Chapter 13

Connie Beckett

Havana, Cuba

“What could have possibly happened?” Danni asked as she and Ashleigh waited in the lobby of the Havana for news about Charles.

Ashleigh clasped her hands to the sides of her head, pulling her hair away from her temples. Her head was pounding. “I have no idea.”

She texted Nicky again, but like the seventeen texts she had sent earlier, there was no response.

“And what’s this about us being in danger?” Danni continued.

“No idea about that, either.”

“What should we do? I mean, go to the hospital or back to the hotel? How are we supposed to know who or from what direction this danger is coming?”

Danni pulled out her phone and once again texted Nicky. Staring at the screen, she waited for a response.

Ashleigh fingered the skeleton key she had found tucked into the dirt under the ash tree. “If we’re in danger and not supposed to go back to the hotel, I suppose we can stay here. At least until we figure out what’s going on.”

She rose and went to the desk clerk.

“Do you have a vacancy? My friend and I are needing a room.”

“For how long, senorita?”

“For the night. We may need to stay longer but for now, just one night.”

Danni elbowed her. “The key,” she whispered.

Ashleigh took the key out of her pocket and laid it on the counter. “I’d like to see if this room is available.”

The clerk picked up the key and examined it. “Room thirteen.”

“How did you figure that out?” Danni asked, her eyebrows raised in surprise.

“See here,” he said and pointed to a set of raised dots on the shaft right below the ornate oval bow. “It’s a code we use.”

Ashley looked at it more closely. “Like braille.”

“Similar.”

“We’d like to stay in room thirteen then.”

She still didn’t know the meaning of the words ‘scorched a snake but not killed it’ but maybe there was a clue inside the room.

The clerk who had been looking the room up on the computer raised his head and frowned.

“My apologies, senorita, but that room is unavailable.”

“Unavailable? Why?”

“I’m not sure, I’ve only been working here for a short time.”

“Is another guest occupying it?” Danni added.

The clerk typed again and looked up puzzled. “It doesn’t show a name, just that it is unavailable.”

“May we speak to the manager?” Ashleigh asked.

“Sorry, the manager just left. I saw her car leave the lot.” He pointed to the video monitor stationed beside the computer.

“Oh, jezz,” Danni sighed. “And I was so looking forward to staying in the room where the grandparents spent their honeymoon.”

She turned to Ashleigh. “Nana and Pops told us such wonderful stories about this place, didn’t they?”

Ashleigh realizing Danni’s plan answered, “They sure did.”

Ashleigh turned back to the clerk. What about the room across the hall? Is it available?”

More clicking of keys. “Yes,” Senoritas. Room twelve is available. Let me check you in.

While he was occupied, Ashleigh slipped the key to number thirteen back into her pocket.

Less than five minutes later, she was fitting a key in the lock of their room, right across the hall.

They had no sooner closed the door behind them when Ashleigh’s phone rang. Charles’ name came up on the caller ID.

“Charles?” Ashleigh said, a quake in her voice.

“It’s me, Ronnie.” Veronica said.

“What’s happening?” She could hear a sharp intake of breath like Ronnie was preparing to deliver bad news.

“Charles is in the ICU, here at the hospital.”

This time, Ashleigh was the one taking a gulp of air.

“He ingested some sort of poison but they’re not sure what it is. They treated him as quickly as they could, but the doctor said it’s going to be touch and go.”

“Poison? Oh, God. What kind?”

“Not sure yet. They’re still running tests.”

“What did you mean when you said earlier that we’re in danger?” Danni asked.

“Hold on,” Ashleigh said. “Let me put you on speaker phone. Nicky and Charlotte are here with me.”

“Well, someone is tried to poison Charles. I suspect it was in the punch.”

“Shit!” said Danni. “How did that happen? I mean did anyone else get poisoned?”

“One of the staff people came in to refill the pitcher of punch. Charles was the only one who drank from it.”

“Have you called the police?” Ashleigh asked.

“Who brought in the pitcher?” added Danni “Do we know?”

“No, she wasn’t the staff member assigned to our family when we checked in. I just thought…. Well, how was I to know? It was the most horrible thing seeing him like that. I’ll never get that out of my mind.”

Danni gave Ashleigh a look. The one that meant Veronica was going all dramatic again.

After a minute to calm herself, Ronnie went on, “We called the police, of course. And as soon as I can reach Jefferies, we’ll have him fly over the family’s private security people.”

“What do you mean as soon as you reach Jefferies?” Danni added closing the curtain in the room so no one could spy on them.

“I mean I’ve called repeatedly but he hasn’t answered.”

“You can try…” Danni started to say but Ronnie interrupted.

“I tried both his private cell and the house phone. No one is answering.”

The line was silent for a moment as everyone pondered what that meant.

Ashleigh worried about her brother. They weren’t close but Charles was still her brother.

Danni thought about Nicky. Was he comforting Ronnie in a way he never did with her? Knowing Ronnie, she was calculating how she could play this to her advantage.

All three of them wondered why the always reliable Jefferies wasn’t answering.

Ronnie broke the impasse. “Where are you anyway?”

Danni and Ashleigh looked at each other, both thinking the same thing.

“We’re somewhere safe, at least for a while.”

“Where?” Ronnie asked, way too much curiosity in her voice.

“A safe place. Don’t worry about us,” Danni said.

After they ended the call. Ashleigh turned off her phone. Danni did the same. It was too easy to track their location, and now more than ever they didn’t know who they could trust.

“We need to get into room thirteen,” they said in unison.

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Back at the hospital Charlotte, Nicky, and Ronnie and waited in the sterile waiting room. There was an old television in the corner, but the set was off. Finally, a nurse entered.

“Senora Blackthorne, you can see your husband for a few minutes now.”

Charlotte and Nicky rose to accompany Ronnie, but the nurse put out a hand to stop them. “Only one person at a time is allowed.”

Charlotte and Nicky went back to the chairs they had just vacated.

Nicky rubbed his face. “Who in the hell wanted to kill Charles?” he asked his mother.

Charlotte leaned forward, elbows resting on her knees. The pink spikes in her hair aimed toward her son. “Seems like the question is who had motive. Any idea what that motive could be?”

Her eyes bored into his. All of a sudden, the room was too warm. Sweat popped out on Nicky’s brow.

“The old man’s money?”

His mom ticked off the reasons on her fingers. “Greed, jealousy, or a little thing called coveting your brother’s wife.”

Nicky rocked back out of range of the pink quills he worried might soon be loosed against him.

“I have eyes, you know. Even if I have been away for a while.”

Nicky decided to change the subject. “The girl who brought in the pitcher. I hadn’t seen her before at the hotel. Plus, the waitress who came in afterwards said she was the only one assigned to serve our family.”

After a pause he added, “I swear it wasn’t me, Mother.”

“Then who?”

“Damn my father and his games.”

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“How about closed-circuit cameras?” Danni asked as they slipped out of their room.

Danni and Ashleigh examined the hall in both directions. They also looked for any cameras. It was a little after midnight and the hallway was empty but there was always a chance some insomniac guest or a staff member might be wandering around the Old Havana grounds.

“Clear,” whispered Ashleigh.

Moving quickly, they walked the few paces across the hall to room thirteen. Ashleigh fitted the skeleton key she had found under the ash tree into the lock. The locked clicked and taking one last look around, she turned the knob.

Stale air greeted them as they slipped inside. Whoever resided in the room hadn’t been there for a while.

“Turn on a lamp,” whispered Ashleigh pointing to one of the bedside tables. The room didn’t have a window, so she didn’t fear light being seen by someone.

Both of them examined the room. Clearly, someone was staying here. The bed was made but there was an empty water glass beside the lamp and a jacket was thrown over the back of a chair.

Ashleigh picked up the coat and looked through the pockets for identification. Nothing. She was getting ready to put it back when she realized something. She picked the coat back up again and sniffed the collar.

“What?” hissed Danni.

“It’s faint but there’s a scent lingering in the fabric. It smells like a cologne my father used to wear.”

“Wow, so maybe Edward’s the one staying in the room.”

Ashleigh looked around. Dust lay on the nightstand. Any liquid that once been in the glass had long evaporated. And the air was stale. Whether her father or someone else, no one had been here for a long time.

“Check the drawers,” Danni told her. “Maybe there are old letters or papers that can tell us who stayed here.”

Quickly, they went through the dressers, moving clothes and such to see if something—any kind of hint—was hidden. Nothing.

“I’ll check the closet,” Ashleigh said.

“Holy heck,” she said a few minutes later. “Come look at this.”

There was something large tapped to the back of the dark closet.

Ashleigh turned on her phone, quickly put it on airplane mode and pressed the phone’s flashlight app.

“It looks like a map,” Danni whispered.

“Not a map. More like an architectural drawing.”

They examined it for a few minutes trying to figure out what it showed and why it was here.

“Office, foyer, bedrooms, kitchen,” muttered Danni pointing out the various room. “Know what I think? I think that’s the Blackthorne house.”

“Damn, it might be. But it must be an old version because it doesn’t show the new wing.”

“Ike Talbot Architects,” said Danni pointing to writing in the corner that identified the architectural company. What were the letters you found? You know, the second clue.”

“ITATBTS” Ashleigh said. You think it stands for Ike Talbot Architects?”

Danni shrugged. “Maybe. But if it does then what is TBTS?”

“Tower, bedroom, toilet, solarium or shower? Hell, if I know.”

“We need to get back home, to the Blackthorne Mansion.”

“Agreed.”

“We should take this with us.” Danni.

“Yep,” said Ashleigh, already peeling away the tape holding the blueprint onto the wall.

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 Meanwhile, back at the Blackthorn Mansion, Jeffries had been busy.