen any of this, and even if you had there wasn't much you could have done differently," Cameron said in a defeated voice.

She looked up at him from where she rested her chin on her arms, "Thank you, I appreciate that. I know intellectually that none of this is my fault, but it still doesn't make me feel any better that it happened on my watch."

"Susannah, you can sit here and wallow in self pity, or you can go to bed and push off all this crap until morning," Cameron said.

"You're right, but I'm not going to wake someone to take over on the phones. Don't give me that look, I only have another hour and then Felicity will come to relieve me, ok?" Susannah finally sat up straight in her chair.

"Ok, I'll keep you company until then," Cameron said.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"Hello?"

"What?" Cameron said.

"Where did you go?" Becca said.

"Nowhere, listen I'm not very good company right now. I'll see you around," Cameron said as he stood up and walked away.

Alexia gave an almost imperceptible nod to show she had heard and continued to stare at her glass.

“I guess you’re not much for company, either?” Becca said dejectedly.

“No, I’m not, Becca. Where’s Carrie?” Alexia said with a hint of mild curiosity.

“She wouldn’t come out of her room this morning. I think she may have taken something to help her sleep. I couldn’t rouse her for anything.”

“Huh,” was all Alexia could think to say.

“Isn’t there anything you’d rather do than stare at that juice?” Becca said exasperated.

“Not really, except maybe sleep, but that only brings nightmares. I’m sorry, Becca. I’d rather be alone,” Alexia stood up and walked away.

Becca laid her head in her hands and blew out a burst of air.

“This sucks,” she muttered under her breath.

“What’s wrong, Becky dear? Is that poor girl’s death keeping everyone from making you the center of attention?” Amanda said in falsely sweet voice.

“Go to hell, Amanda,” Becca said and walked away.

Amanda chuckled and sat down to enjoy a full plate of breakfast. She had reason to be smug. Cameron was once again in her hands. It was unfortunate that a girl had to die in order to achieve her goal, but it was not as if she were responsible. This was just a fortunate turn of events.

“Amanda?” Susannah said.

Amanda’s appetite seemed to vanish almost immediately. This one was definitely one to worry about, but Amanda remembered last night and smiled, her appetite regained.

“Yes, Susannah?” Amanda said taking a bite of her omelet.

“Have you seen, Cameron this morning?”

“No, not yet. Did you need him for something?” Amanda said with false regard.

“No, it’s not important. How are you enjoying your meal?” Susannah switched to the good hostess.

“It’s lovely, thank you,” Amanda said choking on her omelet.

“I’m glad. Please don’t hesitate to ask if you would like something special,” Susannah said and turned away.

Her appetite truly gone, Amanda pushed her plate away. She would track down Cameron and find out what this little Southern harpy wanted with her boyfriend.

Bobby could not help but want to check on his friends. When he had checked in on Jonathan earlier that morning, the nurse there told him he was still under the effects of the sedative. He had decided to wait a few hours before going to check on Melissa. She was really the only one he truly wanted to see, but was too scared to. He put off going to see her as much as possible, but eventually his overriding concern had him walking down the hall to her suite.

He found himself staring at Melissa’s door trying to rebuild the courage that had propelled him this far. When he realized it had not been courage but worry for Melissa that was now the reason for him standing in front of the door, he knocked. It was a tad anti-climactic when there was no response. He knocked again a little louder. There was still no response. He decided to come back later, but something made him want to be sure she was okay.

He knocked again and called her name. There was still no response. There was a chance she was visiting Jonathan. He went to the closest courtesy phone on that floor and dialed Jonathan’s room number. Jonathan picked up. He sound groggy and a little disoriented.

“Is Melissa there with you?”

Jonathan responded on expelled breath, “No.”

“Oh, ok, how are you?” Bobby was impatient to hang up the phone but felt like he could not just hang up on his friend. After all, he had lost a cousin too.

“Listen, man, I appreciate you’re checking up on me, but I don’t really want to talk right now,” Jonathan said.

“It’s alright, Jon. I’ll let you get back to what you were doing,” Bobby said but Jonathan had already hung up.

He replaced the phone in its cradle with a worried expression. A couple came out of their room a few doors down. They gave him suspicious glances as they walked past.

Bobby did not notice.

“Hey, have you seen or heard anything from, 303?” Bobby asked the retreating couple.

“We mind our own business, young man,” the husband replied while his wife gave Bobby a dirty look.

He could not understand why he was beginning to panic. She was probably down in the lobby, but he could not budge from that floor. He decided to dial the reception desk. Someone may have seen her down there.

“No, I’m sorry, sir. There’s no way for us to know if a particular guest is in the lobby until the paging system is installed.”

Bobby replaced the phone once more. He decided to try her door one more time. When he stepped in front of the door, he was startled to discover a cold draft coming from under the door. He looked down to find smoke curling up his legs.

“Melissa! Melissa! Open this door!” true panic now gripped him.

In his panic he could only see fire in his mind’s eye. The cold draft that had caused him to look down was forgotten.

Other guests began popping their heads out of their rooms. Some quickly vanished inside to call the front desk for security or to complain about the noise. The rest stared at the panicked man banging at the hotel door.

Accompanied by two large valets Susannah arrived to find Bobby nearly weeping as he banged on the door and called Melissa’s name hoarsely.

“Bobby?” she reached a tentative hand to him.

He looked at her with a completely lost expression.

“Melissa...” he sobbed.

“What is it, Bobby?”

“Look,” he whimpered.

The mist was playing coyly with the air of the corridor, slipping in and out of the space below Melissa’s door. Susannah, perturbed by the sight, stood up. She fished her master key out of her pocket and opened the door. The smell was the first thing that hit her. She nearly retched in the hall. She closed the door quickly.

“It seems the girl has been terribly sick. I urge everyone to return to your rooms. I will have a maid crew take care of everything here. Thank you for informing the staff of this disturbance,” Susannah said quickly recovering.

It seemed it had been the perfect thing to say. Everyone began to scatter from the hallway and back into his or her room. No one wanted to witness the aftermath of someone having been violently ill. Bobby who had stood immediately Susannah had opened the door had seen what Susannah’s offended sense of smell did not let her see. The French doors had been wide open.

Melissa's room was completely shrouded in fog. His heart slowed, each beat more sluggish than the last. His breath caught in his throat trying to choke him. He prayed that he was wrong, but he feared with everything he was that he was not. Melissa was dead. He knew it, but did not want to believe it. He stood completely still; one hand gripped the trim around the door.

Once the hall was clear, Susannah began issuing orders.

"John, call down to reception. I want everyone on this floor moved to another room. Have Kimberly organize the removal of any guest's belongings that are not currently staying in the hotel if she has to. Luis, do not let anyone enter this room. Robert, you are coming with me."

"No."

Susannah stopped. She was not used to anyone telling her no. She turned to look at him. She could see by expression that he was going to be stubborn.

"John, watch the door. I will take care of informing Kimberly about the room changes. Luis, help Mr. Crawford to my office."

"You can't do this to me!" Bobby said as he realized he was being dragged away from the door, away from Melissa.

"I can and I am. Something happened in that room. Until the authorities arrive, no one goes in or out."

"What if she's hurt? We need to help her!"

"I think you know there's nothing that can be done. By the smell in that room, Miss Donnelly is beyond our help," Susannah said softly.

Bobby went limp. He had known. Susannah's words only reinforced it. His back straightened. He still refused to believe it. Until he saw with his own eyes, he would hold out hope.

"I need to see her. I won't believe she's ... I won't! No until I see her," Bobby said.

"I'm sorry, Robert. I can't allow anyone in that room."

"Don't you want to be sure?" he tried again.

"I will check on her myself. After I've talked to the Sheriff."

He knew he was not going to get any further with her. He would cooperate for now. He knew Jonathan had a key to her room just in case. He only needed to distract John for long enough to get into Melissa's room.

## Chapter Eleven

“Jonathan?” Bobby said.

The nurse had let him in as she left. Jonathan was in his room, staring out of the window into nothing.

Bobby stood in the doorway, unsure now that he wanted to involve Jonathan in anything until he was sure. Jonathan looked haggard. The medicated sleep had not done him any favors.

Jonathan did not respond or turn away from the window.

“Hey, man, I was just checking in on you, but if you would rather I leave...”

“Yes,” it seemed even that much was a strain.

“Alright, I’ll come back later with George. We can talk,” he finished lamely.

Jonathan did not look at him or made any sign that he had heard. It was probably for the best. Jonathan was too fragile to hear about Melissa, not when Bobby was not certain.

He left Jonathan staring at the whiteness of the fog. He would come back later when he knew the facts.

He would just have to figure out another way to get into Melissa’s room. He bumped into George as he was leaving Jonathan’s room.

“George! Hey, man, how are you holding up?” Bobby said.

“I’m ok, I guess. I’ve never seen Melissa like that before, you know? It was scary.”

“Yeah, it was a little gut wrenching. Listen, Jon isn’t really in the mood for visitors right now. Why don’t you and I go talk somewhere?”

“Yeah, alright,” George said shrugging. He was relieved not to have to console his friend just now.

They were talking in Bobby’s room a few hours later.

“Wait, didn’t you say that the room filled with fog?” George said.

“Yeah? So what?” Bobby returned not seeing where his friend was going.

“Follow me, if there’s fog in the room, then there must be an open window or balcony door. What if we go around the exterior of the building and climb up to her balcony?” George said.

“Are you crazy? We’d get lost inside a minute, first of all. And second, even if we managed to find our way to her room, how are we going to get up to the third floor?”

“Look, you want in that room or not?”

“Of course, but what good is it if we get ourselves killed in the process?” Bobby said exasperated.

“Look, I kinda been talking to some of the guys that work here. One of them might be cool with leaving a ladder where we need it. We just need to stick close to the building to avoid getting lost.”

“Great, one of your ‘friends’ is gonna be willing to risk their neck out in this crap?”

“If the money is right, my ‘friends’ will do just about anything. Now cough up some money, and we’ll get you that ladder,” George said impatiently.

“Are you sure this will work?” Bobby asked already doubting the whole enterprise.

“I ain’t making any guarantees. You just keep to the side of the building until you find the ladder. After that it’s a piece of cake.”

“Wait a minute! Just a second ago you were talking about ‘we’ when did this turn out to just be me?”

“When you reminded me how stupid this all is, but I’ll back you up. Now do you have the cash or not?”

“How much do you need?” he said a bit uncertainly.

Somehow he felt like he had been swept up into this without really thinking it through. Bobby pulled out his wallet to look at how much he had. There had not been much opportunity to spend any of it, since they had been stuck at the hotel.

“I don’t know. It’ll take some negotiating. Just make sure you’ve got plenty. Like I said they’re willing to risk their life if the money is right.”

George eyed Bobby’s wallet.

“It looks like you’ve enough. If not I can back you with a bit,” George said.

“I thought you blew all your cash that stripper joint we went to before we got here?”



“Nah, I always carry some spare change in my suitcase just in case. Besides, I hit an ATM before we got stuck here. Now are we done discussing my finances or can we get this going?”

“Alright, alright, after you,” Bobby said.

The two had managed to find the ladder leaning against the building a few hours later. It had been difficult to get around the valets guarding the exits, but they had managed. George clutched Bobby’s shirt as he led them practically pressed against the building toward the back of the main house.

Bobby quickly climbed up to see how far they needed to move the ladder. The fog had not cleared in any way nor had the oppressive feeling he had experienced the last time he was out in this crap. He reached the top rung and by sheer luck discovered he was just arm’s length away from the nearest balcony. He hoped that this was Melissa’s balcony. He would hate to scare some other person half out of their mind when he peaked inside. He climbed back down the ladder to talk to George.

“I think if we move the ladder just an arm’s length to the right we should hit a balcony. I have no way of knowing who’s balcony it is until we look through the window, but at least we’ll be up there.”

“I’m all set,” George said.

Together they moved the ladder over. George went up first this time around. Bobby held the ladder steady. When he no longer felt George moving the ladder, he climbed up after. George helped him over the side of the balcony.

“Is this the one?” Bobby asked as he lifted a leg over the side of the balcony.

“I haven’t looked. I was too busy making sure your ass didn’t fall from this damn ladder,” George answered.

Bobby sighed as he managed to finally get his body over the railing.

“Thanks,” he said without much gratitude.

“Look I could’ve just let you fall,” George insisted.

“I said thanks. Now keep your voice down. We don’t know if they finished moving everyone off this floor.”

“Whatever, just go walk over there to see if the damn doors are open.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m on it.”

Bobby walked slowly toward what he hoped was the center of the balcony to find the French doors.

“Damn it!” he let loose as he smacked his hand against the door.

It swung slightly away from him. He decided not to bother going back for George. This was his thing. He could barely see a thing within the room. The fog had penetrated the room completely. The smell finally hit him. He gagged on it. He knew he should stay away from the room. He had seen enough forensic shows to know he could be disturbing vital evidence, but he just did not care.

He went back outside to clear the smell from his nostrils. He knew the only way to see what was inside that room was to close the doors and wait until the mist dissipated. He gently kicked the doors closed. He turned toward the balcony edge and leaned there to wait.

“Is this it?” George asked.

Bobby started; he had forgotten that George was still waiting for him.

“Yeah, this is it. Listen, it’s going to take a while for this stuff to clear out of the room. Why don’t you head on back?”

“Are you crazy? I’m not walking through this shit by myself. I’ll wait with you.”

“Ok,” Bobby said not wanting to fight.

The two waited for the fog dissipate from the room, checking every once in a while. Neither spoke much as they waited. It was a gruesome thing they were doing. The gravity was not lost on them.

Night fell before the fog had finally cleared enough to see anything. At last check, Bobby and George looked at each other.

“Do you want me to go in with you?” George asked.

“I think I do want you to come with me,” Bobby admitted.

“Alright,” George said but neither moved to open the door.

“Let’s get this over with,” Bobby said and opened the door.

George followed closely behind. The smell had not improved, but Bobby was prepared. Unfortunately, George was not. He nearly ran out of the room. He managed to stay with Bobby, but he was only to do so by pulling his shirt up over his mouth and nose.

What they found would remain in their minds for the rest of their lives. Melissa's body lay on the bed. From the neck up, her face was intact. What it revealed was almost as disturbing as the rest of what was left of her body. Her features were twisted in horror and pain showing she had endured some terrible torture before she finally died. Blood was speckled across her cheeks and forehead. Her chest and abdomen was ripped open. She looked as though she had been mutilated by some wild animal. Her hands were mangled. Some of her fingers were missing; the palms lacerated. The sheets were soaked with blood. The walls were covered in gore and more blood.

Neither could bear to look beneath the sheets that covered her body up to the waist. Her body was twisted as if something had tried to drag her out. There were what appeared to be bite marks on the hanging arm. After the shock began to release them, they both ran for the balcony. George made to the ladder first. He climbed down as quickly as he could. Bobby tried to wait to make sure George was off the ladder. He just wanted to escape. He had known that Melissa was dead, but this? He never expected... but he should have. After what Jonathan had said about Vicky and what that creature had done to her, he knew Melissa was dead when he saw the fog had entered Melissa's room. Something was out there and it had gotten into Melissa's room.

George disappeared into the mist before Bobby could climb down to the ground, but Bobby was not thinking about George. All he could think of was the gore and blood, the mutilation and how he never had the chance to tell Melissa how he felt. He had wanted to run fast and as far away as he could, but now he had difficulty just placing one foot in front of the other. He stopped paying attention to the building. He wandered off into the mist.

After several minutes of mindless wandering, Bobby realized he had strayed out too far from the hotel. He could not see anything beyond his own nose. Bobby contemplated panicking, but he could not work up enough reason to care. He stopped walking. He was either just a few feet from the hotel or several yards depending on which direction he had left the path. There was no point waiting for help or for the fog to clear. He was on his own out here and had no way to orient himself to get back.

He squared his shoulders. If he was going to die out here, Bobby would do so staring the thing that killed Vicky and Melissa dead on. His gait changed from a meandering shuffle to a purposeful stride. He headed deeper into the grayness. Wisps of fog wrapped teasingly around his ankles before flitting away. A cool, moist breeze caressed his cheek. The oppressive feeling of the mist changed to one of barely contained excitement. Bobby realized in that moment that there was no one creature loose out here after all. The evil thing that had mutilated his two friends had been the fog itself.

The fog was nearly giddy with anticipation. Bobby was its first willing victim. Bobby's mouth twisted into sickly grin. Tendrils of mist were forming in front of him taking on vaguely human shapes. He screamed. It was not a scream of fear but a battle cry as he lunged into human shapes.

George stopped running at the sound of Bobby's battle cry. He turned to discover he was alone. He reached for the hotel wall on his right. The rough feeling of the stucco under his fingers reassured him. He knew he could not help his friend. The thought relieved him of his guilt. George had no intention of tracking Bobby only to find Bobby's body. There was no point. He

waited there unsure still whether he should stay or run. He owed Bobby more than this. Without losing contact with the wall, George turned to look out into blankness. He pressed his back into the building and waited. The sounds that carried back to him were more terrible than even the sight of Melissa's mutilated body. At least with Melissa, he had only seen the aftermath of what happened to her. His imagination could not fathom how she had received such injuries. Now he could hear what the creature was doing to Bobby, every last gurgling scream, every single bone snapping, and each bite into human flesh. With each sound, his mind painted a picture of wild animals rending flesh from bone except these wild animals did not snarl or bark. The only thing he could hear standing there was Bobby. It made the whole experience worse in every way.

His hands clenched into fists at his side, George closed his eyes. He managed to keep from crying out but only just. He would wait. He would bear witness to Bobby's death because it was all he could do. Because his eyes were closed, he did not see the bloodied hand that reached for him mere inches away from his feet. His eyes snapped open at Bobby's final scream. He was able to see Bobby being dragged back into the mist.

"Bobby!"

"No... no—I," George slid down the wall until he landed on his knees.

He remained kneeling there for an uncountable period of time. He would later remember the cold that had swept over him as despair and shame sunk into his stomach like two awkward dance partners. In that moment, he did not feel the damp grass against his bare legs or the way the fog cleared slightly around him while a few feet away the mist pulsed thickly. It fed off his despair, his guilt and shame as it had fed off Bobby's fear and pain. It craved more and more it shall have.

## Chapter Twelve

Someone had found him. He could not remember who. Whoever it was, he helped George to his feet and practically carried him to the lobby. There had been a crowd around him at one point, but it had not seemed to penetrate. He was numb. He neither wished to be alone nor did he want to speak to anyone.

He was now sitting in an office on a leather couch. He could hear someone speaking, but George could not understand what it was she said. George thought maybe he should figure out where he was, but could not care enough to look around. He let his head fall back on the couch and closed his eyes.

“He’s still not responsive, Miss Susannah,” the doctor said.

“Thank you, Henry. What do you recommend?” Susannah asked.

“He’s fine here for now. He should not be left alone. His blood pressure is a little low, so I’d make sure he has plenty of water. Keep him warm. I’ll check on him again in another couple of hours.”

The doctor walked to the door. Susannah escorted him to the staff exit that led back upstairs.

“Thank you, doctor,” Susannah said closing the door after him.

She turned to look at George. He was still pale, but his breathing appeared to have improved. She was unsure of what to do next. His friend Bobby was missing and Jonathan was still a bit of a mess. She contemplated asking Cameron to come but decided against it. Then she remembered Alexia. The girl would be perfect. She could fill the room with nonsense chatter until George snapped out of it or he fell asleep.

Susannah walked back to her desk and called the kitchen for a pitcher of water and some snacks. She pressed the end key on her phone and dialed Alexia’s room. The phone rang several times before someone answered. A woman picked up that Susannah did not readily recognize.

“Yes?” the woman’s voice said impatiently.

“I was looking for Alexia,” Susannah said uncertain she had dialed the correct room.

“Susannah, dear, you needn’t be coy. If you want to speak to Cameron, you can say so,” Amanda said in a sickly sweet voice.

“Amanda? I was not sure I had the right room for a moment. I am looking for Alexia, however. Is she available?” Susannah said politely.

“If you’re sure that’s who you want to talk to...” Amanda paused to see if Susannah responded to her baiting.

“It is what I said,” Susannah said with mild sarcasm.

“Of course, hold on just a moment then, okay?” Amanda laid the receiver on the table.

Chances were that Alexia would not wish to speak to anyone even Susannah. The brat had been listless and unapproachable since she had come up to visit with Cameron.

She rapped gently on Alexia’s door, hoping she would not answer.

“What is Amanda?”

Amanda grimaced at her rude tone, but remained calm. Cameron was now paying very close attention to how his sister is treated. It would not do for him to hear Amanda saying anything rude to his precious little sister.

“You have a phone call,” she began.

“I’m not available right now,” Alexia called through the door.

“Yes, dear, but it’s Susannah. I thought maybe you would want to take it,” Amanda said smiling through gritted teeth.

She had been ambivalent to Alexia before but now she really was getting to be a real bother. It did not matter much in the end. Once Cameron and she were married, there would be no reason to visit with the family as often. She would rarely have to see the brat after that.

“Are you going to take the call?” Amanda asked after a period of silence from behind Alexia’s door. She was starting to dislike talking to a door.

The door opened suddenly to reveal Alexia.

“You startled me!”

“I’ll take it in here, thanks,” Alexia said and closed the door just as Amanda began looking around inside the room.

Alexia picked up the extension in her room and waited until Amanda replaced the receiver in the other room.

“Susannah? What is it?” Alexia asked.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I could really use your help,” Susannah said.

“What do you need?” Alexia said noncommittally.

“I just need you to sit with one of the guys you met today. Do you remember George?”

“Yeah one of Jonathan’s gang. What about him?”

“One of the staff found him just shy of the staff entrance kneeling on the ground in a near comatose state. The doctor says he should be fine. He just needs someone to keep an eye on him. My only on duty nurse is assigned to Jonathan. I was just hoping you could sit with him here in my office until Millie can get away from her other duties. She’s studying to be a nurse, so maybe she could help. Listen to me, I’m rambling. Anyway, can you?” Susannah finished.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I feel up to being around people right now.”

“Oh, well of course. What was I thinking! You just went through this traumatic thing and here I am being as sensitive as usual. Well, I am sorry I disturbed you. I’m sure I can get one of the reception girls to sit with George for a little while.”

“Actually, I guess I could sit with him. It might help me if I just got out of this room for a little while,” Alexia said.

“Are you sure?” Susannah asked nervously.

She felt such a selfish idiot. How could she think to ask Lexi for a favor when she had been there when that poor girl was attacked. She could not believe how little forethought she had put into this call. All she wanted now was to hang up and pretend she had never picked up the receiver, but it was too late. Alexia was agreeing to help. Susannah could not help but admire her.

“Who was that?” Cameron said without much interest.

Alexia replaced the receiver, “Susannah, she was hoping I could sit with George for a little bit.”

“George?” he was trying valiantly to remain focused on what she was saying, but he did not remember meeting a George on this trip.

“Jonathan’s friend,” she said quietly.

“Oh. What are you going to do?”

“I think you need to stay in your room with a nice cup of tea. You don’t need to add someone’s else’s trauma to what you experienced,” Amanda said hoping she sounded maternal and protective and not like a busybody.

“I appreciate your concern, Amanda, but I already agreed to sit with him for a little while.”

“What happened?” Cameron asked.

“I’m not sure. They found him just outside the service entrance. He hasn’t spoken, so no one can get a straight answer from him,” she shrugged, “I can handle a little companionable silence.”

Cameron’s lip twitched slightly in an attempt at a smile. Amanda could certainly talk when she was nervous. He did not mind, the nonsense became just so much white noise, soothing and constant.

“Do you want me to walk you down there?” he asked.

Alexia looked at him and realized he was not asking her what she wanted, but if she would allow him to protect her. She nodded leaving her suspicions unsaid. She did not want him there at her side, but if it made him feel better that he was watching over her, than she would allow him to.

She went back to her room to grab a cardigan and met Cameron at the door.

“Wait a minute!” Amanda said as she realized Cameron meant to leave her alone while he escorted his sister to the freaking lobby.

Neither said a word, as they turned and watched her scramble for her purse and shoes. When she had collected her things, they turned back to the door and stepped through. The door nearly closed in Amanda’s face, but she managed to grab it in time. They marched silently down the hall toward the grand stairway. There were closer stairwells, but no one was inclined to take the narrow, airless stairs down to the lobby. The elevators were still set to emergency power only. How long would it be before repair crews could get to them out here and restore the power?

The three arrived at Susannah’s door. Cameron felt a moment of anxiety at not having Alexia in sight where he could keep an eye on her. He tried to suppress it. He did not know where this fear and apprehension came from. He had been fine last night or least better than this. He had left Alexia alone most of the night, but now for some reason he felt he had to protect her.

Amanda was only impatient to get back to Cameron’s room. She thought maybe he could comfort her again. She hid her satisfied feline smile by pretending to examine the tile at her feet.

Alexia was oblivious to it all. She did not know why she had agreed now that she stood at the door. They waited for Susannah to allow them in. Alexia’s doubts grew as her eyes landed on the pale faced boy sitting with his eyes closed in Susannah’s office. What had she agreed to? George was nearly catatonic from the looks of it. She was not qualified to watch over anyone much less this stranger who’s barely a vegetable.

“Susannah, I—“

“Alexia, Cameron, Amanda,” Susannah said her excitement much less palpable at the mention of Amanda’s name.

“Susannah, how are you?” Cameron said.



“I’m fine. I wanted to thank you for your help last night. You have no idea what it means to me to know I can count on you,” Susannah said warmly.

“I wouldn’t count on him for long, Susannah. We do check out at the end of the week,” Amanda said with false brightness.

Her true meaning was lost on no one except maybe on George. No one was sure whether he even heard any of them. There was an uncomfortable silence until George screamed.

They were all startled at the sound and turned to look at him. He appeared to be having a waking nightmare.

“Bobby!”

They all looked at each other. No one liked where this was going.

“George?” Susannah ventured toward him.

“No!”

Susannah sprang away as George grasped at her approaching hands.

“Bobby! Bobby...” his voice broke into sobs.

He dropped his hands punching his thighs he dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. He stayed in that position a moment before releasing a strangled shout through bared teeth. He dropped his hands again.

“He’s dead.”

“Who is?” Susannah asked very carefully.

“Bobby. The mist got him just like Melissa and Vicky.”

“What do you mean like Melissa?” Susannah asked.

“You saw the mist that covered her room. She opened the doors and it got her. We saw what it did to her.”

His gaze turned inward as he relived the moment when Bobby and he had seen the mutilated body of Melissa on the bed. He shuddered as he tried to shake the image from his mind. He would never truly forget what he had seen. The images were losing their power over him as the horror of Bobby’s death took over his nightmares.

“You mean you and Bobby snuck into Melissa’s room?” Susannah tried very hard to keep her tone from showing her incredulity.

“Yeah, we found a ladder and climbed up onto her balcony. After what we saw, we ran for it. I made it down to the ground before Bobby. I heard him hit the ground behind me. I thought he was still there, but I was wrong. By the time I realized it, I heard him scream. I heard him scream again and again. The thing was tearing him apart. I could hear it ripping into him. All I heard were the screams and the tearing flesh.”

George fell silent for so long they thought maybe he was done, but then he said, “I was too slow.”

“What do you mean, George?” Cameron asked.

George looked up for a moment, but he was not seeing anyone.

“He had managed to get away. He was crawling back to me, but I thought he was already dead. I stopped looking for him. He was right there. He was reaching for me. I could have saved him! I was too slow. It grabbed him and dragged him away. All I could do was stare at him in horror until the mist swallowed him and he vanished from sight. He screamed to the last. I stayed there and waited, prayed that maybe he would be able to get away again. The screams eventually faded away, but Bobby never reappeared.”

The shattered look on his face was enough to break even Amanda’s self-centered shell. She was crying and had not realized it. Alexia had managed to snap out of her malaise. She had to help him. She just did not know how. Cameron sought his sister’s hand. He needed reassurance that she at least was okay. Alexia looked at him and smiled. He squeezed her hand to show her he would protect her. He released her hand. He needed to console Amanda. He gathered her up and held her there against his chest and let her cry.

George was oblivious to them all. He stood and left the office. No one tried to stop him. He did not know where he was going, but he did not believe it mattered.

Susannah’s jaw hardened. She was now determined that no one else would die. Why did they have to go out there? Why not wait until authorities had arrived to check on Melissa? All they had managed to do was get one of them killed. She doubted they just found the ladder. In this fog, they would never be able to figure which balcony belonged to Melissa. Someone had to have helped them and that someone was on her staff. She would worry about that later. Right now she needed to make sure there was someone posted on every exit even the service exit.

What Susannah did not know in that moment was that it was already too late to set guards. Someone was helping the fog just as the fog helped him. He had opened a few windows on the top floor and now the mist was inside the hotel.

## Chapter Thirteen

Susannah's phone began ringing. All the lines were flashing. She walked over to the desk. She chose a line at random.

"Susannah speaking," she answered.

After listening for a few moments, a frown creased her brow. She rubbed at the spot and said, "hang on I have another line ringing through."

She put the first all on hold and chose another at random.

"Yes?"

Her frown deepened, "Hang on."

She switched to another line again and again. She finally gave up after the tenth call. Her head was ready to split in two.

"This is unbelievable," Susannah whispered.

She sat down behind her desk before her knees could give way beneath her.

"What's going on, Susannah?" Alexia was the only one left of the original group.

"I—" Susannah stopped. She could not find the words.

"Susannah? What is it?"

Susannah shook her head.

"I don't know where to start. The whole third floor is shrouded in thick fog. People can hear screaming coming from every room. I don't know what to do..."

"You can start by getting up and starting an evacuation from the top floor and down into the lobby," Alexia said angrily.

"Now get up, and stop feeling sorry for yourself!"

Alexia stormed out to find Cameron. She had to be sure he was okay. Amanda's room was on the third floor. She was hoping they had not made it upstairs yet but if they had, she hoped they were in their room. She tried the first courtesy phone she found. The phone line was dead. She slammed the phone down. She would have to go up and check herself.

She took the grand staircase two at a time. Cameron had to be okay; he just had to be. She collided with Adrian half way up the stairs.

“Whoa! What’s the hurry?” Adrian said.

“Cameron, I have to get to him,” Alexia huffed.

“Why what’s wrong?” Adrian followed behind her since Alexia did not bother to slow down.

“Something is loose in the hotel,” she managed.

“What?!”

“Top floor... Amanda’s room is on that floor,” she said.

Adrian finally understood. He quickened his step. They hit the second floor landing and sprinted the rest of the way to Alexia’s room. She reached the door handle forgetting about her key. She was frustrated into slamming her open palm on the door. The sting was enough to snap her out of her momentary panic. She fished her room key out of her pocket and clumsily got the door open.

“Cameron?” she yelled as soon as she opened the door.

“What?” Cameron was startled from his doze on the couch.

“Oh, thank God!” Alexia said dropping her head down and bending almost double with relief.

She tried to get her wind back.

“Where’s Amanda?” Adrian asked.

Alexia snapped back upright.

“She’s in my room sleeping. What the hell is going on?” Cameron asked quickly losing his temper.

“We have to help people down from the top floors. Whatever killed the others is loose up there.”

“What? How the hell do you know?” Cameron asked as he quickly placed his feet in his shoes.

“I was in Susannah’s office when the calls started coming in. There are people screaming and whole damn floor is shrouded in mist. Susannah has no idea what to do. We have to do something,” Alexia said urgently.

“Let’s go,” Cameron said once he had his shoes on.

“Can I ask you guys something?” Adrian said.

He had not moved from his spot on by the door.

“What is it Adrian?” Cameron said impatiently.

“Why do we have to run up there? I mean I want to help but why us?” Adrian asked genuinely confused.

“Adrian we don’t have time to debate this. We need to go. I just want to help as many people as I can,” Cameron said.

“Come on!” Alexia said already waiting with the door ajar.

“You coming?” Cameron asked.

“Yeah, I’m coming,” but Cameron was already out in the hall.

Adrian rushed to grab the door before it slammed closed in his face. He closed the door gently behind him and sprinted to catch up with the siblings.

“No, don’t use the stairwells. It’s too tight in there,” Adrian said as he caught up with them.

“Then how do you propose we get up there? The grand staircase only goes up to this floor.”

“The arterial staircases go up to the third floor. There’s access to the wider service stairs from that floor.”

“Can we stop debating this and go?” Alexia said impatiently.

“Come on, it’s this way,” Adrian said with a twist of his lips.

They followed quickly behind him.

Meanwhile, Susannah was busy mustering what was left of the hotel staff. She figured out how the boys had been able to leave the hotel so easily. There were barely enough people on staff left to guard the main exits let alone all the possible ways in and out of the hotel. All that was left were a few of the maids and a couple of reception desk clerks. Most of the kitchen staff had disappeared. The head chef and maybe a handful of bus boys were that were left of them. The bellhops were all mostly there, but all the grounds staff had left before the storm hit.

“Miss Susannah?”

“Oh, Jeffrey! Thank God you’re still here!”

“Yes, miss, the entire security staff that was on duty when the storm arrived are all here. There weren’t enough to cover all the exits, but I think it’s sufficient to help evacuate the top floors.”

“Jeffrey, you’re a God send. Please coordinate any remaining staff to get those people down into the lobby. Is there any way to block off the top floors?”

“I don’t believe so, Miss Susannah, but we’re keeping all our options available,” the head of security nodded as he left Susannah’s office.

Susannah began to feel a modicum of ease at seeing the ex-cop was still here and very much on top of things. He should have been the one to coordinate everything once the first person had gone missing, but Susannah was too much a control freak to relinquish command. She was certain now that she could have made some vital mistakes in taking over the way she had.

It was too late now to castigate herself over what might have been. Now there was only time to resolve this latest crisis. She set to making phone calls and coordinating what was left of the maid staff to set up the breakfast room and adjoining conference and ballrooms into temporary sleeping quarters for those guests being relocated. She tried several times in between phone calls to contact the police on her cell phone. There was only static on the line. The landlines only worked within the hotel. Outgoing lines were still down. How the hell was she going to get these people out of here?

This whole mess began with the missing Mr. [belligerent] and the rising of this blinding fog. What if there was no creature? What if the thing that was killing people was the fog itself? It would explain how so many people could be affected upstairs while still in their rooms. Most of the rooms on that floor did not have operating windows and no access to the decorative balconies on that floor.

How in the hell were they supposed to keep the fog from making it down to the lower floors? She stopped to rub her temples, but soon berated herself for taking the time to wallow in self-pity. There would be time enough for that later if they made it out of there in one piece. Her mouth twisted at the morbid thought.

## Chapter Fourteen

“We make quite a team,” Frank said into the misted room. He sat on an armchair in their latest victim’s room.

Their symmetry was incredible. There was no reason for the fog to stifle the screams now. Not now that screams emanated from every room. The little blonde had been delicious. He was able to relish every scream, drink in every glare and mewling prayer to make it stop. But he did not stop. He sliced and tore while the fog kept her flailing arms from raising too far off the bed. He liked that part quite a bit. It gave them hope to be able to raise an arm or leg off the bed only to have the limb slam back down on the bed.

It was a shame he had not known her name at the outset. He would just have to wait. He could not risk rifling through her belongings to discover her identity. He sighed contentedly. He had never liked working with a partner. They usually talked or made mistakes that he would never make. He had been along on a few trips with others who were just beginning. He never participated. He had known better even then to keep his hands off anything that could be traced back to him. They were all eventually caught. They had only been amateurs. Frank had never been an amateur. This fog was the best tool in his extensive toy chest.

He would regret leaving here where the fog would not be able to follow. He could not afford to remain here after the authorities finally made it through the barricade of trees. He could not afford to stay in this room either. He looked over his handiwork. He was glad he had not majored in medicine. As much as a good anatomy class would have helped with his hobby, it would be another link the police could follow.

He made a quick sweep of the room making sure there was no evidence that he or anyone else had been there. He nearly made his first mistake. He was feeling so sure of himself, he did not check before exiting the room.

“Frank!” Alexia said surprised to see him there.

“Alexia, did you come to check on me?” he asked with his usual sarcasm.

“Not remotely, but I thought your room was down a floor...”

“Is that so? You know what room I’m in?” he waggled his brows.

“Stop being such an asshole, Frank. What the hell are you doing here?” Alexia asked.

“I was just checking on the girl in this room. It doesn’t look too good for her. It’s pretty much the same story in every room I’ve checked,” he said.

“Poor girl, how far did you get?” Alexia asked.

“Just a few rooms, really. This one and a couple others down that way,” he pointed vaguely down the hall from where they were.

“Okay, we’ll skip those. Just make sure to point them out as we go,” Alexia said.

Cameron and Adrian had caught up with them at that point.

“We got a few people out of their rooms, but I’m not holding much hope for the rest. It’s not pretty,” Cameron said grimly.

They all exchanged bleak looks. They paused for only a few moments before continuing down the hall. They banged on doors and called out for anyone who could hear them. Where the door was locked, they forced their way in.

Every third room had a living person inside scared and shivering. Those were only the ones who had someone staying with them in their room. The other person was not so lucky. Whatever it was that was terrorizing the guests, it only left alive those that it could torture with the death of someone else.

“What are you kids doing?” they heard from the stairwell opening at this side of the hall.

“We’re helping people out here,” Alexia answered without turning around. She helped a devastated young woman out of her room.

“Well, you need to get off this floor. We can take it from here,” the security officer said.

“You do what you feel you have to, and I’ll do what we feel we have to,” Alexia said.

“Come on, sweetie, just a few more steps. That’s it,” Alexia coaxed.

“Miss, I appreciate you want to help, but we would all feel more comfortable if you and your friends went downstairs. There’s a great deal you can do to help the people out down there,” Jeffrey tried again.

“Come on, Alexia. He’s right. They have more guys and master keys. They can get the people out of their rooms faster than we can. We can get this bunch,” he pointed at the shivering group milling in the hall, “down to the lobby. Once everyone is settled, we can come back and get the next batch. None of them will want to be separated from you right now anyway,” Cameron said.

Alexia stopped and looked at him and then at the small group they had managed to rescue. None would meet her eye, afraid of what she would say. No one wanted to admit how much they were depending on her. They were ashamed of their fear and of their dependency.

“Okay, let’s go. Adrian, lead the way. We’ll avoid the enclosed stairwells. It’ll be safer with all these people in tow,” she said decisively.



“Thank you for all your help. We’ll keep everyone at the head of the stairs as we get them out of the rooms,” the security guard said.

“Good idea, mister,” Alexia said and turned away.

“My name’s Jeffrey,” he told her.

“Nice to meet you Jeffrey, but forgive me if I don’t continue the introductions,” Alexia said over her shoulder.

“No problem, good luck,” Jeffrey said as he turned back to the task.

“You too, Jeff,” Alexia said in a low voice.

Frank was chafing at all this good guy crap. He should not be helping the rescue effort, but he could not do otherwise or he would raise suspicions. He knew his chance to escape was coming, though.

“I’m gonna start checking this floor, start getting people downstairs,” Frank said as they made it to the third floor.

“Sure, Frank,” Alexia said not paying him much mind.

She was just glad he was leaving them alone. He gave her the creeps now more than ever. She could not really put a finger on what was bothering her. She decided to put to the back of her mind. She would think about it later. She was exhausted. She had enough trouble placing one foot in front of the other. Her neck and shoulders were tight with the stress of the whole situation.

Cameron watched his sister with admiration and concern. He never knew she could be this protective and this strong. He should have. She behaved so much like the older sister growing up. She always watched out for him. He had always thought it was hero worship of an older brother. He knew now, just how much it was just a part of her make up. He helped the old man in front of him whose step faltered. The poor man had to watch his wife of twenty years get torn apart in front him. All the people they rescued had similar stories. He was just grateful they had not come across any families with young children. He suspected they either were at the beach resorts or were not schedule to arrive until Friday night. All he wanted was to get back to his room and crash on the bed pretend none of this had ever happened.

He watched Adrian as he watched Alexia. He had never noticed until now what Adrian’s feelings were for his sister. He hoped fervently things worked for them. He had no idea how Alexia felt, but if she returned the feeling, he would not get in the way. He just hoped that they would both make it out this damn hotel alive. He had already learned a valuable lesson on this trip. Aside from having finally seen his sister for the strong woman she was, he realized that he wanted more out of life than he was letting himself have.

In that life he could not see Amanda anywhere near it. He just did not have the feelings he thought he had for her. He had to get his head on straight first. Maybe in a few years, he would be ready for that relationship. If he was going to have the kind of marriage his parents' had, he had to stop trying to emulate the paths they took and chose a woman based on the feelings they had for each other.

He could not believe he was even thinking about this stuff when everything around him was falling apart. And yet he could because if all he did were think about what was happening, he would probably go insane. He had seen so much death in so many guises in the last hour. He pushed the images that rushed to the surface back down again to be examined later when he and Lexi were safe and far away from this place.

“Listen guys, I’m going to take a look on this floor, see if there’s anyone still in their rooms,” Frank said as they reached the third floor.

He finally had his moment to escape without appearing suspicious. He doubted Cameron or Adrian would volunteer to leave their precious Lexi alone with these traumatized sheep. He had to keep his end of the bargain, and he could not do that while playing babysitter to a bunch of weaklings that were not strong enough to defend themselves against a little water vapor. He had other prey to hunt and more windows to open. He smirked. He would help drive all the sheep to the slaughter. It was joyous to communicate with it, to understand it.

He did not bother to wait for a response. He left the herd and the shepherds to their work. He had some stragglers to take care of yet.

“Yeah sure,” Alexia said. She was just glad to be rid of him.

Alexia did not watch as he disappeared down the hall. She was not certain what it was, but there was something about him now that was infinitely creepier than normal. Alexia could not quite nail down the thing that bothered her, but she promised herself time to think about it later. In that moment, all she could manage was to focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

Adrian watched her as they made their way down the ornate stairs that joined the second floor with the third at each end of the hotel. He had found them on one of the many occasions he found himself mercifully alone. He did not want to be alone now. Whatever was happening, whatever or whoever was killing all these people; he did not want to be alone when it came for him. It made him feel selfish to think such a thing, but he somehow knew he would not be the one left to watch. He was not sure why he knew that. There was no one here who cared for him deeply enough to torture with his death. If anything, he would be the one who would have to watch someone he loved die. He glanced at Alexia once more. He would not let himself believe that anything could happen to her. He would keep her safe from this fog, from Frank, from whatever threatened her.

“Why is this happening?” one of their small group spoke up.

“I don’t know,” Alexia answered.

“I mean why here? What is God awful fog that’s killing everybody?” the woman continued as if she had not heard.

“I don’t know,” Alexia repeated.

“Why did it my husband? Why did it make me watch as it tore him apart?” the woman was near hysterics.

Alexia could only repeat once more, “I don’t know.”

“Stop saying that! You must know something! You work here, right?”

“No, I’m a guest, just like you,” Alexia said tiredly.

“You’re what? You’re just a guest? Then why the hell are we following you?”

“Shut up, woman! We’ve all lost someone here. This young lady and her friends risked their lives to get us off that floor. You should be grateful you’re still alive and it’s all thanks to this kids!” the old man Cameron had helped earlier said.

“Look, we can argue about who’s in charge later. I think we all want to get down to the lobby and as far away from the top floor as we can,” Cameron said.

A few people walked over to the near hysterical woman. One took her by the shoulders while another took her hands. They whispered meaningless platitudes while casting dirty looks at the old man. A couple clapped the old man on one shoulder as they filed past. The rest kept their gaze firmly on their shoes and followed. They did not care who was in charge or where they were being led. They did not care why it was happening only that it had and now they either picked up the pieces or wallowed in despair.

Those that had sided with the woman kept their gaze averted from Alexia. They knew they owed their lives to her and to her friends, but they needed to feel in control. They followed now only because she seemed to know the best route down to the main floor without having to use the stairwells.

As they reached the grand staircase, the small group divided. Those that were looking for control quickened their step, and reached the bottom before the others. There were a few people that helped the injured navigate the wider stairs. While the rest ambled behind; they would not find the answers they sought in a lobby full of strangers anymore quickly than in a hallway with arguing victims.

Someone, she was not sure who, helped the woman Alexia had been practically carrying away. Alexia felt suddenly weightless and drained. Holding up that girl had kept her going. With her gone, she was at a loss as to what to do next.

“You’re exhausted! Come here and sit down. Gina, get them some water,” Susannah said practically clucking as she shooed Alexia, Cameron and Adrian into one of the hundreds of benches and chairs set up that now littered the lobby.

None of them put up a fight as they allowed themselves to be fussed over. The reception clerk brought a full pitcher of ice water and four glasses. She set everything up at the small side table next to their bench. Susannah poured each of them a tall glass. She waited until they each had a sip before beginning her interrogation.

“What’s happening up there? My security staff is not communicating with me as often as I’d like,” Susannah began.

“As far as I know, they were busy checking the rest of the rooms on the top floor for survivors. They sent us down here with the people we had managed to rescue. Frank took off around the third floor to start investigating there. Listen, Susannah, I think our best bet will be to move these people to one of the annexes. If we move them in small enough groups and cordon off the walkways, we should be able to get everyone across without incident,” Cameron said.

“Can’t do it, Cameron. None of the annexes have any power right now. The generators are working full force just to keep the main building’s electricity going. Besides, I can’t risk people going outside,” Susannah said.

“The generators can be rerouted. What are you going to do when that mist starts making its way down that grand staircase? Barricade everyone in a conference room and pray someone would come to rescue us?”

“We’re better off here where we have access to the kitchens, food and fresh water. Yes we can reroute the generators if we had an electrician, but I seem to have lost most of my maintenance staff!”

They were both shouting by this point.

“Will you two just be quiet? It does no one any good to see you losing your cool, Susannah, and Cameron you’re not thinking this through. What difference does it make if we’re barricaded in a conference room here and being barricaded in one of the annexes? We would still have to pray someone would come to rescue us except we wouldn’t have access to food or water. It’s not worth the risk to go fucking around with the generators or sending people outside.

“This thing seems only to attack groups of one or two. Everyone would be safer here together,” Alexia finished.

She sat back on the rattan bench completely drained after her outburst. Susannah and Cameron both bowed their heads in shame. She was right and they were both being assholes.

“Look, let’s just rest here a moment and help the rest of the guests down from the upper floors. Your guys have the top floor covered, so we’ll concentrate on the next floor down,” Adrian said.

“Lexi is going to stay here. She’s done enough,” Cameron said.

“Cameron, I can take care of myself, and I can decide for myself when I’ve done enough. Right now all I’m interested in is this glass of water and this cushioned couch under my butt.”

Adrian and Cameron laughed despite themselves. Susannah smiled and shook her head. She felt a million years old, but hearing these guys laugh reminded her they were older than her.

“Run!” Frank said as he took the grand staircase steps two at a time.

Everyone in the lobby just sat and stared at him until they saw the mist rolling down the steps behind him. The crowd panicked and made for the front entrance.

“Stop! Don’t go outside!” Susannah yelled.

“Please, listen! Go to the conference rooms! Don’t run outside!” Cameron added his voice, but the crowd did not listen. They crammed themselves through the now too narrow front entrance, climbing over each other and pressing to get out. Those that were not trampled were nearly suffocated by the crush of bodies pushing to get out.

After a while, those that had made it through to the outside began to run for the road. It was difficult to hear over the screaming of the crowd at the door, but Cameron strained to listen. He prayed he was wrong, that they made it to the felled trees and over out to the main road. He doubted it, though. He feared once they were outside, they would be disoriented and lose their way.

Becca had been glad to have been so close to the front door. She had been one of the first to make it outside. She was certain that she could find her way down to the main road if she just paid attention to the ground beneath her feet. The moment she felt anything other than tarmac, she would step back and change direction slightly. If that Vicky girl had been paying attention, she would not have gotten off the pathway. She would still be alive, just like Becca planned to be for a while longer. It was a shame that she had been separated from Carrie, but in a situation like this you had to fend for yourself. Once she made it to town, she would send for help. There was not much else she could do for the poor fools still stuck inside.

She felt the ground change beneath her feet and quickly turned a bit to the right. Her feet were back on tarmac once again. She was relieved her plan was working. Now she just needed to keep one foot in front of the other and continue to pay attention to the ground. The fog cleared slightly in front of her. She was able to see more of the driveway ahead of her. She was going to make it out of this nightmare. She quickened her step certain now that she was heading in the right direction. Just as quickly as the mist had cleared, it thickened again to an impenetrable morass of grey and white. She could not even see her own hand in front of her face. The fog felt as though it were trying to suffocate her. It pressed down on her like a smothering blanket.

Adrenaline began coursing through her system. Her heart raced, her fingers tingled. She quickened her step a little more. She was sure the driveway and ultimately the road lay right in

front of her. In the end it did not matter where she was or where she was headed. Once she succumbed to the panic, the mist struck. It solidified into a vaguely humanoid shapes, but instead of hands and fingers the limbs hanging from these creatures of air and water were hooks and talons, blades and pikes and all with serrated edges to tear at the flesh.

Becca screamed but they went unheard because in that moment many more were screaming and over the screams some were already dying.

He noticed a change in the mob at the door. Those at the front were pushing back. They yelled something unintelligible as they tried to get back inside. He could finally make out what they were saying.

“Get back! They’re dying out there! Get back!”

Cameron balled his hands into fists. There was nothing he could do for them. If he stepped into that mob, he would be signing his own death warrant. He watched and he let loose a string of curses.

Alexia closed her eyes. She had rescued some of these people and now they were throwing away that second chance by giving in to the panic. She looked behind her to try and located Frank, that bastard. She could not see him, but what she did see angered her more than ever. There was no mist on the steps. It had been nothing more than a ruse to get people outside and it had succeeded. She turned away from the mob at the entrance. They were beyond her help. She would check on the team on the top floor, and then she would make her way down to the next floor. They at least had a chance.

Cameron saw her turn to walk upstairs. He realized that Alexia had the right of things. There was nothing that could be done for those at the door. Those that had been frozen by fear were fine. They had stayed where they were. A few, so very few, had listened to him and run to the nearest room and locked themselves inside. He would let Susannah and her staff deal with the mess down here. Alexia needed his help.

Adrian followed the siblings without much deliberation. They needed his help. That is all he needed to know. Frank had disappeared from sight. Adrian was certain this panic he had generated had been on purpose. He just did not know what possible purpose it would serve. The man had a sick sense of humor but even Frank would deliberately create a situation that would lead to people dying, would he?

“Cameron?” he heard a tremulous voice behind him.

He stopped and turned to find Carrie at the foot of the stairs. He could see she was reluctant to place even one foot on the staircase. She was crying. Her face was swollen, her eyes dripping tears while her nose almost glowed red.

“Carrie? What is it?” Cameron ran down the few steps he had managed to climb. Alexia and Adrian were not far behind.

“Carrie? What’s happened? Where’s Becca?” Alexia asked urgently.

At Becca’s name, Carrie’s eyes closed; a moan of pain escaped her lips.

“Carrie, what happened to Becca?” Alexia asked again more slowly.

“She’s probably dead by now,” Carrie managed between hiccupping sobs.

“Why would you say that, Carrie?” Alexia tried to modulate her voice, but it was difficult when all she wanted to do was grab Carrie by the arms and shake her until she gave an answer.

“She was one of the first to run outside. We got separated when the crowd rushed to the door. I wasn’t fast enough! I saw her through the glass before this damn fog swallowed her. I heard the screams not long after. It was like it was waiting for them, waiting for Becca,” she looked down wiping tears and snot from her face.

“She’s dead!” she screamed at them.

“You don’t know that, Carrie. She could have made it far enough to escape whatever this,” Cameron said trying to console her.

He knew it was impossible. He was fairly certain that Carrie was right and Becca was very much dead now, but he could say that. Saying it would only make it true.

“I know! Don’t patronize me! The only reason she was here was because of you! But you never saw her as anything more than you kid sister’s little friend. You were too busy sucking face with that bimbo of a girlfriend to pay attention to Becca. She was the only woman who worshipped you and you couldn’t even see it,” Carrie finished bitterly.

“Oh my God, Amanda! I left her sleeping in our room. We have to go check on her!” Cameron said with widening eyes.

He turned back up the steps and ran, Adrian following closely behind. Alexia stayed by Carrie’s side. She cradled her crying friend in her arms and made nonsensical noises like one would make to calm a screaming baby.

“I never got to tell her...”

“Tell her what, sweetie?” Alexia asked brushing Carrie’s hair out of her face.

“Nothing,” she said on an exhale. On the next shuddering breath she began to cry again.

“You loved her,” Alexia stated.

Carrie made no sign that she heard, but the sobs seemed to intensify.

Aware that they were being watched, Alexia guided her friend to Susannah's office. She did not believe Susannah would object, but frankly she did not give a damn.

Cameron hastily opened the door.

"Amanda?"

"Amanda!"

There was an eerie silence in the room. He prayed she would be all right. That the only reason she was not answering was because she was deeply asleep. Please just be asleep.

Once inside he step slowed. He dreaded going into that room, dreaded what he would find there. He pushed the door open and fell to his knees.

"No, no, no, no," he muttered.

"Amanda, why?"

He found her laid out on the bed in angelic pose. Her eyes were closed, but that did not hide her horrified expression. Her mouth was twisted in a final silent scream. There was blood on every surface. He felt the liquid seeping into his shorts. He did not want to step closer, but somehow found himself kneeling at her bedside instead of in the bedroom doorway.

Cameron took her hand in his. He pressed his forehead into the back of her hand. He wanted to block out the image of her mutilated body. Her arms were gouged in several spots. There were claw marks along the top of her chest. The hand he held was missing fingertips on the last three fingers. A part of her shoulder had been bitten clear off to expose the bone below. His eyes skittered away from the open chest. She resembled a television crime drama corpse lying on a cold metal autopsy table. The skin from her chest flapped to either side to reveal the shattered rib cage and collapsed lungs. There were other organs mangled together but he could not identify them since they were not where they should be.

"Cameron?" Adrian called from the living room of the suite.

"In here," he called back hoarsely.

"Oh, Jesus," was all Adrian could say when he saw what was left of Amanda.

Her body was completely exposed. Her legs were broken in several places, bent at strange angles where they were connected at all. What was left of her thighs looked like the discarded remains at a butcher shop. He could not imagine what kind of creature could do such a thing to a healthy athletic girl like Amanda.

"Why are her eyes closed?"



“What?” Cameron asked confused at the strange question.

“Her eyes, did you close them?”

“No, they were closed when I came in here,” Cameron said getting to his feet.

No animal closed the eyes of its victim after mutilating it. Had Amanda been murdered?

“I closed them,” Frank said standing very close behind Adrian.

Adrian jumped, startled by his sudden appearance.

“What?” Cameron said incredulously.

“When I made my sweep of this floor earlier, I found her like this. I couldn’t bear to look at her eyes, so I closed them,” he explained.

“Where did you come from?” Adrian asked looking around the room.

“I just got here,” Frank said.

“How did you know to come here?” Adrian’s suspicions were not allayed.

“I saw you two running up here. I just assumed you finally remembered your girlfriend sleeping up here all defenseless,” Frank said snidely.

“You bastard,” Cameron said as he launched himself at Frank.

Adrian stepped in the way just in time to hold Cameron back.

“Don’t,” Adrian said in a low controlled voice.

“Hey, man, it’s not my fault you were too busy playing hero to protect your woman,” Frank added antagonistically.

“Shut the fuck up, Frank,” Adrian said increasing his hold on Cameron.

“Why should I? What are you doing up here anyway? Shouldn’t you be watching over your precious little Lexi? I’d hate to walk into another room to find another one of our friends laid out like a serial killer’s latest victim.”

“Are you threatening my sister, Frank?” Cameron said with forced control.

“I didn’t say that, my friend. All I’m saying is that when these ladies are left alone, terrible things seem to befall them,” Frank said and walked away.

“You watch your back, Frank,” Cameron said to his retreating back.

Frank stopped and said over his shoulder, “Oh, no, Cam, I’m not the one who needs to watch his back.”

He walked out of the room closing the door behind him with a soft click.

“Come on, there’s nothing we can do for her right now. We shouldn’t leave Lexi alone. In that Frank was right,” Adrian said loosening his grip on his friend.

“You’re right. I’m just going to grab something to change into.”

He turned back to the room and paled. In that brief moment, he had forgotten what lay behind him. There was no surface in the room that did have some splatter of blood or bits of gore. He did not think he could rifle through his bags to find clean clothes. Adrian saw his dilemma.

“Come on, we’ll go to my room and grab you something of mine,” he said as he steered Cameron out of the room.

Cameron could not tear his eyes away from her. He should have been here with her. He may not have been able to protect her, but at least there was a chance the fog would have chosen him instead.

What if the fog had not done this? The thought disturbed him more than he wanted to admit. He was not ready to believe Frank was a murderer nor was he ready to believe that he would ever harm any of them. No, Amanda’s death had to be because of this God forsaken fog.

He followed Adrian to his room where he quickly removed the blood soaked shorts and stained shirt. He splashed water on himself from the sink trying to wash away the blood on his hands and body. He dried off on the hotel’s immaculately white towels. The blood smears he left behind turned his stomach. He only had Lexi to worry about now. He would be damned if allowed anything to happen to her.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Carrie? Tell me what happened,” Alexia asked.

She had managed to get Carrie away from the mayhem in the lobby. Alexia had wanted to help Susannah, but she could not save everyone. She could only concentrate on her friend now.

Carrie took a sip from the glass of water Alexia had given her. She had not stopped crying but at least the gut wrenching sobs had stopped.

“Talk to me, Carrie,” Alexia prodded gently.

“I know she’s dead,” Carrie began.

“Will you start from the beginning, please?”

“We were in my room when we heard this commotion start outside in the hall. When we looked out to investigate, we heard people running and screaming in the stairwell by our room. They were all coming down from the upper floors. We decided it was best to join them. We grabbed our shoes and ran toward the open stairways. We didn’t want to get trampled,” she paused to smirk at the thought.

Considering she had nearly been trampled herself a few short minutes ago, she had reason to find it morbidly amusing.

“Go on,” Alexia said.

After another sip of water, she continued, “We made it down to the lobby where we started hearing about what was happening here. Becca wanted to make a run for it right then and there, but I managed to talk her out of it. When that freak yelled, ‘Run!’ Becca was closest to the exit. She did not bother to look around before making a run for it. She was one of the first to escape before the crush of people slammed into the exit.

“We were separated. She did not wait for me,” her voice broke on a sob.

“Shh,” Alexia patted her clenched hands.

“It’s okay, you can do this,” Alexia said.

She did not know why it was so important to know what happened. She instinctively felt that if Carrie did not talk, she would slip into shock or worse. All she had to do was keep her talking.

“I know, I know. It just hurts so much. You pour so much love into someone, and you know that they will never look at you the same way. You think you can live with that as long as you can be

friends, right? But she didn't even care for me in that way. She really is as selfish and shallow as everyone believed!"

"I never knew you felt that way," Alexia said stunned.

She smirked, "No, apparently no one knew. Now she's gone, and she will never know."

"Why are you so certain she's dead?"

"I don't know. I could hear the people screaming out there. I was practically pressed against the glass. I couldn't see anything at first," she stopped and shuddered at the memory.

"What is it?"

"I was able to see someone's arm hit the glass," she said swallowing.

She stared into her glass intently. She did not want to relive that moment.

"Was it Becca?" she asked confused.

"I don't know who the arm belonged to. It was no longer attached to its owner," she closed her eyes against the memory, but it was too late.

She heard again the thunk of the limb hitting the thick glass and the wet sound it made as it slid down the glass to the floor. She had watched its inexorable descent to the ground with horrified fascination. She could not stop herself no matter how much she wanted to.

"Oh, God, Carrie," Alexia said as she dropped to her knees in front of her friend and hugged her tightly.

"It was so pale against the glass. The diamond ring on her finger actually twinkled from the light in the lobby. Her hand was perfectly manicured. Why do I remember that? Why would I even notice that?" she was becoming hysterical her voice rising with every word.

"Hush, now, I've got you. I've got you."

Carrie sobbed into Alexia's shoulder, gripping her arms at the elbows tightly.

The lights in the office went out. Carrie stopped crying. She gripped Alexia's arms more tightly.

"What is it? Why are the lights off?"

"I don't know. The generator might be out of fuel," Alexia said as she disentangled herself from the now very panicked Carrie.

"Where are you going?" Carrie asked panic evident in her voice.

“I’m just going to find a flashlight, and then I’m going to see what’s going on,” Alexia explained patiently.

“Don’t leave me!”

“I’m not going without you, but you have to pull yourself together and you have to let go of me.”

“Sorry,” Carrie loosened her grip enough to allow Alexia to pull free.

“Thank you.”

After a few minutes, Alexia’s eyes adjusted to the dark enough to make out the desk at the back of the room. She checked through the unlocked drawers in Susannah’s desk. She was about to give up when she noticed the row of file cabinets against the wall. She stepped over to it and pulled on the top drawer. It would not budge. The damn thing was locked. She checked the next one. This one opened easily but she found only folders. She blew out a frustrated breath and checked the drawer beneath it, more files. She checked the last drawer in the file cabinet. There were no files, but she did hear a distinctive clink against the metal sides. She reached into the drawer and after a few seconds of feeling around found what she hoped was a flashlight.

When she drew the object out, she found she was indeed holding a flashlight. She clicked it on and nearly blinded herself. She had been holding it upside down. She cursed as she pointed it away from her face.

“Ow, aim that thing a little lower, Lex!” Carrie yelled from the sofa.

“Sorry,” Alexia pointed the flashlight to the ground where it could flash in anyone’s eyes.

“Come on, let’s go,” Alexia said decisively.

“Why not just stay here? I’m sure the hotel staff can take care of whatever is happening out there,” Carrie said nervously.

“Well, I want to know what’s going on out there and I promised to not leave you alone. You either come with me, or you force me to break my promise,” Alexia said matter-of-factly.

“Why can’t you just stay here with me? Why do you have to play hero?”

“It’s okay, Carrie. You can stay here. I’ll be right back and then I can hold your hand some more,” she had tried to hide the sarcasm but Carrie’s comment had hurt and she was unsuccessful.

“I’m sorry, Lex. Here you are trying to keep me from falling apart, and all I can do is fling insults at you. I’m coming with you,” Carrie said contritely.

“Fine, let’s go,” Alexia had trouble forgiving her at that moment, but she certainly did not feel like arguing the matter either.

Carrie fell into step behind her as they exited Susannah’s office. Alexia kept the flashlight’s beam at hip level. That way, they could see where they were going and keep the light from shining in anyone’s eyes.

“Lexi!”

“Alexia!”

She heard Cameron’s and then Adrian’s voices shouting for her.

“I’m right here,” she shouted back waving the flashlight over her head.

She could not see them and was not sure if they could see her light from wherever they were, but she decided to stay put just in case.

“Lexi!” Cameron said in an excited voice.

Soon both men joined them in the hall outside Susannah’s office.

“Thank God, you’re safe. Who’s that with you?” Cameron asked.

Alexia shined the light toward Carrie trying to avoid hitting her in the eye with the beam.

“Hey Cam, Adrian,” Carrie said in a low voice.

“Carrie? Where the hell have you been?”

“Not now, Cameron. Have you found Susannah?”

“No, we came looking for you the moment we hit the lobby. That’s when the lights went out. I used my cell phone to try and keep from tripping over anything. We saw you’re light flickering down this way and wallah! Here we are.”

“Alright, smart aleck, let’s find Susannah. Maybe she can explain why the lights have gone out,” Alexia said.

“Sure thing, sis. Since you’re the one with the flashlight, you can lead the way,” Cameron said so relieved to find his sister alive, he did not think of the implication of his words.

“How about I run point for a while. All this issuing of orders is probably starting to go to Lexi’s head,” Adrian said as he took the flashlight from Alexia’s hand.

“Good point,” Cameron said. He felt like a fool.

Of course she should not be running around out in front with a big kick me sign in the shape of a flashlight calling attention to her. He had to keep her safe.

“Did you find Amanda?” Alexia asked.

There was a moment of silence as neither man wanted to tell Alexia what they had found. She could not see their faces in the gloom, but their silence was enough to guess what happened.

“She’s dead, isn’t she?”

“Yeah,” Adrian answered, “It was bad. We can talk about it later. Let’s just find Susannah and see if we can’t help get the lights back on.”

“Yeah, okay,” Alexia responded huskily.

She had never really cared for Amanda, but her death still hit her strongly. It was not like learning about Becca possibly being dead. At least there was a chance she might still be alive. The fact that they had found her body mutilated like the others they had found upstairs made it quite real and very devastating. She told herself she would have to wait until later to grieve, just like every other unpleasant thought she could not handle at the moment. It could all wait until later.

It did not take long to find Susannah. She was one of the few with a light strong enough to spot from where they stood. She had managed to secure an electric lantern. Someone must have brought it to her. The remaining staff was really quite efficient.

Susannah was busy coordinating everyone into groups to get things under control. She had just barely managed to solve the issue with the mob at the entry when the lights had gone out. Thankfully, everyone was still too exhausted from their earlier bout of panic to do more than scream. One of the security guards that come down from the upper floors to report stopped at security when the lights went out and grabbed a lantern. She could have kissed him for his forethought, but managed not to.

George and Raul reported that the generator had last been filled with fuel yesterday afternoon. It should have been enough to get them through today, but she imagined with all the people inside the main building, it had drawn too much power. This presented a problem of course.

“What’s the problem?” Cameron asked from behind her.

“Cameron! I’m so glad you and your sister are here and safe,” she paused to regain her composure, “The problem is that now that the fog is attacking anyone who goes outside, it is a huge risk to refuel the generators.”

“Why?” Alexia asked.

“Quite simply because the generators are kept in a separate building to avoid possible carbon monoxide poisoning from any fumes that may escape,” she answered.

“That is a problem,” Cameron said.

“Yes,” Susannah agreed.

“Where is it? The generator room?” Alexia asked.

“A few yards away from the back of the building. It would normally only take a few minutes to walk there, but with the dark approaching and zero visibility, it would take a much larger enterprise to make it there and back without getting lost,” Susannah answered.

“Where’s the fuel stored?” Alexia asked. She was not going to bother answering Susannah’s excuses tit for tat. She simply wanted information.

“In a locker outside generator room,” Susannah responded.

“Do you have the key or does one of your staff?”

“I have a master key for every lock in this hotel. What are you thinking of doing, Alexia?”

“I’m thinking I’ve had enough of playing helpless victim. Cameron, Adrian and I will go out there with whatever staff you have that is willing. We can tie a rope around our waists, go out there refuel the generators and come back. We will just have to risk the dark and the fog if we want to have the lights back on.”

“Why are you doing this, Alexia? Why do you care so much?” Susannah asked, genuinely confused.

Carrie was just glad Alexia had not volunteered her, and then felt shame at her relief. She was willing to accept Alexia risking her life for her and everyone else, but she could not return the favor.

“Like I said, I’m tired of playing the victim. We are facing huge problems and terrible tragedies, but that is no reason why we should curl up and suck our thumbs while we wait for some miracle to rescue us from this situation. We have to get ourselves out of this or at least keep each other safe long enough for crews to finally clear the road. In the meantime, who of your guys will volunteer?”

“Miss?” George said hesitantly, “There’s no reason for you or your friends to risk your lives to get the generator going. Raul and I, well, its our job and its our fault the generators stopped working. Me, Raul and the Leroy will go out, Miss Susannah.”

“George...”



“Don’t worry, Miss Susannah, we’ll be back,” George said. He turned on his electric lantern and walked away into the darkness. Raul followed behind him. They could only imagine that they went to find Leroy before venturing outside.

“Tom, what’s the status with the evacuations from the top floors?” Susannah turned to the security man who had brought her the electric lantern.

“We were able to move everyone down to the first floor. We were about to have groups descend the main staircase when I came down. I’m assuming they’ve halted that for now to wait for the lights to come back on. There’s no sense in sending people down the stairs if they can’t see where they’re going.”

“Thank you, Tom. See if you can’t try and locate a few more flashlights and lanterns. While you’re at it could you find out why the emergency LED lights aren’t coming on along the staircase steps.”

“Sure thing,” Tom waved a mock salute and ran off to do as she asked.

Susannah sighed. If she survived this, she was going to check into the swankiest resort hotel in Manhattan and never leave the Jacuzzi.

George and Raul found Leroy in the kitchen hunkered down on the floor with a pen flashlight and a deck of cards.

“Come on, we gotta get the generators back on,” George said as he continued past Leroy towards the service exit.

“Are you crazy? I ain’t going out there!” Leroy said.

“You’re going or we tell Miss Susannah who left that ladder outside of that poor girl’s room,” George said jovially.

“Are you blackmailing me?” Leroy stood up. He was a good deal taller than George.

“Do you really want to fight over it when people are dying everywhere we look?” He waited to see if Leroy would back down.

“I didn’t think so. Look you’re going to help because you feel guilty you helped get one of those kids killed and left the other one near comatose from fright. Now come on. The sooner we get the lights on the better it will be for everybody.”

Leroy shrugged and followed tucking his penlight in his back pocket. Raul was already waiting for them at the door. He held a length of rope coiled in his hand. One end was already tied to a post by the door used to keep carts from hitting the wall.

“I’ll take point,” Leroy volunteered.

Raul handed him the rope coil letting out enough to tie around his waist. George held on to the rope that was hanging from Raul's front. Leroy uncoiled some more rope and in this way, they made their way across to the generator shed.

Leroy made his way around the side of the shed to the locker where the diesel fuel was stored. He rifled through his pocket to find the key to the padlock. The penlight in his mouth, he fumbled lock open. After grabbing a couple five gallon fuel tanks, he closed the shed without locking it. He was just glad he could see enough in front of him to find the padlock and the tanks. Once inside, his eyes tried to adjust to the room's lack of mist. His eyes adjusted to the gloom enough for him to locate the electric lantern hanging from a hook nearby. He put down the tanks and picked up the lantern. When he switched it on, he jumped.

There on the floor was one of the staff slumped over the nearest generator.

"What the hell?" Leroy whispered.

He set the lantern back up on its peg and walked over to the unconscious man. He shook his shoulder and said, "Luis, you okay?"

He was cold to the touch and when Leroy removed his hand he fell sideways. What he saw had him running for the door. He stopped after a few feet, though. He had to ignore the poor bastard and get the generators back on. If they had gotten here sooner, Luis might have still been alive.

When he made it back to the shed he noticed what he had missed before. There was blood smeared on the door and sides of the shed. Luis must have been caught outside by whatever was killing all these people and dragged himself here. He was safe from the fog, but not from the trauma that had already been inflicted. The man's body was missing parts everywhere. The worst, though, were the eyes or rather the fact that the eyes were missing.

He walked back in avoided looking at Luis's ravaged body. Leroy picked up one of the cans to start filling up the furthest generator from Luis and the trail of blood on the floor. He noticed at that moment that his hand was covered in blood. He wiped it hastily on his black pants, but it had already dried somewhat; the blood stuck to his palms.

He found the generator was still nearly full. He almost splashed himself with the foul smelling diesel from the overflow. He jumped back quickly avoiding all but a few drops on his shoes. He set the tank down a ways away and screwed the lid back on. There had to be another reason why this generator was not working.

He inspected it carefully but found nothing wrong. He checked again this time bringing the lantern a little with him. Again he avoided looking at Luis. With the lantern he checked all the points on the checklist. He did not smell anything or see anything out of place. He hit the reset lever twice then turned the key back to on. After few seconds the generator began humming again.

He went over to the next one this time checking the fuel level before pouring more in. This one was indeed low, so he refilled its tank. He restarted the second generator and the lights in the room turned on. Something must have happened that the fail-safe did not kick in on the last generator.

He made his way back to the last generator. It too was nearly empty. He refilled and started it up again. He contemplated bringing Luis's body back with him. He thought it better to leave him here. The authorities would want the scene left undisturbed.

He took the lantern off its hook and turned it off. The sudden darkness was unnerving. He flipped the emergency lighting back on but it did not light. There must be a short circuit in the electrical box. He flipped open the electrical panel and reset the circuits. The generators' humming changed. The first generator sounded like it was working full force while the other two switched to standby.

“Hmph.”

The lights in the shed came back on. He released the breath he did not know he had been holding. He found an open toolbox on the counter. It looked like maybe Luis was out here working on the electrical short when he met his end. He spotted a utility knife. He lifted it out of the box and slid the blade out. He was about to put it back when he remembered Luis. He did not know what good it would do him against these mist monsters, but it made him feel better to have it. He slid the blade home and tucked the knife in his pocket.

He picked up the two empty fuel tanks and closed the door behind him. He would be damned if he let mist back in there to finish the job. Feeling his way around he returned the tanks to their storage closet and locked the door. He gave the rope behind him a good sharp tug to signal his return. He felt the corresponding tug and knew that George was still waiting for him. He turned to leave and found himself face to face with the creature that lived in the mist. Leroy did not panic. He brought the utility knife out of his pocket and cut the rope. He would not lead the motherfucker back to George.

George was impatient to get going. This fog gave him the creeps. All that mess with the rope earlier had scared him shitless. He was glad to feel the signal that Leroy was on his way back. He did not think much of the guy, but he would hate to be the one that brought him out here just to die.

The rope went slack at his waist.

“Shit! Leroy!” George called out.

He heard nothing for a moment and then, “Run!”

He dropped the end of the rope he had been hauling back. He turned and followed the rope that connected him with Raul. It felt like forever as he heard Leroy's screams. He had gotten him

killed after all and yet he now he owed him his life if he got back inside before the creatures caught up with him and Raul.

He rammed right into Raul. He scrambled to help him up.

“What the hell is going on?” Raul said.

“No time, man. Come on run like the hounds of hell are after you ‘cause they just might be,” he said as he hauled Raul by the shirt behind him.

“Alright, I’m running let go of my shirt or we’ll both be dinner for whatever’s out there!”

He released his hold on Raul’s shirt and the two ran for all they worth following the rope tied to post just outside the service door. They had nearly made it when George felt a tug on the rope tied around his waist. He tried to untie it but it was too late.

He screamed as he was dragged on the ground far enough away that Raul could no longer see him.

“George!”

“Run, you idiot! Get back inside!”

“Raul quickly untied the rope around his waist and ducked back inside the now brightly lit service corridor. Leroy had gotten the lights back on. It had only cost them two lives. He had tripped on his way in and now lay sprawled on the thinly carpeted hall. He pressed forehead to the floor and sent up a silent prayer for their souls.

He eventually got to his feet, checked the door to be sure it was locked, and turned back down the hall to report to Miss Susannah. He did not relish telling her what happened. Miss Susannah cared about all of them. She knew each of her staff by name. She took the time to get to know them all. She really was the genuine article and she would be devastated to learn that she had sent two men to their deaths. It would not matter that they had volunteered; she would still feel responsible. Raul shook his head. No, he did not like to have to be the one to tell Miss Susannah George and Leroy died getting the lights back on.

## Chapter Sixteen

Cameron was in the middle of changing into some of Adrian's clothes when the lights went out. His heart was lodged somewhere in his throat.

"Lexi!"

He quickly pulled his shirt back on and buttoned his shorts. He slipped into a pair flip-flops and ran out of the room. He rammed his shin into the side of Adrian's bed frame.

"Damn it!"

"Cameron?"

"Yeah, I'm fine just ran right into the side of your bed. You got a flashlight in here somewhere, buddy?"

"Yeah."

Cameron was momentarily blinded as Adrian shone the light into his eyes.

"Will you aim that somewhere else?"

"Sorry," Adrian pointed the beam at Cameron's feet so he could navigate his way out of the room.

"We gotta get back to Lexi. I don't know, but I felt certain Frank was threatening her," Cameron said worry tingeing his voice.

"I agree. You ready?"

"Yeah, let's get back down to the lobby."

They found themselves surrounded by a sea of panicked guests. Some tried to snatch Adrian's flashlight while others were too busy screeching in their ears. They fought their way to the front of the column only to be stopped by two security guards.

"Listen, man, we've got the flashlight. We can get down to the lobby without your help," Cameron began.

"Uh-uh. You're staying right here until the lights come back on. I'm not allowing anybody on those stairs until then. You get me?"

"I've got to get back to my sister. I can see well enough with the flashlight. Just let us through."

They tried to push their way past the two guards, but they were joined by two more.

“I said no one is going down those steps until the lights come back on. Now why don’t join the others over there sit calmly. You could be a good influence on the ones that are panicking,” the guard said in a patronizing voice.

“Shit,” Cameron said under his voice.

He turned and leaned against the nearest wall. His hands were tightly wound fists. These yahoos did not understand. He knew Lexi was in danger. He could feel it in his gut. He would have to find a way to sneak past these idiots.

Adrian switched off the flashlight and leaned in to whisper in Cameron’s ear.

“I’ve got a plan. Once they stop paying attention to us, we can sneak back down the hall towards the emergency stairwells.”

“Are you nuts? Those things are deathtraps right now!” he returned in an angry whisper.

“We just need to get down one more floor. We’ll be fine. I’m more worried about Lexi right now,” Adrian said harshly.

“You’re right, man. I’m sorry. Lexi’s safety is more important. She wouldn’t go anywhere with Frank would she?”

“I don’t know. If he said you were in danger, she just might. There’s no way for her to know one way or the other without following him.”

“How is he going to get past these guys?” Cameron said nodding toward the guards at the head of the stairs.

“He’s managed to disappear a few times without our noticing. He’s probably already downstairs.”

Cameron sighed and waited for the guards’ attention to be diverted from them.

Alexia had found a place to sit the very fragile Carrie away from the hubbub surrounding Susannah. She sat next to her on the wicker couch. She put her arm around the girl, rubbing her hand up and down her very cold arm.

“Alexia?”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“You don’t have to stay with me if you’re worried about Cameron,” Carrie said.

“It’s okay. I promised I wasn’t going to leave you alone. We’ll just stay put until Cameron and Adrian get back with Amanda.”

“What if they don’t come back?” Carrie asked.

“Don’t say that, Carrie. My brother is fine.”

“Then, what’s taking him so long?”

“Are you determined to freak me out, Carrie?”

“Sorry, I can’t help but worry. It feels like this stuff is picking us off one by one.”

“Look, it sucks that Becca ran outside; that she might be dead, but it doesn’t mean this thing is after any of us specifically. You, me, Cameron, Adrian, Amanda, we’re all fine.”

“What about Frank?” Carrie said lifting her head off Alexia’s shoulder.

“Frank is probably just fine, too,” she said through gritted teeth.

Carrie settled back on Alexia’s shoulders.

“You’re really great, Lex. I never really thought much of you before. I thought you were this bubbly idiot who was lots of fun to be with, but no one to depend on. I was wrong, way wrong. You were always the best of us. I’m sorry it took this mess to figure it out,” Carrie said as she stared at the flashlight beam at their feet.

Alexia did not know how to respond. She had no idea her persona had been so difficult to pierce that even the people she considered her closest friends could not see past it.

She looked down and noticed that the flashlight was still lit.

“We should turn this off to conserve its battery,” she said as she clicked it off.

The area around them went a little dimmer. They had to depend on the light shining from the few electric lanterns set around the lobby.

“Alexia?”

“What is it, Frank?” Alexia said turning to look at him approach with cold eyes.

“Alexia, Cameron’s in trouble,” Frank said hesitantly.

“What do you mean?” Alexia said standing up.

“Are you going to leave me alone, Lex?” Carrie said in a little girl voice.

Alexia ignored her. She did not have time for Carrie's whining now.

"Frank? What do you mean?"

"I ran here as quick as I could. Adrian is trying to help, but they're both trapped in there," Frank said his tone shifting from panic to worry and back again.

"Trapped where? Frank just tell me what happened!"

"There's no time. Just follow me. It'll be faster than me telling you where they are," Frank turned to walk away.

"Frank--"

"Lex! Please, you promised!"

Alexia felt torn for about a millisecond. It only took that long to choose her brother over this sniveling creature who had never been her friend, not really.

"Here, keep the flashlight. I'll be back," Alexia said as she handed over the large black flashlight.

She followed after Frank. For a moment he was lost in the crowd and she could not see him.

"Frank?"

"I'm right here," he said coming up by her side.

She jumped. She could have sworn he was ahead of her somewhere.

"I've got a flashlight. We'll keep it turned off until we can't see where we're going. I don't know how much life it's got left."

"Yeah, okay, whatever just take me to Cameron," Alexia said impatiently.

She was furious with herself for reacting this way to him. He was just a bully. There was nothing to fear from him. Besides, he was taking her to Cameron who needed her help. Please, just hang in there, Cam.

"Follow me," Frank said.

He led her through a maze of corridors and side entries until she was no longer sure where she was.

"Frank, Cameron went upstairs the last time I saw him," Alexia began.



“I’m just trying to avoid security. They’re trying to keep everyone penned in the lobby where they can keep an eye on everyone. There’s a service stairwell around behind all these conference rooms,” he said reassuringly.

“If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure. They wouldn’t let us through and by the time they went to investigate, it would be too late for Cameron and Adrian,” he said.

“Where’s Lexi?” Cameron asked when he found Susannah.

“She’s sitting somewhere in the lobby with that friend of hers. What’s the matter?” Susannah asked.

“Can’t explain now. Have you seen Frank?”

“No, and I hope I don’t. That idiot got a lot of people killed earlier,” Susannah said angrily.

“I know. If you see him, make sure your men detain him.”

“What is it? He’s your friend, isn’t he?”

“I thought he was,” he said cryptically and left.

“Cameron!”

He ignored her. He had to find Alexia.

He found Carrie instead who was by now very much alone. Adrian skidded to a halt behind him.

“Where is she, Carrie?”

“Cameron, you’re alright!” Carrie exclaimed happily.

“Yes, I’m fine. Where’s Lexi?” Cameron repeated.

“Where’s Amanda?” Carrie asked bewildered, “Lex said you were going to bring her.”

“She’s dead, Carrie and so will Lexi if you don’t tell me where she is!” Cameron was nearly yelling at the shell-shocked girl.

“Amanda is dead?”

“Carrie, I don’t have time to hold your hand! Tell me where Alexia is now!”

“Cameron, you’re scaring her,” Adrian said laying a hand on Cameron’s shoulder.

Cameron jerked away from Adrian's touch and stepped away. He was right. If he did not calm down, he would never get any information from the stupid girl.

"Carrie?" Adrian said in a soft tone.

"What?" Carrie looked stricken. She could not take her eyes away from the pacing Cameron.

"Carrie, did Frank take Alexia away?" Adrian continued taking Carrie's face between his hands forcing her to look at him only.

"Yes. He said you and Cameron were trapped. He wouldn't say where. He just said to follow him. She left me behind, but she left me the flashlight," Carrie said quickly jumping to her friend's defense.

"Do you know which direction they went?" Adrian asked trying to modulate his voice.

"They went that way," she pointed vaguely to the right.

"Could you show us?" Adrian asked.

"I guess so," she said uncertainly.

"Please, Carrie, Lex is in danger. If we don't find her, we think Frank might do something to her," Adrian implored.

"Frank is dangerous?"

"Yes, Carrie, we think maybe he killed Amanda and who knows how many others. He threatened Lexi and now she's with him alone. Do you think you could show us which way they went?"

"Okay," she agreed.

"Thank you, Carrie. You don't know how much this means to us," Adrian said getting to his feet.

He offered Carrie his hand. She looked at it for a long moment before placing her hand in his and allowing Adrian to help her up.

"Here, you can have her flashlight," she offered.

"That won't be necessary, Carrie. I've got one of my own. Why don't you hang on to that one," he said.

He could be generous now. She would at least point them in the right direction. Cameron stopped pacing and joined them. Adrian held him off.

"You're crowding her. Let's give a little space, okay?" Adrian said keeping his voice low.

“Yeah okay. Can she show us which way they went?” Cameron said impatiently.

“I think so. She can at least give us that much.”

“Cameron?”

“What is it, Susannah?” h snapped.

She recoiled from his anger, but then squared her shoulders. She knew he was only behaving this way because he was worried about his sister.

“You may need this,” she said as she handed them a small wire bound book.

“What is this?” he said with a little less ire.

“It’s a schematic of the hotel. It’s tabbed, so you can jump well-known areas like the ground floor or the annexes. It might help you find them sooner.”

“Thank you, Susannah. I’m sorry I snapped at you, it’s just that—“

“I know, go find your sister. I’ve got my own issues to deal with,” she said with an understanding voice.

“Thank you,” he touched her cheek and turned back to Adrian and Carrie, “Let’s go.”

He looked through the schematic with Adrian’s flashlight keeping an eye on Carrie as she led them in the direction where she had seen Frank and Alexia disappear.

“It looks like he could be headed to any number of secluded places,” Cameron said in frustration.

“He would want time alone where he could take his time. From what I saw of what he did to Amanda, he likes to play with his victims,” Adrian said off-handedly.

Cameron gripped the flashlight tighter. He was going to kill Frank for what he did to Amanda, and if he had laid one finger on Lexi, he was going do it slowly.

He stared at the schematics with much more attention.

“He said he was taking her to you,” Carrie said.

“Yeah we know—“ Cameron stopped. Of course, he would not keep her trust for long if he did not eventually turn to go upstairs.

He found the service stairwell at the back of the hotel behind several conference rooms. He took point.

“He took her this way,” Cameron said with conviction.

Adrian and Carrie hurried to keep up. They followed him as he turned this way and that cutting through conference rooms and smaller meeting rooms. He stopped every few minutes to check their location against the map he carried, and then he would be off again. He was practically running. If he had not been afraid of getting lost and losing time, he would have been running.

At last they came across the service stairwell. They stopped. The steps were metal. Frank would hear them coming, but so would Alexia. He could not decide if that would be a good thing or not. It would warn Alexia that Frank was not to be trusted, but it would also mean Frank no longer needed to pretend. What was he going to do?

He remembered what Adrian said. Frank was a sadist. He would wait before he killed her. He might feel it necessary to kill them first, so he could enjoy torturing her without interruption, but at least it would give Lexi time to escape. He took the stairs two at a time. Carrie and Adrian followed suit, but they could not keep up. At the top of the stairs, Cameron thought he heard Alexia’s voice somewhere to his right. He dropped the schematics in his haste as he rushed to the sound of her voice.

“Cameron!” Adrian said in a loud whisper, but it was too late. Cameron was far out of earshot.

He picked up the book of maps and turned to Carrie. She had disappeared.

“What the hell?” Adrian said as he realized they had both left him without a flashlight.

Frank heard the clambering of who he guessed must be Cameron and two others. One he was certain was Adrian, the other had a lighter step. It could be Carrie. He was surprised they had managed to get that little lamb moving. He could see Alexia was beginning to suspect he was leading her on. He took his opportunity to turn away out of sight.

This way was much more enjoyable. He never got the chance to hunt his prey before. The little sheep always invited him in. He would start with the little lamb. She was already broken, so it would be no fun to play with her. Frank decided it would be fun anyway. He smiled and went to seek the little lost Carrie lamb.

Carrie wandered down the corridor. She thought she had heard Lex’s voice somewhere down this way. She noticed that the emergency lights along the floor were now lit.

“The power must be back on,” she mumbled to herself.

She turned down a cross section to the right. She peaked into the first unlocked door. It was just storage room. She closed the door and kept shuffling along. At the far end of this hall, she saw light coming from an intersecting hallway. She hurried towards it. She would rescue Lex and return the favor. If there was anyone who deserving saving, it was Lexi. Carrie had never been much of a friend to her. She had been too busy pining over Becca. At the thought Carrie’s heart clenched in her chest. Without her, Carrie was nothing more than a shell. Yeah, sure Becca had

been a bitch. Everyone knew that, but she was only that way because she was afraid of getting hurt. That's what Carrie had told herself. She knew now, that she had indeed been as shallow and self-centered as everyone said she was. She had left Carrie alone to live or die, as long as Becca got away. Becca had never cared for her. She had only ever been interested in herself. All Carrie had represented was a boon to her ego.

The lit corridor was suddenly there in front of her. Carrie turned the corner and came face to face with Frank.

"Frank!" she stuttered, "I'm glad I found you! It looks like Adrian and Cameron were able to get away. We were hoping to find you to let you and Leix know they were safe."

"Were you now? How thoughtful, but I think we both know they were never in any danger. At least, they weren't in any danger."

"What do you mean?" Carrie said backing away.

"I mean, Carrie dear, that now that you three have decided to get in my way, I'm going to have to fix it."

"Fix it?" she stammered nervously.

"Yes, fix it, Carrie," he said as he brought out a sharp hunting knife.

"What are you doing with that, Frank?"

"I haven't decided, Carrie. I could carve you up the same way I did all those other girls..." he paused to let that sink in, "but then I don't have time for that."

"Frank, you're not saying you're going to kill me, are you?"

"Oh, indeed I am. Perhaps just a quick incision from here," he pointed to her heart, "to here," he slid the knife diagonally down to her pelvis.

"Frank, you're scaring me," Carrie said as she continued to back away.

"That is the goal my dear," he said as he followed.

He moved quickly as he snatched her by the arms and flung her in the waiting broom closet.

She screamed once before knocking her head against the concrete wall inside. Frank stepped in and closed the door behind him.

He waited until she regained consciousness. He saw her stirring in the beam of his flashlight. He stood to turn on the overhanging light. He set the bare bulb in motion. When Carrie finally opened her eyes it was to the sight of Frank holding a knife up as if studying it. He flashed

between light and dark. She took in a deep breath to scream, but Frank was already there covering mouth the knife just millimeters away from her cheek. He brought it closer pricking the skin of her cheek. A small trickle of blood made its way down her face. The liquid was warm as it traveled down to her chin where she finally saw the red stain.

“Poor Carrie. You’ve lost your true love and now you’re going to lose everything else. Poor, poor Carrie,” Frank cooed.

Her eyes turned away from the line of red traveling down her chin and onto Frank’s hand. There was no panic there or hatred. She looked at him in triumph. It confused him and disconcerted him. It was the last expression he expected to see in her eyes.

“Why?” he asked before he could stop himself.

The triumphant look turned into one of distaste. He could handle that. He had been seeing that look on rich bitches’ faces as long as he could remember, but then the look of distaste changed to one of pity.

That he could not handle. He would not be pitied. He stabbed her in the heart, just between the ribs. He drove the knife up to the hilt. He would not be pitied. He looked again into Carrie’s eyes. The pity was gone replaced with only mild surprise. When he removed his hand, though he found that she had been smiling.

He backed away from her taking the knife with him. Her heart’s blood spilled forth dousing her blouse and shorts in crimson. Her death brought him no pleasure and that made him angry. He looked forward to Alexia’s death with much more fervor. He needed her death to cleanse him of this experience. He wiped the blade on a rag he found on the shelf behind her. He walked out leaving the door open for someone to discover the body. If the actual killing of Carrie had brought him no pleasure, maybe the discovery of her body would.

He hid again as he heard one of the others approaching. He did not know if it was Cameron or Adrian only that it was a man from heaviness of the tread. He almost missed when Alexia turned the corner so intent was he on the oncoming man.

When she saw the open door, she paused. Alexia was much more clever than her stupid cow friend. She would be cautious of an open door with Frank on the loose. He waited breathlessly.

The light streaming through the open door was what had initially attracted Alexia to this particular corridor. Now that she was here, she did not want to go in. Frank had been up to something when he brought her up here. She knew that the sound of whoever was coming up the stairs had spooked him because he vanished as soon as they heard it. Her suspicions were confirmed when she heard Adrian’s voice. They had either escaped or Frank had been lying to her. She went with the latter. She just did not understand what he had been after.

Frank had always given her the creeps, but she could not wrap her mind around the fact that he would ever truly harm her. She just did not take Adrian's warnings all that seriously. She heard someone approaching, so she pressed herself against the wall.

"That's my girl," Frank said under his breath.

Adrian came into view as he stepped into the intersection of the two corridors. He paused at the open door. He was no dummy either.

"Adrian?"

"Lexi! You're safe!"

"Yes, of course I'm safe. What are you doing here?"

"Rescuing you," he said a tone that said 'of course!'

"What would you be rescuing me from exactly?" she said sarcastically.

"You really don't know, do you?" he said in astonishment.

Alexia was feeling a little discomfited by his amazement. What should she know?

"What are you talking about?" Alexia said defensively.

"Frank is more dangerous than even I believed, Lexi," he said.

"Oh, please, Adrian not that again," Alexia said relieved that it was only more of Adrian's paranoia and not something much more serious.

"Amanda's dead," he said suddenly.

"What?"

Alexia had not really cared for Amanda, but to hear that she was dead. The news felt like a blow to the solar plexus. To know for certain that someone she knew was dead... It was nothing like learning that Becca might be dead. That implied that she might be alive, but to know...

"How do you know?"

"Cameron found her. I wasn't that far behind him. Frank was there, too," he said.

"Frank? What does Amanda's death have to do with him?" she said completely baffled by this conversation.

"He killed her," he said simply.

“What? Are you crazy? Frank is a creep, but a murderer? No, I don’t believe it. He must have followed you guys up there,” Alexia said shaking her head.

“He was already in the room. The door from the hall never opened.”

“Sure it did, you were just so traumatized by what you had seen, you didn’t hear it,” she said trying to explain away this terrible accusation.

Had he gone crazy? He and Frank had been friends for years. Could he really believe that Frank would be capable of murder?

“He threatened you,” he continued.

“That was Frank being Frank. You can’t believe half the stuff he says,” Alexia continued to defend him.

“Fine, let’s just find Carrie and Cameron and get back to the lobby,” Adrian said not willing to argue any further.

“We could start right here,” Alexia said unwilling to move.

“After you,” Adrian said. He was angry. How could she still defend him after what he had told her?

“How chivalrous of you,” she said sarcastically as she stepped into the small room.

She dropped to her knees as they gave way beneath her.

“Lexi!” Adrian stepped in.

“Oh, no, Carrie,” he said.

“It’s true isn’t it?” Alexia said softly.

“Yes, my dear, dear Alexia it is,” Frank said as he stabbed Adrian in the back.

Blood bubbled up from Adrian’s mouth. The look of surprise melted away to fear and then anger. He would not be able to save Alexia from this monster after all. As he slumped to the ground, the last look on his face was one of regret. He kept his eyes riveted on Alexia until they clouded over. He was dead.

“That was much better,” Frank said as he wiped his blade on Adrian’s shirt.

“Why?”



“Why? Oh Adrian. He was in the way, my dear just like your little friend there,” he nodded over to Carrie’s body.

“In the way of what?” she said baffled.

“Why of having my way with you, my pet. I thought you would have figured that out by now,” he said with some disappointment.

“But why me?” she was truly confused.

“You’ve been goal all along, Lexi. All the women I’ve killed over the years, they were just practice for you. It was always for you, Lexi,” he crooned.

“You’re sick!” Alexia said getting to her feet.

There was nowhere to run, but she was not going to die on her knees begging for her life.

“Oh, don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ve got one more to take care of, and then you and I are going to spend some quality time together,” he smiled.

He stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him. She heard the click as he locked the room from the outside.

“Cameron! You stay away from him, you sick fuck!” she screamed as she banged at the door.

“Yes do that. It will make him come so much faster. He is a darling when he’s worked up. Makes it difficult for him to control himself or think really. It will be my pleasure to kill him,” Frank said the smile evident in his voice.

“You couldn’t beat him if you were unarmed, you coward,” Alexia said hoping to goad him into dropping the knife.

“You may be right, darling Alexia, but I’m not worried about my pride. I will stroke my ego infinitely when we start having our fun,” he laughed and walked away from the door.

“Damn it!” she kicked the door.

It shook a bit in its frame. The door may be part of the original construction or at least from an earlier remodel. The wood might just be old enough for her to kick her way out. As she prepared to start forcing her way out, she noticed the hinges were new. It would not matter over much if the frame that held in place were too old to support several well-placed kicks, but it did give her an idea. All the noise from her kicking would only draw Cameron closer. She looked around for tools. There had to be a screwdriver somewhere around here.

In her search for the screwdriver, she noticed Carrie’s flashlight. It was large and heavy. At least she could use it as a weapon. She picked it up and tucked it into her shorts. She eventually found

something could work and set about unscrewing the hinges as quickly as possible. They had been screwed in with a drill and quite recently. It took terrible effort just to get the screw loose enough to start twisting it out of place. After several agonizing minutes, she had one screw on the floor. There were only six more to go. This was going to take forever. Instead of dwelling on it, she set about unscrewing the next one. Her arms were starting feel very heavy, but she finally got all the screws on the first hinge out.

Another hinge was higher up. How was she going to reach it? She looked frantically about when she spotted the bucket. It would have to do. She brought it over and stepped up on it. It held her weight, but she could feel it teetering. The bucket was not meant to be used as a step stool.

Alexia did not worry about it. She would be dead either way if she could not get the second hinge off the door. These screws gave her as much trouble as the first, but now her arms ached. Add to that her precarious perch and she was in for an interesting time. She did not worry about failure. It simply had to work. She prayed Cameron was very lost right now.

Cameron was indeed lost. It had been stupid of him to drop the map. It had also been stupid to allow his fears to act like an idiot. Not only was he lost, but he had been separated from the others. Frank was no doubt armed. All Cameron had was a flashlight and his anger. They were no match for whatever Frank carried.

He found himself down another corridor that looked very much like the last, except this corridor had a door that was slightly ajar.

He approached the door with care. Brandishing the flashlight over his head like a weapon, he jumped into the room, hoping to surprise its occupants before they had a chance to strike. The room was empty of people anyway and most of the furniture. There was a king size bed in the middle of the room made up like a marriage bed. The sheets were white satin with rose petals strewn across the surface. Candles lined the room. They were unlit at the moment. The room looked like a scene from a trashy romance novel set for seduction except for the table next to the bed.

He approached the table with dread. What he found upon close inspection made him want to scream with anger. Frank planned to use these on his sister. The array of instruments ranged from surgical tools like scalpels and forceps to mortuary tools like saws and garden shears. The bastard was going to do with these what he did to Amanda and who knows how many others. He was tempted to throw the metal tray across the room. In fact, his hands were raised to do so, but he put his hands down. The noise would only alert Frank of his presence. He took comfort in finding the room so pristine. It meant Alexia was still alive and would remain so until Frank got her into this room. He picked up a few of the blades he could carry safely in his pockets. He picked up what resembled a giant cleaver. He would carry this one.

He approached the door by which he had entered and waited at the doorway. He listened before sticking his head out to peer up and down the hall. He saw nothing, but he did hear voices.

It sounded like Frank and Alexia. He moved closer, so as to make out what they were saying.

Alexia was screaming something. He could not be sure what. Frank responded and laughed. He watched him disappear into a nearby room. That was why Alexia was still alive. Frank was using her as bait for him or Adrian, except he would not bother with bait if they were both alive. He would have made sure only one of them was coming. That meant Adrian was either already dead or incapacitated. He prayed for the latter, but knew with a sinking heart that Adrian was most likely dead.

Bile rose up in his throat. He would make the bastard pay for Amanda and for Adrian, and probably Carrie as well. Most of all, he would make him pay for what he intended to do to his sister. He decided he would not walk into his trap. He threw his flashlight as far as he could. It slammed against the wall of the intersecting hallway several yards away from him. He quickly slid into the closest room and waited.

Frank heard the thunk just outside his hiding place. He did not think there was anyone else in this part of the hotel. These were the overflow rooms for the hotel staff. There would be no reason for anyone to be here. It's why he chose it. So who had made the noise? It had to be Cameron. The boy knew about the trap. He had to give him credit for getting so close without him noticing. He decided to investigate. Chances were Cameron was not close enough to sneak up on him. He knew Cameron had quite a throwing arm.

Frank's esteem dropped a few notches. The fool had thrown his only weapon. Without the flashlight, Cameron was defenseless. He shook his head. How very disappointing.

He walked to the closet door.

"Your brother is a fool, my pet," he said through the closed door.

Alexia paused. She only had one more screw to loosen before the second hinge would come free.

"Why is that?" she said from her perch on the bucket.

"Where are you standing, my dear? Your voice is coming from a great deal higher than it should," Frank asked.

"Damn it," she mouthed.

"I'm standing on a bucket, waiting for you to open the door, so I can brain you from above," she said only half lying.

"Well, how inventive of you, but I'm afraid you will have a long wait. I will have to deal with your brother without using you as bait," he said.

"Why is that?" if she kept him talking, he might not notice what she was truly up to.

"Because, my dear, he already knows this is a trap," he said giving her a tiny bit of false hope.

She held her breath. He might just get out of this alive.

“Nothing to say, Alexia? Perhaps you are thinking that there is a way out after all? I am afraid I will have to rob you of that tiny little flame of hope. Your brother managed to throw the only weapon he had clear across the hall.”

Her hopes only increased. Cameron was no fool. He had another weapon. Frank was an idiot to underestimate her brother. She hoped he continued to do so.

“Still nothing to say? I will have to go find him now, of course. I have to admit I’m looking forward to it. Your other two friends were of so little challenge,” he paused to sigh in disappointment, “Then I will be back for you, my pet. We will have such fun!”

“What is it about me that made you single me out, Frank?” she said thinking fast.

She needed him to stay in front of the door just a little longer. The screw was now turning easily in her hand. It would only be a matter of seconds before she had it loose.

“Alexia, darling, are you fishing for compliments?” he said in astonishment.

“By no means, Frank, I just don’t understand what’s so special about me. You’ve met plenty of spoiled rich girls. Why pin your sick fascination on me?” Alexia asked.

She finally had the final screw in her hand. She stepped off the bucket and pushed at the door with all her might. It slammed into Frank hard enough for him to drop his knife. He was a bit dazed when Alexia stepped through. She was not going to wait to find out if the blow was enough to knock him out or just disorient him. She ran for the service stairs they had taken to get up here. She hoped that Cameron had witnessed what happened and was following.

He was here to rescue her, not get revenge, at least she hoped that was the case. When she heard someone running behind her, she did not stop to see whom it was. She only quickened her pace. It was useless. Frank was at Upenn on a football scholarship. He could outrun her any day of the week and he had. He tackled her to the ground.

She was knocked breathless. Her head hit the carpeted floor hard. She tried desperately to regain her breath. He picked her up and slung Alexia over his shoulder. He would bring her to his den and wait for Cameron there.

Cameron watched as his sister managed to slam the heavy door into Frank. He waited until Frank regained his equilibrium and followed him as he chased Alexia down. He winced when he saw Frank tackle her. He stood out in plain sight hoping she would twist around to see him. She managed to do so just before Frank rounded the corner.

He knew where they were headed. He ran back to the room. Frank might know another way to the room from where he had tackled Alexia, but he still had to deal with her weight. He would be

unable to run very fast carrying her over his shoulder. He ran for all he was worth. He had to beat Frank there.

He slid into the room just as Frank spotted the door. He smirked. He would enjoy Alexia's reaction quite a bit. He was very proud of the set up. It was a shame that his plan of bringing her there while unconscious had panned out. It would mean the candles would be unlit when she first saw the room.

Cameron had just enough time to open the window before he heard Frank approaching. He quickly hid behind the bed. He was very glad for the bed's high headrest. He squatted down on the floor and prayed the mist would enter the room quickly. He was well rewarded for his prayers, for they were answered. The fog rolled in quickly shrouding the entire room in mist. He was at a disadvantage without the visibility, but so would Frank.

Frank was not at all happy to find that the mist had made it into this room. He wanted this moment to himself. Alexia was his and his alone.

"How the hell did you get in here?" Frank yelled.

Alexia was terrified. Frank must have spotted Cameron, but how? She could see nothing with the thick fog surrounding the entire room.

Cameron froze. How could Frank have spotted him so soon?

"She's mine! I've given you plenty, leave this one to me," Frank was saying.

Who was he talking to?

He tossed Alexia onto the bed. His aim was a little off since he could not make out the bed in the thick vapor. Alexia slammed into the metal tray on her way down. One of the blades landed flat on abdomen. She felt the cold steel through her blouse. She felt for it in the gloom and discovered a scalpel. She was armed now, as well.

Alexia and Cameron carried murder on their minds. They were going to kill Frank for what he had done to them. He would pay for ever threatening their sibling. The mist thinned around them, so that they could see Frank arguing with the air. They both realized at the same time who Frank was talking to, or better yet what. He was railing against the mist that had rolled in through the open window. Frank and this stuff had been working together? It was unbelievable, but yet, now a great deal many things became clearer. He had been the one responsible for allowing the mist to enter the hotel. He had deliberately sent everyone panicking so they would run out into the fog. It would not be surprising if he had been responsible for the power going out, although that may be giving him more credit than he deserved.

This was their moment to strike.

Frank stopped yelling. It was difficult to continue when he could not breathe. The mist slipped down into his throat keeping oxygen from entering his lungs. Wisps of water vapor coiled around his wrists and ankles. He struggled to remain upright, but it was in vain. He fell hard. The thin carpet did a poor job to cushion his fall. His ears were ringing and his vision turned red for a brief moment.

He must have concussion. How he could even form the thought was beyond him. The fog had betrayed him. It slipped out of his mouth so he could draw breath. When his vision cleared, he found he could see quite well. Above him stood Cameron and Alexia each holding one of his toys.

For some inexplicable reason, he noticed one of his rose petals stuck to the side of Alexia's thigh. He reached for it, but she kicked his hand away.

"You sick fuck," Alexia said in disgust.

"I'm going to enjoy this, Frank," Cameron said.

He knelt down to make a slight incision at Frank's neck. He had not cut deep enough to sever the aorta, but the wound would bleed well.

Frank screamed. He felt fear for the first time in his life. He had chased after Alexia for so long only to find himself lying below her knife. He would laugh at the irony except he might have just wet himself.

Alexia knelt down and noticed the rose petal on her thigh.

"Is this what you were after, Frankie?" she said holding the red petal in her palm.

She crushed it in her hand and let it fall on his chest. She followed the falling petal with her scalpel. She slid the scalpel gently down his chest. A crimson line appeared like a zipper behind the scalpel's path. When she reached the end of his shirt, she peeled away the t-shirt to expose the shallow cut she had inflicted.

Cameron walked over to the metal tray. The various saws and surgical instruments were strewn on the floor. He picked up the bone saw. He checked that it still worked. The blade turned making an eerie whirring sound.

"What are you doing with that, Cameron?" Frank asked nervously.

"Shh," Alexia said pressing the scalpel on his lips.

The blade felt cold as it sliced his lips. The pain was immediate. Cameron brought the saw and a few choice instruments.

Frank began to cry. He could not scream; Alexia had not removed the blade from his lips.

When it was over, Cameron stood and closed the window. The fog began to dissipate almost immediately. He walked over to Alexia and helped her to her feet. They stepped over what was left of Frank dropping their knives and scalpels to the floor. Cameron emptied his pockets of the instruments he had not used.

After all the sharps were on the floor, Cameron placed an arm over Alexia's shoulders and they turned to leave. The anger, the rage that had driven them to murder was gone. They felt hollow. Something important had been mutilated inside them just like Frank had been, and they would never get that back.

It would be so simple to blame it all on the fog that had continued to pulse with their hatred, their drive for revenge. When one sibling would falter, the mist whispered evil things in the ear.

The door opened just as they reached for the handle. Framed in the doorway were Susannah and two other guards. The siblings parted to allow them entry. Susannah took in the bloody mess on the floor, the surgical instruments, the rumpled bed and the last remnants of the mist.

She looked back at Cameron and Alexia whose clothes were stained with blood.

"I'm assuming you found him like this?" Susannah asked.

Cameron nodded.

"I thought so. Why don't you two go get cleaned up. There are some spare uniforms in the room across the hall. My men are very good at what they do. We'll take care of the rest," Susannah said.

Cameron nodded again and turned to leave. He held a hand out to Alexia. She laid her hand in his and followed him out. The two security guards were snapping on rubber gloves as they left. They could not muster much concern either way.

They found the room and the uniforms. There was a bathroom with a shower. They took turns washing the blood from their bodies. No matter how hard she scrubbed, she could not feel clean. Alexia knew she did not deserve to feel clean, but she scrubbed harder nonetheless.

"Lexi, come on. It's no use. Just get dressed," Cameron said in a defeated voice from the other side of the door.

He heard the shower turn off, and Alexia step out. He walked away from the door to give her some privacy. She stepped out in a maid's uniform. At another time, he would have been amused. Now he only wanted his turn under the hot spray.

He showered and dressed quickly. When he stepped out of the shower he found Alexia leaning against the door drawing circles on the wall with her finger.

It would take a long time for them to recover from this if they managed to at all.

“Adrian is dead,” Alexia said suddenly.

“I know,” Cameron said.

“He killed him in front of me.”

“Oh, Lexi,” he said as he wrapped his little sister in his arms.

She did not cry. She barely moved. She stood limp within the circle of his arms. They stood like that for a few minutes until Alexia finally turned into the embrace and hugged him back.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He was not sure he wanted her gratitude. He had not done what he should have. He had allowed his anger and hatred take control and made them both into cold-blooded murderers.

“Let’s go, sis,” Cameron said.

They made their way down the hall and to the metal service stairs. The metal clanging hurt their ears. They eventually found their way to the lobby to find the place filled with police officers, fire fighters, and paramedics. They paused for a moment before continuing on. As they were approached by one uniformed civil servant after another, a staff member or guest was always there to distract them with a question or some injury. They made their way out through the main entrance without having been stopped by anyone.

Perhaps some day, they could appreciate what had happened as they crossed that lobby. When they stepped outside, they discovered that the fog had lifted leaving behind only a few wisps just high enough to hide most of the bodies strewn across the lawn. They stumbled their way down the gravel drive. No one attempted to stop them among the police vehicles and ambulances. They had made some progress beyond the cars and fire trucks when Alexia stumbled over something.

When they looked down to investigate, they discovered Becca’s broken body. Alexia tried to feel something, but her emotions were spent. She could not bring up any emotion beyond fatigue. Cameron helped to her feet. She stepped over Becca’s body and they continued. At the end of the drive, just a few yards away from the turn they found Cameron’s car with the keys in the ignition.

Susannah’s people were indeed very thorough. They climbed in and drove away. Neither one turned back. Frank had won in the end. He had managed to break Cameron and Alexia with his dying breath.