

Erekdale's Story - *WINNER*

Mysteries were supposed to be about who did it. Not who was going to die.

I stood outside the brightly-lit mansion, my feet locked to the ground. It was hard to imagine what it would be like when I killed my target. I knew nothing about the person. Were they someone just and honorable? A person only targeted because they opposed the Patron and, though indirectly, the Council?

Or were they genuinely a bad person?

The Council didn't bother to tell me. Maybe because they knew I would work better on my first mission without prior knowledge of the victim. Maybe they just liked their mysteries. Or maybe they wanted to torment me because they knew what Omar and I wanted to do...

Fireworks in the distance broke my train of thought. I shook myself and forced my legs into motion, resisting the urge to glance over my shoulder. Focus on the mission. Not the guilt. Assassins killed because they were told to. They didn't choose their targets; they just removed them. The familiar sharp ache pierced my chest—a real knife would probably create a similar feeling.

The guards outside the doors accepted my invitation without question. They didn't bother to check me for weapons beyond giving me a look-down as I ascended the stairs, so the knife strapped to my forearm under my suit's sleeve went unnoticed.

Live music drifted into my ears from an open ballroom, just audible over the hum of the several hundred guests. I glanced around. Plenty of windows, plenty of routes to escape... and plenty of places for my shadow to hide and watch me, making sure I wouldn't try to run. They called it 'insurance.' The shadow was always a Council lackey, ready and willing to kill you if you failed or tried to break the rules.

I looked more closely at the crowd now, picking out faces. *"Your target is someone with a vine tattoo on their wrist. They will be near to you..."* What was that supposed to mean, anyway? It was a party. Everyone was likely to be *near* at some point.

Ball gowns and coattails swept past me as I waded into the room. A sea of satin and silk, alive with sights and sounds... How was I to find the target in *this*?

I caught sight of a familiar face. Elynn, light brown hair falling in waves around her face and framing her hazel eyes as she met my gaze.

No.

I recoiled, bumping into several people. Their murmurs drowned amid the frantic beat of my heart as *near* took on a whole new meaning.

She was trying to move towards me. I almost bolted for the exit. I had never seen her wrists and I never intended to find out if the vine tattoo was there. Not when she'd been my friend all these years, despite my evasive answers to any personal questions.

I whirled around and collided with a man in a white tuxedo. He grasped my forearm to catch me just as my legs went weak again.

“Steady,” Omar murmured, drawing us behind a marble pillar. A smile came to his lips, but didn’t reach his eyes. “I didn’t expect to see you here,” he said in a low voice.

Code speech; he must have sensed my shadow was near. Was tonight the night we escaped? I tried to relax my shoulders. “I’m on a mission from the Council.”

“Who is your target?” His gaze stayed like stone, yet his eyes still softened. He’d tried to keep me from having to make my first kill.

Could we escape before then? Or would my shadow get to us first? I licked my lips, letting out a breath. “I don’t know.”

“Pardon?”

“I don’t *know*.” I dropped my voice to a whisper. “Someone with a vine tattoo on their wrist who ‘will be near to you.’”

Omar tugged at his gloves, frowning. “That’s...”

“Unusual. I know. The vine tattoo is hard enough. They couldn’t give more specific clues? How can I check every person in the room? And how can I find someone ‘near to me?’” I gestured helplessly at the crowd with one hand. “It could be anyone!” *Just not Elynn. Please not her.*

Omar shook his head again, grasping my forearm. I was shaking again. “Calm. Remember?”

I shut my eyes. *They’re going to kill me. I can’t do this. I can’t.*

“I’ll help you.”

My eyes popped open. “Is that—”

“Allowed? I don’t see why not.”

I quickly shook my head. “The Council will just get angrier with you.”

Omar scanned the room, taking a step back. “It’s for you. It will be worth it.” He cast me a brief smile. “Let’s get to searching, shall we?”

I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. “Could...” The question died in my throat.

Omar shook his head. “Focus on the mission.”

He turned and disappeared into the crowd. Fixing my gaze on a group gathered around a refreshment table, I moved towards them. I felt someone’s gaze on the back of my head, following my every moment. The feeling sent my heartbeat ticking up a notch. Had the shadow overheard our conversation? Guessed Omar’s code words? Would we escape after I made my kill, or before?

Every bare wrist in the room taunted me. Would it be a large marking, or a small one? With how quickly people moved, I’d have to stop everyone in order to get a good look. My cover would be blown too soon if I did that, and my shadow wouldn’t hesitate to punish me harshly if I failed...

And what if your target is Elynn?

Shaken, I beckoned one of the servants with drinks.

“Matthan?”

I startled. “Ryder?” The tuxedoed server was a fellow assassin. We had trained together—the Council discouraged relationships between apprentices, but other than Omar, he was the closest thing to a friend I had. Why was he here as well?

“What are you doing here?” he hissed, handing me a glass.

“My target’s at this party.” I took the drink, moving closer to him. “You haven’t seen someone with a vine tattoo on their wrist, have you?”

He frowned, shaking his head. “And have you happened to have seen anyone who just had their world shaken?”

My gut wound tighter. “You have a mystery target too.”

“Yeah, and that’s unusual for an apprentice’s first kill.” Ryder snatched the drink out of my hand and placed it back on the tray. “Thirty minutes left, and an impossible target to find. I swear they want us dead.”

A chill ran down my spine. “I’m sure that isn’t their intention.” Unless they overheard Omar and I. Which they couldn’t have, not if...

I spun back to scan the crowd. No sign of Omar—not a surprise, since he’d been at this much longer than I had. Elynn still danced, her gaze skipping through the crowd—searching for me. My throat narrowed.

I spun back to Ryder. “All right. Let’s look for someone shocked.”

He squinted. “What about—”

“We can work together. Let’s just start looking.” Away from Elynn. Maybe the Council would buy my excuse that I abandoned my mission to help Ryder.

Ryder hesitated, then started off. I followed a ways behind him, scouring the room again. What did the Council mean by *shocked*? How would they even know if we would find the right person? It was even vaguer than ‘near to you.’

I passed another tuxedoed server carrying a tray. Could it be a butler? They all wore gloves so I couldn’t see their wrists and their faces were expressionless. At what point would this person have their world shaken? What if it hadn’t happened yet?

Sweat gathered on my collar as Elynn’s gaze met mine once more. I looked away, ducking out of sight. *Not her, not her. Did her expression register as shocked when she saw me?* I thought back. *No, she wasn’t shocked.*

“There.” Ryder stopped. “I think that lady in blue has a wrist tattoo.”

I followed his gaze. The lady in question had a tight glittering dress. She spun around the dance floor and threw her hands in the air. Something sparkled on her wrist and it wasn’t a bracelet.

“I’ll check it out.” I said.

Ryder gave a curt nod and slipped away. I headed for the dance floor. I could cut in, find if she had the vine tattoo, kill her, and slip away before anyone was the wiser. My throat tightened at the thought of blood staining my hands.

“Matt?” Elynn intercepted me. “What are you doing here?” She swept me into a dance before I could react.

I glanced at the shadows. I was sure the Council knew about Elynn, but she didn’t know about them, and I didn’t want to give them any excuse to use her against me.

“I’m working,” I mumbled, looking over the dance floor for the woman in the blue dress.

“You must have time for one dance,” Elynn said. “What do you do, anyway? I can’t believe I still don’t know.”

There! The woman in the blue dress. Closer, I could see her tattoo was green. She had to be the target.

“Sorry. I have to go.”

I stepped away from Elynn and into the path of the woman in blue.

Elynn’s gaze burned into the back of my head and tore my heart. I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them in time to bump into the woman in blue.

“Oh sorry.” She giggled.

Forcing a smile, I reached for her hand and brought it to my lips, flipping it over at the last second to see her wrist. With my other hand, I reached for my knife.

It was a green feather.

“Excuse me?” The lady fluttered her eyelashes.

“Sorry.” I dropped her hand and moved to the edge of the room. Ryder met me next to a pillar.

“Matt!” Elynn’s voice rose above the clamor of the room, but I didn’t look back. *She couldn’t have the tattoo. She can’t.*

“It wasn’t her,” I said to Ryder. “Any luck?”

He shook his head.

“Let’s keep looking. We’ll find our man. Both of them.” My throat tightened at the thought of what would happen if we didn’t.

Ryder’s steps became quicker and stiffer. He cast glances over his shoulder and at the clock more than he did at the room around.

I saw a man in a blue tie watching us intently from a balcony. A shadow? Did we have the same shadow? His eyes met mine, and the barest hint of a smirk touched his mouth.

A tall figure in a white suit vanished into a side room up ahead. I let out a pent up breath and stepped by Ryder. “I’m following Omar,” I hissed in his ear.

I went ahead, weaving between guests. I tried to check my steps as I went after him, but it would be clear enough to the shadow, wouldn’t it? He was always watching, anyway.

We’re dead. So dead.

I shook my head. We had to try. We *had* to.

I was nearly running by the time I entered the hallway Omar had slipped through. Darkness spilled across it and the door closed, muting the sound of the music. The hair on the back of my neck rose. Darkness—an assassin's best friend. Had Omar found something back here?

A quiet click registered in my ears. I froze by a partly opened door. Slowly, I edged toward it and nudged it aside. Moonlight spilled in through a window and cast light on a figure in white. My heart stopped.

"Omar?"

"You have to live," Omar whispered, smiling apologetically. He raised the gun, pointing it at his own head. A hint of green flashed on his wrist.

"No!" My shout ran in tandem with the gunshot. I rushed forward as Omar crumpled, falling to my knees beside him. Blood stained his white suit. Too much blood—

I couldn't look at his face. Instead, I reached for his wrist. Ice shot through my veins as moonlight fell on the vine tattoo on his skin.

No—the Council couldn't have sent me to... to...

"Matthan?"

Ryder stood in the doorway, gun in hand. I stared at him, numb, shocked. His face paled as his hand began to shake.

"Matthan..." His voice went hoarse. "I can't... they're going to kill me."

It registered after a second. We should have run when we had the chance. The Council had known we were going to, sooner or later, so they had sent me here after Omar, and Ryder here to get rid of me—effectively eliminating us both.

I swallowed, raising my hands. "It's okay. You... I want you to live." Omar would be proud of me for saying this, right?

Ryder's hand shook as mine had earlier. I swallowed, shutting my eyes. It was hard to imagine what it would be like to die. Would it hurt? Would I be numb?

A gunshot went off, followed by exploding glass. My eyes popped open as Ryder yanked me to my feet and shoved me toward the window. "Let's go!"

I looked back at the doorway. The shadow would be here any minute. If we went back now... if I let Ryder shoot me... I looked back at Omar. He had wanted me to escape to freedom, and he was willing to die to save me. The resolve hardened in my chest. I turned and ran after Ryder.

Feedback:

That was unexpected, which was wonderful.

I thought there was too much telling and internal monologue at the beginning. You can create a lot of the same emotions (but more powerfully) by showing us things the MC is seeing that make the job seem worse. (The target interacting with a child. The target being kind to

others/the MC. The target seeming helpless. The target seeming human. The more we see these things, the less angst you have to force into your character's mind.)

I would have liked the bit about Elynn to have been revealed later. It seemed to show up too quickly to let tension build up. (There's suddenly less tension when you know who you're there to kill.) I know it was a red-herring now, but I didn't know that earlier and a more drawn out reveal would have helped drive the story.

Avensbeck's Story

It was a sunny morning in June when it began. Things oughtn't to happen that way, you might say. You'd be right. In theory, a murder should take place on a dull wintry evening in February.

But the way things happen in theory isn't always the way they happen in real life.

I wasn't expecting to be called in to the office that day. It was my day off, after all, and because days off were as rare at the office as murders in June, no one dared violate them.

But murders happen in June, on days off, on days when no one expects them.

My phone rang in the house, and I ran in to answer it, letting the door bang shut behind me.

"This is Kate," I said, picking up the phone.

"Kate," a slow voice said, "there's a job for you. Today."

"Really?" I asked, beginning to get a little bit frustrated. "A job for me today? Couldn't you--"

"Someone's dead," he said, with the tone he used when there was no arguing with him. "We need you."

"I don't specialize in dead people," I said. "I specialize in live people who won't give answers. Then, I specialize in making them give answers."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Right now, we need you."

I took the bus and was at the office within the hour. I took the lift to the director's office, wondering with every jerk what exactly he was calling me in for.

“Kate,” he said, in the slow voice that characterized him, “you’ve arrived.”

I nodded, ready to get on with this conversation. “What do you need me for?” I asked. “I’m not a murder specialist; you know that.”

“Yes,” he said. “But you do specialize in getting answers.”

“From live people!” I protested. “Not dead ones!”

“Precisely,” he said. “This person must be alive, because they’re not there.”

“First question I need to ask--” I paused, trying to sort through the many things that were floating around in my head. First of all, I shouldn’t have even been there. The director wasn’t making much sense (not that he usually did), but someone who was dead should be... wherever they were. “Where did the murder take place?”

The director smiled. “This is why I called you. The murder took place in the south end of the city, at the corner of Raven Street and Ninth.”

I shook my head. “Why there? There are plenty of places that would be much more secluded. And many more places where it would be more obvious. Why in a place where half the people walking by would notice and half wouldn’t?”

He smiled his small mysterious smile that I had come to detest. It meant that the case did not belong to him anymore. It belonged to me, and he was waiting for me to find the answers.

“I’m not ready yet,” I said. “You said the person was dead, but you didn’t say when. Or who. Or how you know. Start with that, would you?”

He twitched his nose, then must have decided to give me more information. “We don’t know when. Or who. All we know is that a dead body was seen at the corner of Raven and Ninth by a citizen who did not give any identifying information.”

“It’s a prank call,” I said. “The office knows better than to respect those.”

“Do we?” he asked. “I sent down Rawlings earlier today, and he reported a dead body, but there were too many people for him to get close.”

“Trust Rawlings for that,” I said. “But there’s no body now?”

"He waited in the area until the rush was gone and then went back. There was nothing. No blood, no marks on the ground of a struggle. He's waiting there for you now."

"No," I said. "If I'm taking a murder case, I'm taking it alone."

"This might be dangerous," he said.

"And when has that ever stopped me?" I asked. "No. No Rawlings, just me."

"There's only one problem," the director said. "Rawlings is the only one who saw the body, and he's the only one who could recognize the people who were in the area at the time. Rawlings is the one you need. Just think: Rawlings and Mortimer, the ones who will solve this case."

"No," I said. "I can deal with you calling me in on my day off. I can even deal with you calling me in for a murder case. But I cannot deal with Geoffrey Rawlings. Not today."

The director smiled again and held out a ticket. "You have two minutes before the bus leaves," he said. "You've better be there."

So against my better judgment, fuming on the inside, I took the bus down to Ninth and Raven Street. As I stepped off the bus, I looked around. Rawlings was nowhere to be seen.

"Mortimer and Rawlings," I whispered to myself. "More like *just Mortimer*."

I looked up at the building right in front of the bus stop. It was a department store, inside of which several mannequins were displayed, dressed in the latest fashions. The front part of the building, and all parts facing the street, were made entirely out of glass. Anyone inside the store could have seen what went on out here. Doubtless, someone would have.

I began to take a step towards the door, but stopped suddenly. I spun around, narrowly missing Geoffrey Rawlings.

His face registered shock, surprise, and a certain guilty air that must have somehow connected to the fact that he had tried to sneak up on me.

"Kate!" He said. "I mean, Miss Mortimer, what a surprise to see you here!"

"Really?" I asked. "Or were you the one who asked the director to send me?"

“Of course not!” he said. “I merely asked the director to send someone! I never dreamed it would be you!”

The look on his face made me believe him just this once. He really hadn’t expected it to be me, and he was entirely crestfallen.

“What did you see?” I asked, resolved to not let any more time be wasted by Rawling’s antics.

“Well,” he said, “there was something on the ground. I couldn’t exactly see *what* it was. I just know it was something. On the ground.”

“Did people notice it?” I asked.

“Um... sort of.” He shrugged. “I didn’t actually see it. I just saw people around something on the ground. Most of them just glanced at it.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s review what we actually know. Someone reported a dead body in a very public spot. When you came to look, you said there were too many people.”

“Sure!” he said. “It was rush hour, after all. People were taking buses and getting to work. There were too many people around to do a proper investigation.”

“But they were all busy?” I asked. “They were all walking, heading to where they were going?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Very busy. Not distracted at all.”

“So there were people around who noticed this body, but they didn’t act like they would have around a body. Whoever called and reported the body didn’t call the police; they called our office. What does that tell us?”

“It means they thought it was serious,” he said.

“No,” I said, turning to face the department store again. “It means they had the office’s number. There aren’t many people who have that. It also tells us that we don’t actually know what’s going on, and we need to find out.”

I headed into the department store feeling like I could face this. All I had to do was ask questions, and that was what I was trained to do.

There was a woman at a sales counter on the left side of the store, and I headed in that direction. I didn't bother to see if Rawlings was following. He could do his own investigating.

"Hello, love," she said. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to know what was outside," I said. "There was something there earlier, wasn't there?"

"Oh yes," she said. "There was something, and I heard people talking about it. Someone in jewelry said it looked like a dead body."

"Was it?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not really. It was actually a mannequin, with catsup or something sprayed over it. Slightly shocking, slightly revolting. Mostly just strange. It was gone the next time I looked. I don't know how someone could take it with them on the bus though. People would stare."

"Maybe that's what the person who put it there wanted. You work around mannequins, though. Do you think that someone stole it from the store?"

"Oh no," she said. "Our kind don't have faces or hair. The one on the ground had hair and a face."

"Really?" I said. "Do you know where else they have mannequins like that?"

She laughed. "I'm not a mannequin connoisseur, love. I wouldn't know. Are you a detective? That's why you're asking so many questions?"

"I like to ask questions," I said. "I always have. Right now, though, I'm not sure of the right questions to ask."

I turned and headed toward the front of the building, only to remember Rawlings. He had come in with me, I thought. He wasn't here now, though. Oh well. He could figure this out on his own, and I could figure it out on my own.

I pushed on the door to open it, and he was suddenly beside me. "It's a mannequin from Bradford's," he said. "There's an artist there that does them like that. Only mannequins of that kind in the world, they say."

I stared at him.

“What?” he asked. “Are you saying I don’t know how to ask questions or you just don’t like the kind of questions I ask?”

I didn’t answer. I was too busy trying to figure this out. If the person who had left the mannequin there was trying to pin the blame on the department store here, why had they used a mannequin from Bradford’s?

“So we’re heading to Bradford’s then?” I asked. “Isn’t that on the other side of the city?”

“Not that far,” he said. “There’s two, you’ll remember. One on the other side of the city, but the new one’s just down by Ninth and Baker Street.”

“Is it?” I asked, leaving in my voice more than a hint of how I felt about him.

“I can ask questions too,” he said. “I might not have asked as many, or asked them as well, but I can still get the answers.”

I didn’t answer him--not then, and not till we had reached the corner of Ninth and Baker and were standing in front of Bradford’s Department Store.

Like the other department store, this one’s glass windows were lined with mannequins. Unlike the other ones, though, these mannequins had faces. They were placid faces--what I imagined kids would look like if they’d never grown up and faced heartbreak.

They were fake faces. Fake like the mannequins themselves, but more so.

“There’s something wrong here,” I said.

“What?” he asked.

“It’s hidden,” I said. “Everything’s hidden. The dead mannequin. The evidence of anything wrong. And the person who’s done it.”

“One thing’s sure,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

“There’s only one way to find out.” He didn’t wait for me, but headed around the side of the building. I’d expected him to go in the front door, but didn’t doubt that he had a different plan. Somehow, this mystery with him was proving to be better than I had thought it would be. And more difficult.

I followed around the corner of the building, then around the other corner to the back of the building. There were several openings for unloading lorries, a service door, and absolutely no windows. This was the place where a murder would happen--not in the open.

That was it, then. The person who committed the “murder” of the mannequin had wanted people to know. They had wanted people to pay attention and be shocked. Why though?

Rawlings bent over the handle of the service door, trying to force it open. He twisted the handle and pulled, but the door didn’t move.

“You don’t suppose there’s another way in?” he asked.

“There’s always the front door,” I said.

“Oh, but we’re not looking for the front door. We’re looking for someone who left a mannequin at Ninth and Raven Street. That person would have taken it through the service door, not the front.”

“Oh, really?” I said. I had to admit he was right, but just because he was right this time didn’t mean he was going to be right every time. I shuffled through my handbag and pulled out my lock-picking implement.

“Should I ask why you have a knife in your purse?” he asked.

“It’s a dagger, actually,” I said, intending to leave him in no doubt of how our relations stood. “And no, you shouldn’t.” I was the one called in here--called in because Rawlings couldn’t handle it. And if I was asked to deal with this, then I was going to do it my way.

I poked the dagger into the hole so that its thin blade was facing the same way as the keyhole, turned it right twice, then left twice, and opened the door.

“How did you do that?” he asked. “It’s a dagger!”

“Anything can be done with a dagger, if one knows how to use it,” I said. “Go ahead, I’m following you.”

He pulled the door open farther and stepped inside. "It's dark," he said.

"Of course it's dark," I answered, stepping in behind him. "Don't you have a torch?"

He pulled one of the regulation pocket torches out of somewhere--most likely his pocket. He shone it around. "We're just in a hallway," he said. "I bet there's plenty of light if we just go a little farther."

He led the way deeper into the building. "The tunnel turns left here," he said, his voice echoing off the walls.

"Why was it a hallway a minute ago and now it's a tunnel?" I asked.

"Because it turned into a tunnel. Now, what's this?" he paused abruptly and I barely stopped myself from running into him.

"I don't know, what is it?" I asked.

"It's like a handle, built into the wall. And the tunnel ends here. Do you think it opens a door somehow?"

"We're in a department store," I said, "not a detective novel. Why would it open the door?"

"I'm pulling it," he said. In the dim glare from his flashlight, I could see him pull down on the handle. Sparks flew from the handle, and a siren immediately started.

"Well," I said, "at least we know the fire alarm works."

"What was I supposed to do?" he asked.

"I don't know!" I said. "I guess not that!"

"Where's the door?" he demanded.

"I don't know that either!" I yelled. "All I know is that we may be stuck here--" I backed up, away from him, and hit something in the wall. It was round and cold and metal, and felt like a doorknob. I turned it slowly, and the door behind it swung open, revealing a room with dark curtains on the walls, but a soft glow illuminating those walls.

"In here!" I hissed.

He followed me and shut the door behind him, leaving behind the screaming siren. "It looks like a theater," he said.

"Or a studio," I said. "You don't think it's the artist's studio, do you?"

"The artist?" he asked. "What are you talking about?"

"The one who makes the mannequins. Does he do his work here?"

"Look," he whispered, pointing at a black-draped figure by the far wall.

I stepped towards it cautiously and raised the covering. "It's a mannequin," I whispered.

"I guessed that," he said. "Like those out front?"

"Yeah," I said. "But this one's wounded."

"How?" he asked.

I pulled the corner of the sheet, and it slid off the mannequin onto the floor.

That mannequin wasn't like the ones out front. This one had a different kind of face painted on. This one looked sad or scared--maybe both. In the side of its head, there was a hole painted to look like a bullet hole.

"Add a splash of blood," Rawlings said, "and it looks like the one at Ninth and Raven. A dead mannequin with that sort of face can look awfully like a dead person."

"Oh, do you really think so?" a voice said behind me. I turned to see a short, slender man stepping into the room. "I've tried my best," he said. "But everyone tells me that they're still mannequins."

"You're the artist?" I asked.

"I am," he said.

"But you're also something more, aren't you?" Rawlings asked.

The artist laughed a dark laugh. “Does it matter?” he asked. “Right now I’m an artist, and you’re admiring my work.”

“But why?” I asked. “Why make some mannequins look like they’ve never grown up and then have this one look like it’s experienced all the heartache in the world?”

“Well,” he said, “it gives me a variety to work with.”

“What do you mean, work with?” I asked.

“Your friend here today saw what I meant. When I left that mannequin there, I knew people would look. It’s why I left it there. But then, they saw that they’d been played.”

“You meant for them to think that it was a dead person,” Geoffrey said.

He nodded. “When I leave them around, people will get used to them, and forget they’re there. They won’t remember a time when there wasn’t a dead mannequin.”

“Ohh....” I breathed. “Of course.”

“I don’t get it,” Geoffrey said. “It doesn’t make any sense. What’s the point of leaving out mannequins? They’ll just get rained on, the blood will wash away. They’ll just look scared, not dead.”

“Oh, but at the start?” the artist asked. “When I first place them, they will look actually dead. Eventually, people will forget to wonder.”

“Why are you telling us?” I asked. “I know what you’re doing, what your plan is. But why are you telling us now?”

He laughed a darker laugh, this one like very dark chocolate, with no hint of sweet; only bitter.

“Haven’t you figured it out?” he asked. “You are very smart, Miss Mortimer. Mr. Rawlings doesn’t even know what my plan is yet.”

“What is your plan?” Geoffrey asked.

“He’ll leave out mannequins so people get used to dead bodies. Then he can kill people and leave their bodies around, but no one will even care.”

“You--” Rawlings stared at the artist for one long second, locking eyes in a way that even I thought was rather impressive. “You are Jean-Rene Beautrand! You’re the one who committed those murders in France!”

“And successfully escaped, I might add,” he said, almost as if he was congratulating himself. “I’ve thought through this all.”

“Then you were the one who called the office this morning,” I said. “You wanted us to come here.”

“Well, yes,” he said. “I knew that the office would send someone down to have a look. And I knew that in time, the trail would lead to Bradford’s. Although, I have to admit that I thought you would enter through the front door?”

“What are you going to do with us now?” Geoffrey asked.

“Now?” Beautrand asked. “Now I can act. The door’s locked. Because neither of you is a normal investigative and punishment officer, otherwise known as the police, neither of you is carrying a weapon. Oh, this will be fun!”

“I question your understanding of the word *fun*,” Geoffrey hissed. From the look on his face, I could tell that he actually had no weapons and was berating himself for that fact.

Despite our earlier animosity, I had to admit that Geoffrey was the one who had gotten us here--which meant he was the one who had put us in danger of our lives at the hands of a French artistic murderer. Somehow, couldn’t he get us out of here, too?

“So we can do this easily, or we can do this the difficult way,” Beautrand said. “Basically, I needed a test model for my theory. I hadn’t expected the office to respond so quickly, but people have seen several of my dead mannequins.”

“Why haven’t I heard of this?” I said. “If this has been happening, why don’t I know?”

“Oh, Miss Mortimer,” he said, “you spend all your time up in that office, asking questions that you think matter. This matters more, though. I hold your life in my hands.”

“You only need one person,” Geoffrey said. “Kill me if you need to kill someone. Let her go.”

“Oh, no,” Bertrand said. “I needed someone, but now you both know my plan. That’s why both of you will die.”

“The director will figure out what happened,” I said. “Then the office will be coming after you.”

“But they’ll be too late,” Beautrand said, “because I’m the one with the gun.” Beautrand pulled out a small pistol and aimed it at Geoffrey’s head.

“Say your prayers,” he said, cocking the gun. I lunged for Geoffrey, knocking him to the ground just as Beautrand shot. The sound of the explosion filled the room, but the bullet went straight into the mannequin.

“Stop it now,” Geoffrey said. “We’ve warned you, we’ve given you a chance. If you try again--” Beautrand aimed again at the two of us on the floor, but I rolled out of the way.

“Be careful!” Geoffrey said. “Kate, don’t get hurt!”

“You neither!” I yelled, realizing that I actually did care what happened to him. I didn’t want him to get hurt.

And then I realized what Geoffrey was trying to do. He had moved to the other side of the room from me, so that Beautrand was between us. Since he could only aim at one of us at a time, he was at a disadvantage. Kind of. He still had the gun.

“Don’t shoot Kate,” Geoff said. “Shoot me if you have to, but not her.”

Beautrand got a look on his face that I didn’t want to ever see again. It was like the mannequin’s--a look of all the heartbreak in the world channeled into rage that would kill a person. Then he swiveled around and I knew that he was going to kill me.

“Kate!” Geoff yelled.

Beautrand aimed at me, and I felt like this time I wasn’t going to be able to move. He cocked his gun and I watched as he pulled the trigger.

In that second, Geoff leapt at him, and Beautrand lost his balance. The bullet went wide. Geoff and Bertrand fell to the ground, with Beautrand on the bottom.

“I may not have a weapon,” Geoffrey said, “but I do have something else. I have handcuffs, and they are going to work very well.”

“I think he’s unconscious,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Geoff said, “The handcuffs will work anyway.” He put them on Beautrand and stood up.

“It’s strange how murdering one thing can lead to another,” he said. “He was going to kill you, you know.”

“I know,” I said. “I think--I’m pretty sure you just saved my life. Thank you, Agent Rawlings.”

“Am I not as bad as you thought?” he asked, giving me the grin I had always hated. Somehow, it didn’t seem as bad this time.

“No,” I said, smiling back. “I think you were the right person tonight. You were the person to save all our lives.”

And that is the tale of how two very improbable things happened on the same day. I found a friend in the face of an old enemy, and I met a mannequin murderer on a sunny day in June.

Feedback:

I *loved* the character voice at the beginning and end. Sunny days in June are not prime murder days and that made me laugh. I wish the voice had been more consistent throughout the whole piece.

I loved the line “Doesn’t matter. The handcuffs will work anyway.” I literally laughed.

Also, the whole thing was ridiculous in a fabulous way.

I would have liked to have seen more setting/description because I could picture almost nothing and I got a little lost because of that.

Knapphollow’s Story

I’ll never forget that smile.

She was gleeful. Sickeningly so, as though she was pleased to be found guilty. I had never seen my partner, Detective Alex Wayne, glare so intensely. But she met him with smiling eyes. I must have been missing something. Maybe Clara Browning hadn’t lost yet.

I always compared missing clues to flies in the bathroom. You get agitated and can’t focus until every single one is handled. I thought we had killed all the flies in this case, but that smile kept buzzing in my head, unnerving me.

We were at the coffee shop near the department. We came here for victory coffee, but I couldn't enjoy without every fly being dead.

"Wayne," I asked the detective, "was she... happy?"

Wayne sipped his coffee. "She shouldn't be. That was shoddy work, as far as murders go."

"Hmm?"

"Clara had no alibi, and Mr. Scott Lincoln knew she had fallen for his son. Him not reciprocating her feelings made a perfect motive. I hardly needed to find evidence to convict her." He explained, "I'm disappointed in her, actually. I always thought Clara to be smarter than that..."

"You knew her."

He took another sip. "Almost everyone's heard of her at some point or another. This kid isn't her first rodeo. He may be her first rejection, though."

I stared into my cup, watching the coffee swirl as I stirred. My mind seemed to spin in sync, rotating through every detail: the smiley-face doormat, the living room ashes, the burned body, *that smile...*

I had been cursed with a photographic memory.

Wayne must have noticed my agitation. "Don't let her bother you. She's showy, but she's not worth your time. Now, if *I* had been the murderer, it would be a different tale."

"Huh?"

Wayne grinned. "You need a detective's mind to fool a detective. Face someone like me, and then you can shudder."

"Oh." I dismissed the conversation and took a sip of my coffee. I tried to drown out the picture of the woman with images of my coffee, but the color matched perfectly with her coffee-brown eyes.

>>>

I took my usual morning jog around the neighborhood, clearing my head. Or at least that's what I had hoped for. It's hard to do when jogging past the Lincoln house

Since Clara Browning had been arrested she had paid bail and had a court date coming up.

Lincoln had moved in with his brother. The house had been abandoned for three weeks.

So why was the doormat crooked? It had been straight last I had come, parallel to the threshold.

A fly buzzed in my ear.

I called Wayne. I knew he'd take me seriously.

"Morning, Christian. You out on your daily jog?" He answered.

"Yes." I hesitated, "I think someone's inside the Lincoln house."

"What makes you say that?"

"The doormat's been moved."

"Really... You had better check that out. Go inside. I'll join you in a bit."

"It's locked." I answered.

"Look for wear on the padlock. The Lincoln's use the same combination for everything. You can see where they pressed if you look hard enough."

“You sure that’s legal?”

“No one lives there anymore. You’re fine.”

I hung up and squinted at the padlock until I could make out the combination. I pushed open the door slowly and took it all in. At first glance, there was nothing more than dust and burnt-in shadows of the old house.

That’s when I saw Clara, dying on the floor. A gun lay on the ground by the kitchen entrance. She was staring at it, betrayed.

I called 911 and tended to Clara, ripping off my shirt for her wound. I put pressure where the bullet had pierced her. Her every breath was strained and shallow.

I looked up, trying to replace the suffocating image of dying. In the kitchen, all the cabinet doors were closed. One had been ajar when I last came so the shooter must have closed it. And why drop the gun?

I checked Clara again. She had stopped breathing.

The fire department made it to the Lincoln house first, and Wayne rushed in two minutes later.

“I saw the firemen. You okay?” He asked.

I stared at Clara. “She’s dead.”

“Forget about it right now.” Wayne reached for my hand, “Let’s get you to the department. You found the body; we’ll need a statement from you.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block out the empty look of Clara’s dead face.

>>>

“You know, Christian, you can sit this one out if you’d like.” Wayne offered.

“No, I’m ready.” I promised. My mind was fresh after a night’s rest. “Do we have a suspect?”

“Of course I do. We should have him in the station any moment by now.”

Meagan Hershel, another officer, entered as we were talking. “Detective Wayne? We can’t seem to get in contact with Mr. Scott Lincoln, or his brother.”

“Lincoln’s Mom’s number is 744-8223.” I chimed in while organizing the case notes. “Call her.” Hershel crossed her arms, “What makes you think…”

“Just trust him.” Wayne assured.

She left, and I continued our previous discussion. “I think we should check the doormat. And someone closed the cabinet door. That might be important.” I scurried for a notepad to write these down.

“I don’t think those are necessary details, Christian.”

I frowned. “I thought you said any detail is worth checking, no matter how small.”

“That’s just what I tell rookies to get them to pay attention. But you could tell if a dust bunny was in a different location than yesterday.” I opened my mouth to retort, but he spoke first, “You said you found a gun on the scene, right?”

I nodded.

“We’re still waiting on forensics to confirm it’s the murder weapon. No fingerprints, unfortunately.”

I secured a notepad and started to search for a pencil. “Why was she in there?”

“She was trying to investigate the scene herself, see if she could spin the facts to make herself innocent. That’s how Clara operates.”

Hershel entered the room again,. “We called Mrs. Lincoln. She said that Scott Lincoln and his brother are on a plane back from Hawaii.”

“What?” Wayne exclaimed, losing color in his face.

“Yep.” Hershel piped. “I guess we can rule him out as a suspect.”

“I’m not so sure...” Wayne said. “Why go to Hawaii so soon after your son dies?”

Hershel shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. Do you have any more suspects?”

Wayne frowned. “I don’t need another suspect. Lincoln did it.” He sounded far more confident than I felt. How could he have murdered Clara from Hawaii?

>>>

The wait for Lincoln’s plane to land seemed to last an eternity. Until we could question him, I was stuck doing the equivalent of sitting in a bathroom full of flies. Why didn’t the murderer stick around to make sure Clara died? Who closed the kitchen-cabinet door? The questions buzzed in my head.

“Wayne, why did Mrs. Browning want to marry Lincoln’s son so bad?”

A scowl came over Wayne’s face. “The boy’s got a large inheritance coming to him in a few months when his father dies. Clara’s a gold-digger.”

“Huh?”

“She marries people for their money, then gets a divorce. She’s done it dozens of times. I think she revels in the betrayal on peoples faces when she shows her true colors.” He spat out the words.

“How many men has she tricked?”

“Let’s stop talking about it. Lincoln’s plane just landed.”

People started to exit one of the planes. Scott Lincoln and I spotted each other at the same time. A frown spread across their face when I made eye contact.

“Mr. Scott Lincoln.” Wayne called, “May we ask a few questions?”

“I already made my statement.” He retorted loudly. “Ain’t her court date next week? Whatever would you need me for?”

“Clara’s dead.” Wayne answered straightly.

A funny expression came over Lincoln. “She’s dead?”

“I need a statement from you.”

He shook his head. “I’m not a suspect, am I? I was in Hawaii! How could I have murdered anyone?”

“Have you ever shared the combination number for your safe?” Wayne asked.

“Uh, No... what are you getting at?”

“Have you shared access to your gun before?”

His fists tightened around his luggage. “My gun? Was it used to kill her?”

Wayne nodded. I corrected him without thinking: “We haven’t heard from forensics yet.”

Lincoln’s face went red. “Are you making false accusations? I could report you for this!”

Wayne pinched the bridge of his nose. “We aren’t making any accusations yet. We’re just digging for facts.”

“Next time you want to talk to me, call my lawyer!” He huffed and stormed away.

Wayne spoke to me through clenched teeth. “Christian, I know what I’m doing. Don’t ruin it.”

>>>

“Great news, Wayne!” Hershel burst into the office. Of course, she only saw me. Wayne was on coffee break, like he was every Tuesday afternoon from 3:12-3:33. Why didn’t people pay attention?

“What do you need?” I asked.

Her voice went flat. “I need to show this to Wayne. Forensics got back; Wayne’s right about the gun.”

I stood up to see the results. “Lincoln’s gun was used?”

“Maybe Wayne’s right about Lincoln after all.” She shrugged, “He gave me the statements from your airport interview, no knew the combination.”one else

The flies died. The details fell into place. “Hershel, I need to ask you a favor...”

>>>

Wayne and I pulled up to the front of Lincoln’s house.

“You go on ahead.” I ushered, “I need to grab something first.”

I watched as he went up to the front door and punched in the 4-digit combination. I followed once he was inside. The smiley-mat was in the same position it was in when I found Clara’s body.

He shook his head as I took a place beside him. “There’s nothing new here.”

Try as I might, I couldn’t make eye contact with him. “Forensics got back. You were right about the gun.”

Wayne smiled, satisfied. “See?”

I tried to breathe in courage. “Now all the flies are dead.”

Wayne blinked. “What?”

“When you explained to me how to enter the house, you told me that the Lincoln’s used the same combination for everything. You’re right. The code you used to open the front door is the same code for the safe. I’ve already checked.

“I can tell you what happened. You knew that Clara would go to this house in search of clues. You came here, opened the safe and took out Scott’s gun. You closed a cabinet door so you’d have better sightlines. Then you shot Clara from the kitchen. You knew I jog through this neighborhood, see the skewed rug and want to investigate, so you moved it.

“How’d you know her so well? I figured it out; you married her. You were one of her victims. It took a bit, but I could see the signs. She got you so mad; you never get that mad. You’ve always used her first name. And every time you talked about her, you used very personal language. You weren’t just recounting a criminals whereabouts; you were telling me about an old love that broke your heart.”

Wayne knit his brow. I tried to continue despite his deafening silence. “But one thing messed up your perfect plan: Lincoln took a trip with his brother to Hawaii. Your suspect now had an air-tight alibi. You were desperate. When you tried to coerce Lincoln into a confession, you admitted you already knew whose gun was used, and where it was stored, and you know the code to the safe.” I breathed, forcing myself to make eye contact, “You murdered Clara Browning.”

I almost thought he wouldn’t answer. He shook his head slowly. “Wow. To think you would create such a conspiracy about me. Have you no trust, Christian?”

“Face it, Wayne,” My voice cracked, “You aren’t the master crime-weaver you thought you’d be.”

A subtle but inescapable change came over Wayne’s expression. That smile. That unnerving smile I saw on Clara’s face when we caught her. “Oh, Christian...”

I watched his lips spell it all out: “You didn’t think I would’ve prepared for this? All you’ve got is circumstantial evidence. But me? I have proof. You were the last person to see Clara alive. You were the one that broke into the house. You were conveniently ‘helping’ Clara right before she died, getting her blood all over you. You know the combination to the safe. You are the one who just left fingerprints all over the padlock.”

He took a deep breath to compose himself: “When you, the new guy, come against me, a seasoned detective, with your baseless accusations, who will they believe? Who’s the master crime-weaver now?”

“Police freeze!” Hershel burst in with her gun pointed. Tears dotted her cheeks. Wayne became silent as death as he raised his hands above his head. Hershel’s lip quivered.

“Wayne, Why?”

He spoke deliberately. “I get what I want. I wanted her dead, so I killed her. I’m supposed to be the hero here, Hershel.” Wayne slowly turned his head to me. “You’re going to regret becoming my enemy, Christian.”

He smiled.

I’ll never forget that smile.

Feedback:

Nice pacing. I especially liked the fly analogy and how it kept coming up.

The ending was foreshadowed a little too strongly in the beginning. As soon as Wayne said his line earlier about having to fool a detective, I knew he was the (a?) killer. (I’m still not sure who killed the first guy?)

This story would had a much more powerful effect on me if I'd gotten to know the characters more. Especially Wayne and Christian. (Also, I'm confused about why Clara was smiling in the beginning, or why Wayne smiled at the end.)