Chapter Four

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The next morning dawned clear and cool. Veronica slipped out of the French doors and peered across the sloping lawn toward the paved path leading to the stables. No one else was awake it would seem. Charles had finally flopped into bed in the early hours. All she had to do was smell him to know what he’d been up to all night. He was sweating brandy. Nicky was most likely in the same condition. They would both require hours to sleep off their night of heavy drinking. She herself had made her excuses and slipped out of the family gathering as early as she could. No one had seemed to care one way or the other when she left the room, feigning tiredness. More importantly no one had followed her when she ducked into the kitchen to make herself a pot of coffee. Jeffries had been the only one about and he was so used to the family foibles he didn’t bat an eye when she moved unerringly to the Mr. Coffee machine.

Fortified with a steaming carafe of black coffee she had retreated upstairs to make plans for the next morning. She was certain no one else had thought about the tree house. It had been ages since Ashleigh had visited it. It was a perfect location for Daddy Edward to have hidden another clue. With any luck she could make her way out there and inspect it before it dawned on anyone to check the place. If she were even luckier she might find the next clue and have a head up on the others.

She shivered in the chill air and hugged herself. The sun was just peeking over the horizon as she started off along the path toward her goal. She grinned to herself. It had been forever since she’d been awake this early in the day. It had not been as difficult as she had anticipated. The excitement of her mission made her blood sing. The coffee she had consumed throughout the long night had kept her hyped as the alcohol she had downed burned its way out of her blood stream. The clues the family had gathered the previous evening snaked through her thoughts, distracting her enough she almost rammed into a bent figure as she turned a sharp corner at the end of the hedgerow blocking the view of the stables from the side of the Lancaster Manor.

“Señora Blackthorne, I’m so sorry,” a smoke roughened voice said.

Veronica jerked to a stop with a gasp. “Franco!”

¨Sí, señora?”

“I didn’t see you there, Franco. You startled me.”

“I’m sorry, señora. I didn’t expect anyone to be awake yet.”

He stared at her, his black eyes wide and questioning. The early morning sun highlighted the weathered lines of his face and sparkled in the silver strands threaded through his black hair. He was not a bad looking man if your tastes ran to earthy men who smelled of fresh turned dirt, cheap beer, and cigarette smoke, she thought, studying him more closely. She’d never paid much attention to the gardener.

“Yes, well,” she finally said, breaking the heavy silence. “I thought I might go for a short walk this morning. Needed the fresh air.”

“Ah, sí. I understand. Will you be visiting the tree house, señora? I fixed the ladder first thing this morning.”

Her heart slammed in her chest. Why would he ask that? “What?”

“Señor Charles asked me to make sure it was functional. He said he wanted to check it out later this morning.”

“T-that’s great. Thank you. I might give it a look while I’m out. I bet the view is fantastic.”

Franco nodded, an odd smile flitting across his tanned face. “I will be here if you need assistance, señora,” was all he said in reply.

Veronica skirted the gardener and hurried up the path toward the stables. So, she was not the only one to be drawn to the tree house. She supposed most of the Manor’s inhabitants would think of it sooner or later. She, however, planned on being the first one there. Several hundred yards later she stood at the foot of a ladder disappearing into the greenery of the ash tree beside the stables. She put one foot on the bottom rung and stared up into the dim area below the fanciful wooden tree house, glad she had thought to put on sneakers rather than the strappy sandals she usually wore during the day. She was also thankful for the personal trainer Charles paid to work out with her three times a week. The climb into the tree house was more difficult than she had anticipated.

She pulled herself onto the tiny veranda running around the outside of the small house with a sigh and wiped at the perspiration gathering on her forehead. She peered into the dark interior and cursed herself for not thinking to bring a flash light. Perhaps her cell phone had an app she could use. She fumbled with it for several long minutes and nearly tumbled backwards over the railing when a loud click, followed by a flood of light from inside the house, sounded right in front of her. Charlotte Lancaster Blackthorne stood framed in the doorway, an amused grin decorating her heart-shaped face.

“Veronica! Not who I expected, but a pleasant enough surprise.”

Veronica recovered her balance and stepped as close to the other woman as she could to avoid the edge of the veranda behind her.

“Charly! What are you doing here?”

“The same thing as you, I’d guess. You’re here to look for clues, right?”

Veronica fought down panic. Had the other woman found the clue?

Charlotte’s tinkling laugh filled the small space. “Don’t look like that. You’ll get wrinkles, Ronnie. Besides I just got here. I slipped around behind the hedge while you were talking to Franco. So, where do you want to start?”

Ronnie. Nobody had called her that for a long time. Not since her days in South Kingstown. Surely Charly couldn’t know about that time in her life. No one now knew about it, not even Nicky.

“Well,” she muttered to cover her nerves. “The letter said something about a chimney pot.”

Charlotte’s head bobbed up and down. “It did. ‘All around the chimney pot, the monkey chased the weasel.’”

Veronica pointed the low ceiling where the small electric stove vented. “That would be the chimney pot for this little house. Perhaps something is hidden inside it.”

“You know, you’re much smarter than the family gives you credit for,” Charlotte commented as she peered up at the piping. “How do we get up there?”

Veronica glanced out the window and grinned. “One of us is going to have to climb out on the roof of the stables and then up to the top of the tree house.”

“You’re younger and more fit than I am,” Charlotte said, her dimples showing. “I think it’ll have to be you.”

No kidding, Veronica growled to herself, again glad she’d dressed for a workout. It had originally been her cover for why she was up and about so early. Now it would put her in good stead as clambered about the roof looking for a clue that might not exist. She gritted her teeth against any biting remark that might slip out and skirted the edge of the veranda until she reached the point closest to the stable roof.

“Here’s goes nothing,” she muttered and hoisted herself up onto the low railing. A short hop later found her scrabbling for purchase on the slippery clay tiles of the stable. Below her she could hear the horses shift restlessly at the noise she made.

“Careful,” Charly called. Her voice was hushed and tense.

Veronica glanced over her shoulder to gauge how high to climb before attempting to leap back onto the roof of the tree house. It was going to take real effort she realized. Fortunately the stable roof wasn’t super steep and her sneakers were able to maintain a decent traction. If she shimmied all the way to the peak of the stable and made a run at the tree house, she should be able to jump high enough to swing up onto the roof. That roof, however, was quite steep and she worried about sliding off once she was there. The chimney pot was a good five feet from the edge on the side nearest the stable. Maybe if she was quick she could make it that high. There was room near the chimney pot to wedge herself into if she could make it there.

“What are you planning?” Charly called over. “It doesn’t look safe at all. Maybe we should try another way?”

Veronica crab walked up the slight pitch to the pinnacle of the stable’s roof, her teeth clenched hard as she concentrated on what she was doing. Once there she twisted around to face the tree house and the other woman. Charly was wringing her hands and glancing toward the ground.

“Is someone coming?”

Charley’s head jerked up and she shook it. “No, but it’s a long drop if you fall. I think we should rethink our strategy.”

“I’ve got this. Besides, if we wait we might miss finding the clue before the others show up. Franco said Charles had ordered him to repair the ladder. He’ll be out here as soon as he wakes up.”

She didn’t wait to listen to any further arguments. She leaped to her feet and launched herself toward the edge of the roof at a dead run, her sneakers squeaking against the clay tiles beneath her feet. She hit the edge of the roof and flung herself into space, arms and legs pistoning in a wild motion. Her feet hit the wooden roofing slats on top of the tree house where she just barely gained enough traction to throw herself forward so she lay flat on the steeply pitched surface.

“Oh my God, Ronnie! Are you insane?”

She ignored the other woman’s blathering and army crawled upwards toward the chimney pot. She couldn’t imagine any of the others, most especially Ashleigh, expending such effort to find the next clue. In fact, she wondered how Daddy Edward had even gotten the damn thing up here at all. He probably paid someone to do it, she thought in an uncharitable moment. After what seemed like hours she was able to wedge herself into the space next to the chimney pot. Her entire front was covered in wooden slivers. She hoped it was worth the effort and pain.

With her free hand she felt around the ornate carvings of the chimney pot, looking for any way to open it. It seemed solid beneath her probing fingers and she groaned.

“Did you find anything?”

Charly’s question distracted her enough to cause her to lose her grip. She started to slide sideways toward the edge of the roof. She squealed and flung both arms around the chimney pot to stop the dangerous movement. The whole thing snapped off at the point where it attached to the roof itself, and she and the chimney pot slid faster toward the roof’s edge. She came to a skidding stop with her hips and legs hanging out in open air. Tears filled her eyes and her hands and upper body stung from dozens of wooden barbs.

“Oh, gosh, are you okay? What can I do?” Charly sounded near tears, too.

“Catch this,” Veronica said with a grunt and shoved the chimney pot toward the edge. That left both hands free to cling to the rough wooden roofing tiles. A loud bang followed by a string of curses filled the air.

“You didn’t catch it, did you?” she asked through clenched teeth. “Great. I’m going to die and for nothing because you dropped it.”

“It’s just below the tree. Come on, I can grab your ankles and guide you down to the terrace. You’ll be fine.”

Veronica felt cold fingers clutch her bare ankles and tug her farther down. She used her elbows to edge over the lip of the roof and then let Charly swing her onto the narrow ledge. She fell heavily, bowling Charly to the floor with her.

“Ow, ow, ow. Dammit! That hurts like Hell!”

She curled into a fetal ball and clutched her arms to her stomach while the burning stinging in her hands, arms, and belly prickled and stabbed at her.

“We don’t have time for that,” Charly said, nudging her with the toe of her yoga flat. “We have to get down there and see what you found before someone comes along and scoops it up.”

Veronica sat bolt upright, her painful wounds forgotten. “You’re right. You go first, just don’t do anything until I get there.”

She waited for several long minutes after Charley disappeared down the ladder before following. It gave her a little more time to recover herself and to stop shaking. Now she was off the roof she was scared spit less. When she felt she could negotiate the ladder she followed the other woman to the ground. Charley sat on the lawn with the chimney pot cradled in her lap. She stroked it with both hands looking for a way to open it just as Veronica had on the roof.

“That’s not going to work,” she said and snatched it out of her arms. Before Charly could do more than gasp she pivoted and slammed the piece against the trunk of the tree, shattering the intricately carved red clay cap. Amidst the shards of hardened clay lay a packet of something protected inside a gallon sized Ziploc bag. Charly grabbed it and ripped it open before Veronica could identify its contents.

“I don’t get it,” she said with a pout. She unfolded a brochure and waved it in the air.

Veronica seized it, scanning the cover. It was a play bill from a theater production of MacBeth from 2000. “I don’t either. What does this have to do with anything?”

“It was Father’s favorite Shakespearean play.”

Neither she nor Charly had heard Charles’ approach. He leaned closer and studied the play bill. “Theatre-by-the-Sea? I remember Father taking Preston and I there one summer to see some stuffy play. It was dead boring.”

She turned it over and glanced at the back before stiffening in shock. Charley and Charles both stared at her like she’d grown a second head. She was too excited to speak, so she just pointed toward the bottom of the paper where bold letters spelled out TBTS.

Charles chuckled and gave her a one armed squeeze. “Good eyes, my dear. That looks a bit like the letters in the first clue. It must be significant.”

Charly bounced up and down on the balls of her feet, one hand clasping her son’s arm. “I know what it means!”

“Well then spit it out, Mother. What do you know?”

“The first three letters were ITA, weren’t they?”

“Yeah, so?” Charles’ eyes were all squinty and Veronica took a step back. She knew full well what that expression could herald.

“ITA was a short hand your father used in his construction business and sometimes in his personal notations. It means ‘in the attic.’ The clue means there’s something hidden in the attic at the Theatre-by-the-Sea! Don’t you see? One of his early projects was the renovation of that theater. The owners of FourQuest, the company that purchased the property paid him a fortune to do the work. They brought him back in years later to update.”

“So? Where is it?” Veronica felt a surge of excitement. She wanted to bounce up and down like her mother-in-law, but her muscles were still too sore.

“South Kingstown. It’s not that far from here at all!”