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A week after her conversation with Declan, Kelly drove up to Mr. Zucker's looming estate. Her first instinct—put her SUV back in drive and hightail it for the exit.

I've received a request for your writing services. Declan's words slipped through her mind as she turned off the engine. Had it been anyone else asking her to step out of her comfort zone, she would've passed.

Flipping down the visor, she swiped a trace of cinnamon gloss across her lips. Then, she turned in her seat and surveyed the Zucker estate. To say the sizeable Georgian home impressed her was an understatement. The mansion sat nestled in the center of lush, sprawling acreage, blanketed in trees on the cusp of changing color. As she stepped out of her vehicle, she stared at the ebony shutters flanking the windows. They resembled enormous bookends, holding up a row of glossy-spined books. She checked her watch. Five minutes before ten. At least she wasn't late.

The door opened after a quick knock, and a stout older woman greeted her. "Welcome, Miss Landon. Right this way."

Kelly stepped into the foyer. A smooth, buttery blue covered the walls and wrapped around her like a breezy summer sky. Snow-white molding lined the ceilings and entrances and

encased everything in clean lines. Large black-and-white squares, polished to a high shine, spread out like a gigantic checkerboard beneath her feet. She resisted the urge to slide from one square to the next like a chess piece.

“My name is Donna.” The woman flashed her a warm smile and led her up a broad staircase. “If you need anything during your visit, please let me know. I’ll have you wait in the sage room. Mr. Zucker will join you shortly.”

As she climbed the stairs behind Donna, Kelly studied the black-and-white photographs lining the walls. Several showed men in uniform—circa World War II? The other photos exhibited landscapes and old buildings. When she noticed a photo of a lone oak tree, she paused. *My tree*. The oak resembled one she’d danced around with imaginary friends and played make-believe beneath as a child. She blinked. A coincidence?

“Miss Landon?” Donna stopped a few steps ahead of her. “Is something the matter?”

“This picture looks familiar.”

“Mr. Zucker dabbled as an amateur photographer for years. I’m sure he’d be glad to give you the history behind the photo.”

Kelly stole one more glance at the massive tree, whose bushy branches mirrored a tangle of outstretched arms.

I’m a fairy princess, Father. I’ll climb the branches of my magical tree and hide from the ogres roaming the countryside. She shoved the memory away. Even as a child, she’d let her imagination run rampant with tales of faraway lands and unexplored galaxies.

“I’ll fight your ogres, and your mother, the queen, will live with you in your magical tree.”

A pang of sadness gripped her heart as the provincial farmhouse her family lived in on the outskirts of London flashed across her mind. *Before Mom left. Before my world turned upside down.*

After her mother left, she and her father relocated to the city, where he quit playing make-believe with her. In London, Father only believed in ogres and monsters and not in magical trees.

Stepping onto the second floor, Kelly took a moment to admire the massive crystal chandelier dangling from the ceiling. The chiseled glass reflected the sun and projected cascades of sparkling diamond waterfalls across the walls.

“Mr. Zucker had that chandelier commissioned for his wife.”

Kelly dragged her eyes from the glittery reflection and looked back at Donna.

“When the moon hits it just right, it looks like a thousand stars.”

“That’s wonderful.” She followed Donna into a sitting room with towering sage walls.

Donna gestured toward a chair near the floor-to-ceiling windows. “You can sit here.”

Kelly slipped into the seat and glanced outside. The room overlooked a meticulously landscaped rose garden. “The gardens are amazing.”

“Mr. Zucker loves roses. Every color has a meaning. He tells me you can communicate a whole story just by choosing the right color combinations.”

“That’s interesting. Almost like a code.”

“Exactly.” Donna uncovered a bone china plate stacked with miniature cookies. “May I get you some tea or coffee?”

“Coffee would be wonderful.”

“Cream or sugar?”

“Both, please.”

After Donna poured her coffee, she filled two glasses with water from the crystal pitcher on the table.

“Thank you.”

“Of course. Enjoy your visit.” Donna turned to leave just as a young man dressed in scrubs wheeled an elderly gentleman into the room.

“Good morning, Miss Landon.”

Her pulse raced as she stood and stuck out her hand. “Good morning, Mr. Zucker.”

When their palms clasped, a mound of unnaturally

pigmented scars along his wrist caught her attention. He followed her gaze, and she winced. She'd not meant to stare.

"Marks of a well-lived life." Beryl Abram Jakob Zucker's oceanic blue eyes danced with symphonic energy.

Those eyes. Her cheeks warmed as a childhood memory tugged at her thoughts. "I'm sorry, Mr. Zucker. Have we met before?"

After holding her gaze for several seconds, Abram released her hand. "If we had, no doubt you'd remember." He waved to the chair. "Please, have a seat."

No doubt she would have remembered. She lowered herself into the chair and attempted to steady her nerves with another drink of coffee.

"It's nice of you to meet with me. I'm a huge fan of your writing." A symmetrical, white-grey beard outlined his smile, reminding her of a seasoned sea captain.

"Thank you." She set her mug down and smoothed the imaginary creases in her slacks.

"Books have always been one of my simple pleasures. Your crime novels intrigue me." Abram grinned at her. "You have an uncanny ability to draw a reader right into the drama of your story."

"I, well ... I'm glad you enjoy them."

"My family has a lot of history, Miss Landon." He lowered his chin, and sunlight filled his eyes, turning the blue iridescent. "There might even be some mystery for you to write about."

Her body relaxed. "Please, call me Kelly."

"Very well, Kelly." Abram sat back in his chair, folded his hands, and steepled his fingers. "Where should I begin?"

She shrugged. "The beginning."

"The beginning. Of course." Abram's baritone laughter bounced around the room. "My parents lived in a small village outside of Berlin during World War II. It was a dark time in history for my family." He frowned. "For many families, as you can imagine. With a new regime in place and war on the horizon,

our simple life was about to go up in flames.” His eyes darkened as he rubbed at the scars on his arm. “If you decide to take on this project, I’ll work closely with you over all the details of the book.”

“I understand.”

“We’re not on a timetable, my dear.” Deep crinkles formed at the corners of his eyes. “Outward appearances may suggest otherwise, but my time is in God’s hands.”

She shifted in her seat.

“Take your time. Gather as much information as you need to,” he said. “There will be several documents and newspaper clippings for you to look over as well as records my parents kept.”

“I’ll be honest with you, Mr. Zucker—”

“Please, call me Abram.”

“Abram. I’ve never collaborated with anyone before, and I’ve never written nonfiction.” She didn’t want to cut her chance off as soon as it was offered, but she wanted to be sure he understood what he was signing on for. “I’ve never written about anyone’s family history.”

“Ah, but this is not just a bit of history, the story of my family,” he stopped and leaned in as if relinquishing a profound secret. “It’s an incredible love story.”

Her muscles tensed. Love stories were the farthest thing from what she was comfortable writing.

“Not a fan of romance?” His eyes twinkled with mirth.

“Well, I just don’t have any ...” *Any experience in love.*

“I know you can write a whodunit.”

“Yes, that’s what I prefer.” She took another long drink of her coffee. Solve the crime and get out. No hearts on the line. No emotions to shatter.

“Ah, but Kelly, love is a mystery. Isn’t it?”

Abram’s words ribboned around the room and sent a tingle of goosebumps across her skin. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

"For instance, Mr. Declan McNeary." Sitting back, Abram shot her a sheepish grin. "Do you have feelings for him?"

"Why in the world would you ask me that?" *How could he know?* She placed her mug back on the table.

"He seems very fond of you," Abram said. "Why would you not?"

She tried to read Abram's expression. But couldn't.

"He's a nice, handsome man—an Irishman, if I judged correctly—and you're a clever and beautiful young woman."

Her heart sank. *No one could know about my feelings for Declan. Could they?*

"Mr. McNeary gave a glowing recommendation for you." He seemed blind to her uneasiness as he continued. "I've talked to him several times, and he can only say good things about you. Very complimentary."

She swallowed. "I would hope so. He is my agent. It would be a little awkward if he disliked me." Prickly heat crept across her neck as a flash of Declan's beautiful face traipsed across her mind.

"Well, it's a mystery why you two aren't together. Isn't it?" His brows rose. "Do you know much about him? He seems to know a lot about you, Kelly dear."

She opened her mouth, then clamped it shut. This was ridiculous. Who does Abram Zucker think he is? A matchmaker? This interview wasn't what she'd expected—or prepared for.

After a moment, the lines around Abram's eyes softened. "I'm an old man. I may have spoken out of turn. Forgive me?"

"Uh, yes." She relaxed her shoulders. Was this some bizarre test to see how she could handle herself under pressure? "I'd love to talk about Edna and Otto. Your mother and father." She forced a weak smile, hoping to redirect the conversation.

"Right. A love story but not quite a mystery." Abram winked at her.

"Or a whodunit."

"Oh, you might be surprised."

“Really?” Her heart skipped as she dug through her bag for her notebook and pen.

Abram stretched out his wrinkled hand and placed it on hers. “No notes today. Let’s take a walk.”

“A walk?” Her pen and paper mimicked a protective sword and shield, and she hesitated to put them away.

“Yes, it’s a little cooler today. Don’t you think?”

Her eyes darted to the window. She hadn’t noticed the weather.

Without being summoned, the same man who’d brought Abram in entered the room.

“This is Trevor.” Abram waved a wrinkled hand in her direction. “Trevor, this is Kelly. The author I told you about.”

“Nice to meet you, Kelly.” Trevor shot her a smile then secured the blanket around Abram’s feet. “Abram’s told me a lot about you.” Trevor gripped the handles of Abram’s chair and moved him toward the door. “Where are we walking today?”

Abram gestured for her to join them. “Let’s walk in the rose garden.”

Kelly stashed her pen and notepad in her bag and met them by the door. Today’s interview hadn’t unfolded the way she’d expected. She’d planned to gather information to determine if she and Abram would be a good fit. What she didn’t expect was a quirky, older gentleman who would derail those plans.

She followed Trevor and Abram down the hallway leading to the elevator. What would the rest of the day bring? Maybe a shift from the normal wouldn’t be so bad.