**Chapter 7 – Leslie Galbraith**

The front door to Lancaster Manor swung wide and the Blackthorne butler Jeffries’ face split in an uncharacteristic grin.

“Miss Danielle, good morning. Please,” he stepped back to allow her entry to the foyer.

“Good morning, Jeffries. Is anyone up yet?”

Danni knew most of the Blackthornes tended to sleep late if they had the choice. She had no illusions about where Preston was. He had been hammered when she left the previous evening and raring for more. However, this morning she hoped Ashleigh was up and moving so they could get to work on the mystery her best friend’s father had dumped in their laps.

Jeffries was the consummate butler, well-trained. His expression rarely changed from the stoic façade he showed the world. Now he looked uncomfortable as he led her to the parlor. A quick glance around showed the maid staff had done their duty to clean up after the events of the previous evening. No signs of the drunken hullaballoo remained in evidence.

“It’s been a strange morning, Miss Danielle,” Jeffries finally said. “Mr. Charles and his wife left early with his mother. Mr. Preston is still abed, but I believe I heard Miss Ashleigh moving around above stairs earlier. I will send a maid up to inform her of your arrival. Would you care for anything while you wait?”

“Tea would be nice, but I can get it myself,” she said with a smile. She always felt uncomfortable when the Blackthorn servants waited on her hand and foot.

“Nonsense,” Jeffries replied, his stoic façade restored. “Please sit. Sylvie will be out with the tea things shortly.”

He turned and disappeared into the foyer. Danni wandered around the parlor, her fingers trailing lightly over the shiny surface of the tables. Not a speck of dust to be found, she mused with a small smile. Across the room the mahogany bar glowed in the sunlight streaming in through the windows. If it could talk she was certain it could tell a few stories. Maybe it had been privy to the multitude of secrets kept in this house. She jumped at the sound of a voice behind her.

“Miss, your tea. Would you like me to pour?” ask Sylvie.

Danni didn’t know her well. She had only started working in the mansion a few months earlier. Every time Danni saw the young girl though she felt a shiver of something she couldn’t define run up and down her back. There was something about the girl that triggered something in her. At first she had thought it was jealousy. Sylvie was beautiful in a China doll sort of way with shiny midnight black hair and cornflower blue eyes. She was just the kind of woman who would hold a degree of fascination for Preston.

She blinked and shook her head. “I’ll pour, thank you, Sylvie.”

The maid bobbed her head. “Miss Ashleigh will be down shortly.”

Danni watched the girl scurry out of the room, still wondering what it was about the girl that bothered her so. Nothing came to her so she shrugged and crossed to pour a cup of tea. She dropped two sugar cubes into the bone china cup and stirred the dark liquid with a silver spoon, marveling at the beauty of such a common thing.

“Danni, you’re here early. Preston went out already.”

Ashleigh, dressed impeccably as always, stood in the doorway to the parlor. She looked well-rested on the surface, but the puffiness and dark circles below her eyes belied the carefully applied face the other woman showed the world.

Danni studied her over the rim of her cup, holding the hot tea in her mouth for a long moment before swallowing.

“I didn’t come to see Preston. I thought he wouldn’t be up for hours yet. I came to help you.”

Ashleigh’s eyes widened. “Me? Help me with what?”

Danni suppressed a sigh and took another sip of her tea. Things had changed between the two of them once she and Preston announced their engagement. It was almost as if Ashleigh disapproved of her sorority sister dating her brother. She was certain her friend now considered her a gold digger. It had been one thing to groom her for husband-hunting as long as the prospective husband wasn’t so close to home. She had no illusions when it came to Ashleigh’s views on the lower classes. Her rants about her eldest brother’s choice of spouse spoke volumes. Not that she had come from as humble of roots as Veronica, but her comfortable middle class upbringing still wasn’t up to par when it came to marrying her youngest brother.

“The treasure hunt, of course.”

Ashleigh allowed herself a tight smile before crossing to sit beside her and pour her own cup of tea. After adding liberal amounts of sugar and milk, she finally took a judicious sip. “I would have thought you’d be helping Preston. He is, after all, your fiancé.”

“You were my friend long before that happened,” she replied in a light tone. Clearly Ashleigh was in one of those moods.

“Have it your way,” Ashleigh said and set her cup down with a thunk on the coffee table. Milky tea sloshed over the shiny surface. “Where do you think we should begin?”

Danni had been giving the mystery a lot of thought during the long hours of the night. She lived over a bar to save money until she and Preston tied the knot and she was allowed to move into the Lancaster Mansion. Her university salary was sparse and she was determined to pay for the balance of her wedding without resorting to begging her fiancé for help.

“Actually, I was thinking about the letter your mother brought.” She paused, knowing she had made a tactical error. She didn’t even need to look up and see Ashleigh’s frown. She hurried on, hoping to gloss over her mistake. “The numbers and letters she read out. I did some digging and I think it’s map coordinates.”

Ashleigh, her sudden anger at mention of her mother fading, leaned forward. “Map coordinates? What do you mean?”

Danni set her cup aside and fished her cell phone out of her purse. “I entered them into a search engine and it reconfigured them like this.” She turned the phone toward her friend.

“Latitude and longitude? Interesting. Where is it?”

A deep surge of excitement rushed through her. She hadn’t shared what she’d seen on television the previous evening, but the coordinates made more sense than Ashleigh would know. “Cuba.”

“What on earth does Cuba have to do with anything?”

Danni shrugged, disappointed. She had imagined mention of the island would trigger something. “Did your father have any holdings in Cuba?”

Ashleigh’s gaze was heavy. She was debating herself. Danni recognized it in her expression. So, she did know something. Apparently Ashleigh made a decision. She pulled her own cell phone out of her pocket and clicked it open to a screen.

“He did actually,” she said, scrolling with her finger until she found what she wanted. “About two years before he disappeared he purchased some beach front property just outside of Havana. I wonder if Joel knows what he planned on doing with it?”

That prickle of excitement was back. Danni wondered if she should confide in Ashleigh what she thought she’d seen on television the previous night. Was it too soon to get her friend’s hopes up regarding her father? No, she would hold onto that for now. One of the things she had done the previous evening was locate a clip of the news program she had seen and downloaded it to her laptop. She would have it for reference later when it came time to convince Ashleigh and her brothers.

“Maybe you should call him and see what he knows?” she suggested.

Ashleigh sighed and nodded, but before she could dial the attorney the front door opened and Charles, Veronica and Charlotte spilled into the foyer, all talking at once. They froze when they caught sight of the two young women in the parlor and then burst into excited chatter as they descended on them, all three trying to tell them a story at the same time. Ashleigh, her expression turning cold at the sight of her mother, looked ready to bolt. Danni leaned over and caught her arm in a loose grip and shook her head.

“Enough,” Charles snapped, his deep voice cutting through the higher tones of the two women with him. They fell silent and stared at him without blinking. “Sit down, have some tea, and let me catch Ashleigh up on the latest developments. Where’s Preston?”

“He went into the office,” Ashleigh said through stiff lips, her gaze locked on her brother as her mother maneuvered onto the settee beside her. “What’s going on? I thought you would all still be in bed.”

“Veronica and Mother found the next clue this morning. In your tree house.”

Ashleigh paled. Danni felt another surge of excitement. That had been on her list of things to run by her friend as well. She couldn’t contain herself. “What did you find?”

“Where in the tree house?” Ashleigh asked at the same time.

“Ronnie was magnificent. You should have seen it, Ash,” Charlotte said, her eyes shining with excitement. “She jumped onto the stable roof and then up onto the roof of the tree house. The clue was in the chimney pot. A play bill.”

Veronica pulled a creased paper from her pocket and passed it to Ashleigh over the coffee table. She barely glanced at it before thrusting it at Danni. She turned it over and read the cover before opening it. She gasped.

“What is it, dear?” Charlotte asked.

“It can’t be,” she murmured, still staring down at the paper clutched in trembling hands. But, no, the photo beside the name confirmed it.

“Can’t be what?” demanded Charles. He leaned down to study the play bill over her shoulder.

“L-lady MacBeth,” she murmured, her voice catching in her throat.

Charles pried the paper from her grip and studied it. “Lady MacBeth played by Genevieve Murray. So? What’s so shocking there?”

Ashleigh gasped and stared at her friend as understanding dawned. “Murray? You never told me your mother was an actress.”

“What? Is this true?” demanded Charles.

Danni shook her head. “I – I don’t know. She never said anything about acting. Not ever.”

“Well, isn’t this an interesting development,” drawled Veronica with a throaty laugh. “How the birds come home to roost. You don’t think she and Daddy had a fling or something, do you? It would be just too precious if they had a love child, now wouldn’t it?”

“Ronnie, how horrible,” Charlotte murmured, stabbing the other woman with a disapproving glare. “That is hardly amusing.”

“It is to me,” Veronica said, still giggling.

“You would find such tragedy funny,” snapped Ashleigh.

“Well, she’s the right age.” Charles eyed Danni with suspicion. “And she did show up at an interesting time in our lives.”

Ashleigh rose and smoothed her skirt. “You’re just worried you’ll have to share Father’s fortune with a fourth contender. You all make me sick. Come on, Danni. We’ll continue our discussion in my rooms.” She offered her stunned friend her hand.

“Wait. There’s more you should know, honey,” Charlotte said in a quiet voice. “The play bill led us to the Theatre-by-the-Sea. In the attic we found this copy of the play. A passage is marked. It has to be the next clue.”

She laid the thick folio on the table and they all stared at it for a long moment in sobering silence. Then Veronica chuckled and glared at Danni.

“You’re the British lit expert, my dear. Check it out and tell us what it means.”

Charlotte leaned forward and flipped it open to a page before pushing it closer to Danni. She leaned in and read out loud, “ ‘Nought’s had, all’s spent/Where our desire is got without content/Tis safer to be that which we destroy/Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.’ Lady MacBeth from Act III, scene II.”

“We know all that,” said Veronica with a sneer. “What does it mean, dammit?”

Danni closed her eyes and composed herself. Several inchoate thoughts wrestled in her head, but she wasn’t quite ready to put it all together yet.

“This is Lady MacBeth expressing how empty their seeming victory is now that she and MacBeth have achieved the status of King and Queen. Everything they worked for has come to fulfillment, yet it is an empty victory. She is saying it is better to be dead like Duncan, who they murdered, because then all their strife would be finished. These are the words of someone searching for a new start or the ability to become something they are not.”

“And that means what in this situation? It’s a dead end,” Charles said with a sigh. “We have nothing else to go on.”

“I wouldn’t say that exactly,” Danni said. Her voice was faint, even to her own ears.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ashleigh demanded with a warning look.

She met her friend’s heavy gaze and made her decision. “The numbers in Charlotte’s letter are the coordinates for Cuba. Ashleigh was just about to find out some more information on a property Edward purchased there not long before his disappearance. It’s possible he faked his own death in order to start over just like Lady MacBeth speaks of in this scene.”

She met each persons’ gaze. “And there’s more. I think I saw Edward on television last night during a newscast from Cuba.”