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I've been a storyteller for as long as I can remember. Even before I knew how to read or write, I would pick up books and recite my own stories out loud based on the images I saw. Writing is my way of creating a whole new world, a world where you call the shots. As a child, a book to me felt like a teleportation device. As a writer, my goal is to create stories that take you somewhere else and allow you to experience new adventures and emotions in the comfort of your own home.

As George R. R. Martin once said, "a reader lives a thousand lives before [they] die, but [someone] who never reads lives only one." I stand by this quote, because I feel as though I've lived several lifetimes through stories and books I have read. Reading broadens the depths of one's mind, while writing is an opportunity to share your own. I hope my writing inspires, excites, and provokes new perspectives for readers.

MYSTERY ON THE *MARIPOSA*

I step onto the ship at the exact moment the bell rings, signalling the arrival of new passengers and the start of a new game. The Mystery Mariposa is the most exclusive murder mystery game show in the country. Just getting your hands on a pair of tickets is a game in itself.

“Isn’t this amazing? The Mystery Mariposa... Pinch me or something because I must be dreaming!”

I pinch Margot’s arm.

“Ow! I didn’t mean literally.” We both laugh.

Margot’s dad recently started dating a producer of the show, which is the only reason we’re here in the first place. The game works a little something like this. Once a year, twenty-five high school seniors from across the country are chosen to take part in the annual Mystery Mariposa games. Usually, students are handpicked after having written an impressive essay on their future life goals. But this year, me and Margot are the exception to that. Ah, yes, the luxury of having connections in show business.

The contestants board a lavish cruise ship in the harbour of Marina Del Rey. One crew member acts as the murder victim by basically sprawling out somewhere on the ship, waiting to be found by the contestants. It's an unspoken, unofficial rule of the game: find the body first and then your clues.

There are three dozen fictitious passengers on the ship, any of whom may be the culprit. You're allowed to interact with the passengers for clues, but you can expect to be thrown off course by the murderer throughout your investigation. And you better be careful not to get swindled because you only get one shot at guessing the murderer, and if your guess is wrong, you're out.

But despite the cut-throat nature of the competition, The Mystery Mariposa always manages to produce a winner. I guess that's what you get when you recruit twenty-five highly ambitious high school seniors and pit them against each other.

Oh yeah, and did I mention the grand prize? The winning contestant gets to walk away with *twenty thousand dollars*, typically put toward school or some sort of business endeavour.

I scan the front of the ship, sizing up my competitors while I still have the chance. All of them have got their eyes fiercely glued on the show's host as she recites the rules of the game. And I mean *fierce*. I have never seen so many determined-looking high school students all in the same room at once.

I begin to feel the nerves. *Who was I kidding? Did I really think I could beat out twenty-three thrill-seeking,*

chess-playing, essay-winning seniors? And Margot, who reads crime novels “for fun”?

Before I know it, the bell rings a second time, marking the start of the game.

Oh, God, I think to myself. Was I even paying attention?

A flurry of students rush into the main lobby of the ship where the fake passengers await our arrival. We are each handed a single flip notepad and a pen that doubles as a flashlight. As the host explained, the notepads are especially for our own personal notetaking. One major Mariposa rule is that you are not allowed to collect found evidence, so notetaking is vital to keep track of clues.

A cluster of students climb to the top of the ship while the other half barrel down to the bilges. From my years of watching the show, I know contestants *always* want their personal space and tend to split up rather equally. And even though there is not much to see on the ship’s main level, I take this opportunity to investigate uncharted territory while everyone else is scrambling around looking for the dead body.

I notice a small coffee lounge off to the side, almost hidden behind the spiral staircase leading up. Hidden enough to go unnoticed, but not hidden enough to look overly conspicuous.

I walk through the door. Red leather couches, a coffee table, a bookcase. I’m the only person in the room, but I’m not alone. The show’s cameras are mounted high up on the wall, practically hitting at every angle of my face.

I take note of the bookcase in case there is some sort of hidden door behind it that might come in handy later. And that's when I see it. A little black book propped up at the very end, sitting significantly shorter than all the other books on its shelf.

That's odd, I think to myself. It's the smallest book... Maybe that means something?

I walk toward the shelf, pick it up and begin to flip through it.

Empty. Huh, guess not. What good is an empty notebook?

I place the book back on its shelf and continue on my way.

We are sixteen hours in. People are starting to get tired. I can see it on their dopey faces as I pass them on the ship, clinging onto their clue-filled notepads for dear life.

The body turned out to be in the freezer in the back of the ship's kitchen. Morbid, I know. But it wasn't a real freezer. At least not with real freezing temperatures, otherwise the person playing the murder victim might *actually* have died while waiting for the last of the contestants to find them.

Since then, multiple clues have popped up. An amethyst-encrusted engagement ring found on the victim, who turned out to be a thirtyish-year-old man. A love letter written in sharp calligraphy with the sender's name ripped off at the bottom. And a bottle of arsenic

tucked away behind a bunch of other medicine bottles in the nurse's station.

I'm assuming some of the people that have been eliminated so far guessed it was the nurse, because the arsenic hidden among her stash was a little too obvious. Which is why I didn't want to jump the gun and guess it was her. Besides, the engagement ring and love letter didn't exactly add up to the nurse.

It's well past midnight now and to be honest, all I want to do is go back to our hotel room and climb into bed. There are eighteen players left in the game and, at this rate, I can easily see this lasting another twenty-four hours. They keep refreshing the snack table in the ship's main lobby, but a person can only live off cucumber sandwiches and no sleep for so long.

My mouth salivates as I remember what Margot told me just before we boarded the ship. *Win or lose, we're hitting up the 24-hour diner after the game. They have the best buttermilk waffles.*

I walk into a bathroom down below and close the door behind me. One of the few places on the ship with no cameras. Relieved to be getting a break from the ship's bright lights, I leave the lights off and allow the socket nightlight to glow up the bathroom.

I look into the mirror and sigh. Maybe this whole Mariposa thing is overrated. I mean, who wants

to be on national television with dark circles under their eyes and bird-nest hair?

I lift my pen, holding it up against my chin in contemplation. Amethyst. Arsenic. Click, click, click.

The pen lights up. It's that neat little flashlight they provided at the ends of our pens, probably to search the exterior of the ship after nightfall. I tilt my head back in an attempt to stretch out the kink in my neck.

And that's when I see it. Something written on the ceiling. I'm so exhausted, I think my eyes are playing tricks on me.

I steady the light as my eyes peer at what I think I just saw. *Hi*.

Hi?

What the hell kind of clue is that?

Or maybe it's not a clue. Maybe the clue is bigger than the message itself.

This pen isn't a flashlight. It's a blacklight.

I freak out. Who else knows this? Are there secret messages written all over the ship? And what are the odds of anyone else finding them if they are as small as the word *Hi*?

I think back to the little black book I found in the coffee lounge. It seemed so useless at the time that I didn't think anything of it. But now it's all I can think about.

I slowly walk out of the bathroom and upstairs to the lounge, trying to look as casual as possible. It's a good thing the main level doesn't have much going for

it other than the refreshments table, otherwise it would be difficult to do what I'm about to do here.

Making sure the coast is clear, I switch off the lights and pull the black notebook out from its shelf.

Come on. This notebook is not for nothing. Where are you, secret message?

I shine the blacklight on every single page until I find it. Written in the same sharp calligraphy as the first love letter, right there on page seventy-two. I'm sure that number means something, but I haven't gotten around to all the clues yet. I'm just working on instinct here.

My love,

This secret is tearing me apart. I don't know for how much longer I can do this. Marin is telling me it's too dangerous, that he'll kill me if he finds out. I don't know what to do anymore. I'm leaving this notebook in the coffee lounge because it's the place you frequent most, on the seventy-second page because that's how many hours it took for me to realize I'm in love with you.

Anabelle

Anabelle! I met her earlier. She was with her husband, Peter. And Marin is Anabelle's best friend. Does that mean Peter's the murderer? Marin *did* imply that he is capable of killing, after all.

Or is it Marin, trying to save her best friend from being killed by Peter?

Or Anabelle, leaving this cryptic message behind just to blow up the game of anyone smart enough to figure out the flashlight trick?

At this point, I feel as though I have a one in three shot of being right. Heck, I probably have a fifty-fifty chance of winning this whole thing.

I run to the bow of the ship, ecstatic at a shot at being right on a ship full of ambitious, goal-driven honour-roll students. Of finally winning something, for once in my life.

I whizz past a dozen contestants that look more like brainless zombies at this point. I think I even see Margot in my peripheral vision, but I am too excited to stop even for her. She must think I'm crazy. That I am desperately looking for a way out of this game.

She must think I've really got a hankering for those waffles right about now.

Once I've exited the ship's main doors, I am met head on by the host of the ship and a face full of cameras. It's too late to turn back now. Once you come through those doors, you proclaim your guess or your forfeit the game.

The bright lights hit my face and I'm seeing stars. Maybe I'm delirious to have left the game so quickly. Do I even know what I'm doing? Did I even *decide* on a murderer yet? Or did the fleeting thought of having a fifty-fifty chance of winning make me delusional?

The host is sticking a mic in my face, expecting a guess or a sentence to come out of my mouth. *Something.*

“Anabelle?”

Oh, God. I meant to say Peter. Anabelle? What in the world possessed me to say Anabelle?

A blast goes off and a stream of confetti pours down over me.

I won. I just won The Mystery Mariposa and twenty thousand dollars.

Those waffles will sure taste a whole lot richer now.