

CHAPTER

two

LIKE TO SLEEP in on Saturdays, but when I received a call early the next morning and checked the ID, I jolted upright in bed. “Alice, what’s wrong?”

My sister’s voice shook as she said, “Somebody’s at my door, but I don’t recognize him. I know it’s dumb to be scared just because of what happened yesterday, but what do I do? I never get visitors!”

“Maybe the guy’s got the wrong unit.”

I heard some shuffling from her end. “I snapped a pic of him through the blinds, and I’m sending it to you. If anything happens to me, you’ll know who did it. Tell Ma and Dad I love them. And Marshmallow, too.”

I rolled my eyes at my younger sister’s dramatics, but an anxious pit still formed in my stomach.

Once I received the image, I recognized Detective Brown right away. Grim features, sandy buzzcut, and signature gray suit.

“What should I do? Call the cops?” Alice asked in a tiny voice.

“No,” I said. “He *is* the police. It’s Detective Brown. Let him in, but stall. I’m heading your way.”

I hung up and changed into presentable outside clothes. As I ran around the house searching for my purse, Marshmallow heard the commotion. “This isn’t NASCAR, Danica Patrick. What’s the hurry?”

“Detective Brown just showed up on Alice’s doorstep.”

He hissed. “I’m coming with.”

Nodding, I snatched a can of cat food and stuck it in my newly found purse. I rushed us over to the car.

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I may have broken some traffic rules on the way there. Perhaps I could make it in the Indy 500 after all because we ended up at Alice’s place in record time.

She lived in a sprawling complex of cookie-cutter tall beige buildings, separated by patches of fresh green common lawns. I pulled into a guest parking spot and sprinted to her unit with Marshmallow in my arms.

After banging on her door, Alice’s sweet voice called out, “Come on in. It’s unlocked.”

I found Detective Brown seated at Alice’s cozy dining table, its wooden surface draped with a happy sunflower-patterned fabric. The cop and I locked eyes.

He shrugged one shoulder in greeting, as though unsurprised that another death had occurred with me nearby. Not guilty *again*, I thought, squaring my shoulders.

Then Alice bustled over from the kitchen. She stood before the cop and served him a mug of steaming *teh tarik*. I could smell the

sweet scent of “pulled tea” from where I stood a few feet away, though I doubted my sister had prepared the drink using the traditional method of pouring black tea and condensed milk between two containers at increasing heights. She’d probably opted for an instant powder package.

In any case, Detective Brown accepted the mug with thanks, then he turned toward me. “Your sister asked that we wait for you to arrive and offered me snacks in the meantime.”

I glanced down at the table and noticed a plate of green speckled soda crackers.

Alice smiled at me. “I’ll bring you some tea, too.” She knew me well. I’d never refuse teh tarik, a common drink in Malaysia. The tea reminded Ma of her home country, and she made it often during my childhood, so I now associated the drink with happy family memories.

Marshmallow wiggled in my arms, and I let him down. “Don’t forget about *my* stomach,” he said.

I took out the can of cat food and pulled the tab. “Bon appétit,” I said, placing his snack on the floor.

While Alice brought me my teh tarik, Detective Brown stared at the plate of crackers on the table. He picked one up. “What are these green things?” he asked.

“Scallion bits,” I said.

“Uh, savory.” He raised an eyebrow and nibbled on a cracker.

My sister finally sat down with her own mug of steaming tea. The detective placed his cracker onto a napkin and cleared his throat. “Miss Lee—”

We both looked at him. “Which one?” I asked.

“Alice,” he said in a sudden brisk tone, and my sister’s light brown eyes widened.

He pulled out a notepad and tapped his pen against it. “It seems that it was you who found the body yesterday.”

“We both did,” I said, sitting straighter in my chair.

He scratched the bridge of his nose. “Let me start with Alice’s account first.”

I put my hand up. “You know, Detective Brown, they already took our statements at the scene.”

“Well, I wasn’t there to do the questioning and to make sure all the details were recorded correctly. I’m in charge, and I insist on doing a thorough job.” He cleared his throat and turned to Alice. “When did you find the deceased?”

My sister’s eyes dimmed. “Her name’s Helen. And I guess we stumbled onto the scene in the late afternoon. Mimi and I had planned to meet up for a girls’ night out.”

Detective Brown gave a slight nod at the mention of my name but continued to train his sharp gaze on my sister. “Tell me more.”

“I didn’t know why Helen was still there. When I looked in her car, she was slumped over . . .” Alice shivered and cupped her hands around her warm mug of tea.

The detective scribbled some notes in his pad and glanced at Alice. Maybe realizing he was pushing too hard by her trembling, Detective Brown turned his attention to me. “What was your recollection?”

“I noticed Helen in the car by accident. Thought I spotted some kind of animal lurking under her Prius.”

Detective Brown bit the cap of his ballpoint pen. “Hmm, that would explain . . .”

His words trailed off even while I leaned in to listen.

“What else?” he asked me.

I sipped at my milk tea and thought back to yesterday. “Helen’s head seemed slanted at an odd angle, one not comfortable for resting.” I rubbed my suddenly sweaty palms against my jeans.

A deep line creased Detective Brown’s forehead. “Interesting.” He took a few swallows of tea and faced Alice again. “Do you have more to add to your statement? Anything you remember could help crack the case.”

Case? I tugged at my ear. Had I heard wrong?

Alice had stopped trembling by now. “Helen did complain of a stomachache yesterday.”

“Mm-hmm.” Detective Brown wrote in his notepad. “When was this?”

“After lunch.”

The detective waited a few moments, but Alice didn’t seem to have anything else to add, so he slid his chair back and stood up. “Thank you, ladies.”

Marshmallow meowed from his place on the dining floor. “Why is nobody getting a strange vibe about this besides me? What is Detective Brown doing here in the first place asking all these questions?”

I hadn’t really wanted to think about that, but now Marshmallow had made me confront the facts. Swigging the sweet tea as a soothing mechanism, I instead felt the sugar grains lodge in my throat. The cop had definitely referred to the situation with Helen as a case. “Detective Brown,” I said, “is this officially a homicide investigation?”

Alice turned pale, while Detective Brown’s ice blue eyes gazed at me, unblinking. “It is an unusual scenario. When a previously healthy young woman dies inside her own car, my department has to investigate.”

Alice whispered, "Will you be shutting down the school?"

"No, Miss Lee. We've already scoured Roosevelt Elementary. Feel free to go back to work come Monday."

"Thanks, Officer."

He brushed a hand against his formal gray suit. "It's Detective, actually." Pulling out a business card from his pocket, he placed it on the table. "In case you remember any extra details."

Using a somber tone to say goodbye, he also gave me a brisk handshake. "Mimi," he added, "try not to get in the middle of the investigation this time around."

My back stiffened. It wasn't my fault that Detective Brown had homed in on me as a prime suspect before. I, along with Marshmallow, had needed to investigate to clear my name.

After he left, I watched Alice drink her cooled-down tea in one continuous gulp.

She shook her head. "My Valentine's Days are usually bad, but not at the level of a cop showing up at my door."

I nudged her shoulder. "Well, it can only get better from here, right?"

"Easy for you to say, Mimi. I'm sure Josh is planning something great for you this evening."

I felt my face warm up. How could I respond to that? Perhaps it'd be wise to even cancel tonight's outing. Was I heartless to go out on a date when Alice had discovered a dead body only yesterday?

While these thoughts swirled in my head, I saw Marshmallow jump onto Alice's lap. My sister stroked the puffy white fur on my Persian cat with satisfaction. "At least I get a few more minutes with you, handsome," she said.

He purred. "That's right, gorgeous. And I'm way better than a thousand of those two-leggers."

Even though she couldn't hear him, Alice smiled. Marshmallow had never failed to cheer her up whenever she felt down, ever since the moment she'd spotted him at the rescue shelter and decided to give him to me.

"You know, I could leave Marshmallow here for the night," I said.

Alice shook her head. "You know the rules at this complex. We can't own pets here, and I don't want to get caught. The landlord is testy enough as it is."

She continued, "Besides, I'm feeling better now. Go and enjoy your time with Josh."

With my sister in a healthier emotional space, I breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps I could focus on my upcoming romantic date without feeling guilty after all.

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Josh and I had been dating for a few months now, but this was our first Valentine's together.

"Should I dress up?" I'd asked him when he'd told me he was planning something. I possessed only one formal thing in my closet: my go-to little black dress.

"No." Josh had shaken his head, his cute floppy bangs swishing across his rich brown eyes. "And actually, you might want to go for a casual look."

What kind of activity would we be doing? I hoped it wasn't something like paintball. The last time I'd gone, I'd ruined my favorite shirt and had sustained bruises that lasted weeks.

When Josh picked me up that evening, I scrutinized his outfit. He'd donned a bomber jacket over a black T-shirt and slim jeans. On his feet, he wore a pair of Keen sneakers.

I looked at his footwear. “Did you want to change into dress shoes?”
He shrugged.

“You’re so close by. Feel free to go back if you need to.” His apartment, unit number one, wasn’t very far from my own.

“Nah. These are comfortable. A good break from the usual polished shoes I have to wear for work.” He put his arm around my waist and waved goodbye to Marshmallow.

My cat flicked his tail in the air at us from the couch. He stared at the television screen in front of him. I’d left the National Geographic channel on at a low volume to keep him company while we’d be gone.

I kept begging Josh for a clue about where we were headed as he drove south on the 405. After a solid five minutes of begging, he relented. “One hint,” he said. “We’re doing something international.”

“Should’ve brought my passport then,” I said and winked at him.

We shared a laugh, but then he quieted down and fixed his gaze at the moving traffic up ahead. He was pretty good at keeping me in suspense. When we got off the exit in Long Beach almost an hour later, I finally understood our destination.

He’d arranged for us to travel to the Naples of Los Angeles. The neighborhood featured restaurants serving Italian fare and even a series of waterways for boats to glide along.

We ended up at a quaint Italian café where he’d already made reservations for two. We sat in the back at a small square table with a flickering tealight between us. The checkered tablecloth and paper napkins lent an informal atmosphere, but I was still glad I’d changed from my “When Life Gets Ruff, Hug a Dog” T-shirt into a simple top.

According to an advertisement in the window, the restaurant was famous for its handmade pasta dishes. We both salivated at the menu. He ordered penne, and I got the spaghetti.

After the waitress left, Josh flashed me a wide smile. “Happy Valentine’s Day!”

I grinned back. “I’m really excited about finally getting to celebrate this day as part of a couple.” Oh, wait. How much more of a loser could I sound like? I felt my insides shriveling up in embarrassment.

I switched topics. “Er, how has this past week been for you?”

Josh raked a hand through his hair. “Ugh. It’s been so busy at the firm.”

True. We’d barely texted over the last few days.

He continued, “Ever since you referred me to PetTwin, my bosses have insisted that I take on more patent law cases.”

At the end of last year, I had connected Josh with a pet matchmaking company that used advanced virtual reality capabilities. They’d needed patent protection to secure their cutting-edge ideas. Ever since then, he’d been swamped with work.

Josh took hold of my hand across the table and traced circles with his thumb on my skin. “How’s Hollywoof?”

I loved the name and the play on words that I’d given my pet grooming salon. “Business is steady. I’m really glad I hired Nicola. She even handles basic grooming tasks, in between her sporadic acting auditions.”

He selected his next words with care. “That all sounds good, but you seem a little on edge tonight.”

“Why would you say that?”

Josh pointed to the paper napkin in my hand.

Or what was left of one. I’d picked up a napkin without even noticing and had shredded it to bits while we’d been talking.

“Oops.” I pushed the tattered pieces into a pile. “I think I’m still tense with something that happened at Alice’s school yesterday.”

Josh's jaw tightened. "Is it school budget cuts again?"

I shook my head. "After I met my sister at work and we walked to the parking lot, we found a teacher . . . slumped over in her car."

He raised his eyebrows at me. "Unconscious?"

"No, dead." I gazed at the checkered tablecloth and frowned. "The paramedics came, but it was already too late."

"I'm so sorry. That must've been really hard." His dark brown eyes gazed at me with concern. "Are you and Alice okay?"

I gritted my teeth. "So, Detective Brown showed up at my sister's apartment this morning."

He scowled. "The nerve of that man." Josh and Detective Brown didn't get along, particularly not after the cop's deep suspicion of me last year.

"He ruined Alice's day," I said. "A double whammy since Valentine's isn't the best holiday for singles anyway. He has no consideration, given that it's both a weekend and a special occasion."

"The detective probably didn't even realize it was February fourteenth," Josh said. "The man's a workaholic."

I'd never seen Detective Brown relax in all the time I'd known him.

"I bet he's single . . . by default," Josh said.

I smirked. "No doubt about that."

Our trash talking the detective had lightened the situation and made me feel better. When our food arrived, I could savor the hand-made pasta. I loved the chewy texture of the noodles, a consistency that far beat the store-bought packages I always used in my cooking.

Josh gestured to my plate of spaghetti with his fork. "We could eat it together, *Lady and the Tramp* style?"

"I think that kind of thing only works in cartoons. In real life,

there's major sauce splashing involved. Besides"—I pulled the dish closer to me—"this is way too good to share."

He gave me a puppy dog pout, and I caved. While we didn't eat both sides of the same noodle, we spooned a little of our pasta onto each other's plate.

When we finally finished eating, I felt like I'd feasted. "This is the kind of traveling I enjoy," I said. "A food-cation."

Josh laughed and checked his watch. "Okay, and now it's about time to move on to our next reservation."

"I hope this isn't going to be a progressive dinner date," I said, patting my full stomach.

"Not exactly."

We ended up walking down the quiet side streets and burning off those pasta calories before stopping at the waterfront. Josh pulled out his phone to make a discreet call as I admired the floating boats nearby.

Five minutes later, a tall blond man strolled over to us with a clipboard in his hand. "Reservations for Josh Akana and Mimi Lee?"

Josh nodded.

"It'll take a minute or two for your guide to show up." The man ticked off some boxes on his papers and then turned to me. In a confident manner, he said, "Asian last name. Is it Chinese, Korean? Maybe Thai?"

"None of the above," I said. "It's from my dad. And he's white."

The young man's face grew red as he looked down at his papers. "Oh."

At that moment, the guide turned up and saved the other man from further embarrassment. The newcomer carried both a picnic basket and a scarlet carnation in his hands. He gave the flower to me and said, "For you, *bellissima*."

Turning to Josh, he passed over the basket. “Are you ready?”

Between the super fake accent and the striped shirt, I figured out Josh’s romantic plans. This gondolier would take us out on the water.

We walked the short distance to the docks, Josh holding my hand all the while. A slim black gondola waited for us in the canal. So that’s why Josh had wanted to wear water-resistant shoes—in case his feet got wet.

After situating ourselves in the gondola, Josh opened the picnic basket to reveal a small baguette with slices of salami. Though still stuffed, I managed a few bites as the gondolier perched at the stern and maneuvered us through the waterways with his oar.

I relaxed into the romance of the scenario. Even the gondolier’s cheesy rendition of “That’s Amore” didn’t dampen my mood. Gliding down the canals crisscrossing Long Beach, we passed by the elegant homes at the water’s edge, dressed up and sparkling in the serene evening.

Soon the gondolier paused underneath an arc. Josh’s eyes twinkled at me as he said, “Legend has it that kissing under a bridge means a couple will enjoy never-ending happiness together.”

He leaned in, and I could smell the faint whiff of pine. Anticipating his tender kiss, I closed my eyes and tilted my head up.

Smack. His mouth crashed into my nose.

A kiss-astrophe. He’d bumped into my button nose. I rubbed it, hyperaware of the one feature I’d always felt sensitive about.

He leaned in again and brushed his soft lips against the tip of my nose. “You’re beautiful,” he whispered.

Then he kissed me full on the lips, and somehow his reassurance of my self-conscious flaw made the new kiss seem that much sweeter.