

The Butterfly Detective

The last thing I remember in my life was collapsing. My heart thumped like bongo drums as I gripped my chest in a desperate act to prevent the inevitable. Apparently, some things were doomed to happen. Death had taken me, and I was on my way to Heaven.

That is, until a big ball of light impeded my soul from ascending any further. It called me “the miracle.”

“Someone will kill someone else,” it told me. “Because of someone’s malevolent actions, someone else will die.” It waited a moment for that to sink in.

“And you,” it continued, “will be given an inconspicuous form to stop the murder from happening. You will be that miracle.” With that, my soul began rocketing downward back towards Earth, where I would be tasked with identifying who’s planning to kill whom and prevent it from happening at all.

I wake up in a lobby, but I immediately face trouble. I can see ahead of me but also behind—even when I turn around, I still see all the same things. I take a step forward and nothing changes. I look down and my legs look like twigs. They’re not human at all. I feel a weight on my back, and while I’m confused, I instinctively begin my ascent up until the air.

I’m facing away from a large window, but I can still see my reflection. I am a butterfly.

God really does have a sense of humor to put me up to this. My mother taught me a lot about nature—she was a smart lady—so I know a thing or two about butterflies. Given the pattern on my wings, I am nonpoisonous, which is honestly a relief. I’m not the type to hurt a fly,

pardon the pun. Plus, it's actually the nonpoisonous butterflies that are much faster, and can travel up to thirty miles an hour.

As I ascend higher to survey the landscape, it becomes immediately apparent that I'm in a retirement home. There are many elderly residents in this carpeted lobby, adorned with deep blue chairs you could sink your butt in. Some are visited by their families, while others snore idly in wheelchairs or play with glue and putty at a craft table. Life here must be pretty nice. Hard to imagine someone dying here outside of natural causes.

I search for a lead and my senses—intuition, I mean, not my antennae—pinpoint the nurse whose name tag reads Julia. Her faint red hair is turned into a bun, and even as she instructs the guard working front desk to keep his eyes open despite the early shift, it's clear that she's not the authoritative type. Her eyebrow keeps twitching throughout this tragic attempt at confrontation. I realize now that while I can hear vibrations through my wings, I need to be very close to the source of noises in order to hear them. I suppose it's because I was originally human that I can understand these conversations at all.

It sickens me to consider that a girl as docile as Julia could commit the crime, but who else would be capable? The guard is yawning fervently, and the residents look too debilitated to kill. One extra pill or a different fluid is all a nurse would need to put someone down. So, for the sake of the residents' safety, and ensure I complete my mission, I decide to follow this woman first.

We move towards the elevator as I examine more of the layout. The lobby area contains the front desk in which the exhausted security guard works, as well as a craft table for the elderly to make artsy pieces and plenty of chairs to socialize or nap. There are two corridors on the far

sides of the room. Doors to the restroom are next to one and the elevators are next to the other. Julia presses the button and the elevator doors fly open.

I flutter above her and we enter inside. In my current form, I'll need to rely on other people—either Julia or the residents—to press the button for me. There only appears to be two floors in this particular building, so once the doors close, we begin moving up, and I adjust the beating of my wings to match the elevator's ascent.

Once more, the doors open and we're on the second floor. This area has a living room furnished with a couch and, bookshelves, and a large tv played at a high volume that I can hear from the other side of the room. Beyond the living room is a dining room table and swinging doors that I can see lead into the kitchen. There are two halls on either side of this space, containing many doors. I must assume that these would be the residents' private rooms. The clock on the wall shows that it's now 7:45am.

Julia branches off to the hall on the right, so of course I follow. She walks to one of the rooms on the far side and knocks twice before entering. Julia calls out for a woman named Cynthia and a shrewd-faced woman sits motionless on her bed, gripping her walker so tightly her veins bulge out of her saggy skin. Julia motions forward but Cynthia raises a hand to get space and hoists herself up. Cynthia is short, but she talks down on the nurse for being behind schedule today. Despite how early it is, she's dressed in a polka-dotted dress and has even come out wearing earrings. She announces she'll be getting breakfast now and Julia quickly steps out of her way.

But Cynthia stops suddenly, her walker now blocking the door. She cranes her head up at me and moans irritably as she does so. "You let bugs in here now?"

My heart beats faster; not once did I consider that they could *see* me. I suppose that makes sense; I'm a butterfly, not a ghost. Julia stammers and Cynthia waves her off before leaving the room. After collecting herself, the nurse shuts Cynthia's door, but not before I fly out the opening and follow her to the next resident.

Two knocks and the door opens. Julia calls out Margaret and a full-figured woman yawns and brushes her eyes. Margaret has short, curly hair and, given the object propped next to her bed, needs to move around in a wheelchair. I want to turn away as the nurse dresses the resident, but I recall the prophecy I'm told: "Someone will kill someone else." In Margaret's position, she's at the mercy of the meek-looking woman who puts her into her wheelchair. Fortunately, nothing appears out of the ordinary, so I flutter towards the door.

"Is Cynthia up?" Margaret asks. "Oh, how I know her better than anybody. I tell you, she really *hates* to be kept waiting." She gently rambles away, her smile showing more and more teeth each time she gets a giggle out of Julia. "Oh, but listen to me, rambling away again. Back to my question, is she awake?"

"She's already eating breakfast," Julia says worriedly.

The wheelchaired residents gasps. She touches up her make-up quicker before wheeling out of her room while stifling her exhausted exhalations. The nurse and I wait for Margaret to move past before Julia closes the door behind us. I continue my routine of following the nurse, learning about each of the residents one by one.

Julia moves further up the hall and I cling to the wall to blend in, so she won't try and swat me at Cynthia's command. As she opens the next door, Julia calls for Sydney, but it appears she's fast asleep. Her snores are loud and wily like the scream a cat might make if someone were

to park their car on its tail. But despite the horrific sound she's uttering, she rests peacefully on her stomach, completely unyielding to even the thought of waking up. Thin, wire-like blonde hair covers Sydney's face like wet noodles. The nurse watches her for a minute before closing the door.

She paces towards the other hallway. I flutter close to her leg to stay out of view from Cynthia, who knits with a watchful eye, her chair oriented towards us. Julia knocks twice on the first door in this hallway and opens it. She calls for Larry, who's grooming his hair in the mirror. As soon as he notices Julia crack open the door, Larry asks about whether Margaret will be attending Bingo; Julia chuckles to herself and says she's fine, just getting ready. The man smiles and turns back to the mirror, whistling sitcom showtunes as he pulls his cane towards him.

On to the next room, and I feel like I'm getting the hang of it. The connections between the residents are already forming in my head. Julia is afraid of Cynthia. Cynthia and Margaret made plans to meet. And Larry has a crush on Margaret, or at least has some affinity for her. Julia moves to the next door, calling for Darrien as she opens the door. A portly man is nodding off in his chair, half a jigsaw puzzle resting besides him. Julia goes to leave but the creaking wood stirs him awake. The nurse begins to apologize but the resident interrupts her.

"Have my breakfast delivered to my room," he proclaims. "I really don't care to socialize." I swear he looks straight at me and his eyes show no acknowledgement that I'm here. Perhaps his eyeshot's gone kaput.

Julia closes the door behind her. Last one, she mutters to herself, and I'm almost saddened that our time together is coming to an end. Besides helping Margaret get ready and

watching Sydney as she slept, I was at ease in her company throughout this experience. If it weren't for this prophecy of murder keeping me on-edge, I'd say she's a pretty good nurse.

She knocks twice on the last door, as is her modus operandi, before entering. She calls Terrence's name and a frail man looks back at her. He's not pleasant to look at, as his head has wispy tufts of white hair that fail to cover the brown birthmarks on the top of his head. His knees tremble violently but Julia doesn't appear to be alarmed; this must be what everyday life is for him now. She asks how his morning's been and he murmurs words that I can barely make out. Julia nods, smiles, and gives a generic response, which clues me in that she has no idea what he's said either. Instead, she offers an arm and escorts him out of the room.

"By the way, Margaret should be coming out of her room any minute now," Julia says before offering a wink at the gentleman. He blushes and I realize at once the potential danger of two men—him and Larry—having their eye on the same woman.

I follow closely behind Terrence and the nurse to observe that Margaret has gotten her breakfast and rolls in her wheelchair next to Cynthia, who converses with her quietly with her eyes fixated on whatever's she's knitting. Larry sits at the dining table with his food, observing the pair with quick glances as he quietly eats his meal. And sure enough, kitchen staff take a tray carrying porridge and a granola bar over to Darrien's door.

Julia sits down Terrence across from Larry and fetches the quivering man his breakfast meal. It's a tense situation, but I watch them like a camera for risk that Larry will beat the lad with his cane. Apparently, I fly too close, however, as Larry breaks into a smile and points at me.

"Why, it appears we have a visitor," he says aloud to nobody in particular.

Terrence notices Larry's happiness upon seeing me and responds by attempting to swat me away. He can only manage a couple wimpy swings before gripping his own hand in anguish. Apparently, sudden movements like these are just too much for the old fool. I flutter away to Larry's impish laughs at his peer's physical incompetence.

As I move away from the boys' table, I find myself approaching the ladies in the living room to overhear their conversation. I've learned from my previous encounters that the best way to be hidden as a butterfly is to stay still as I cling to the walls. However, in order to "hear," it's important to keep flapping my wings. It's risky, but I must fly close to my targets if I wish to properly eavesdrop. And fortunately, due to my compound eyes, I can still watch the boys in the dining hall even though they're directly behind me.

"She shouldn't be asleep this long," Cynthia says, directing her eyes towards Sydney's door. "It's already past 8 and she is nowhere to be seen."

"Oh hush," Margaret replies gently. "She's not like what she used to be, you know how tired she gets."

Cynthia opens her mouth and her more amiable companion. She leaves it agape for a moment before dropping the subject and returning to her knitting, going more quickly before without making a single mistake.

The two persist in their conversation, glittering their tedious days in this place like it's the best years of their lives. I suppose that's all they can do to get out of bed, and I commend them for it. At 8:30, Terrence proceeds to go downstairs, and at 9, Larry does the same. A little after Terrence leaves, Sydney comes bursting out of her room, as fast as her stiff legs can carry her, which is not fast at all. Her hair is still wet, but I can smell through my antennae that she took a

shower. Cynthia chastises the newcomer for her frequent sleep-ins, and I only now learn that this has been an almost daily occurrence.

“This has happened every day,” Margaret says, resting a hand on Sydney’s arm before eyeing Cynthia. “At this point, it’s our fault for expecting her to be ready so early in the morning, when her body is clearly not.”

“What, so she can become a vegetable?” Cynthia charges back. “I only want the best for her.”

Sydney says nothing and merely yawns. She is far from apologetic but even further from awake.

Being in this building, I remember from my own life how these retirement communities work. Nurses and other employees such as the kitchen staff keep a watchful eye on the residents, but otherwise the residents are free to do what they want. Their lives are much more meticulously planned in another ward, sometimes called Assisted Living. This is the building where residents’ days are organized by the staff, and at all time they receive assistance from the many attentive nurses. Only those with significant physical or mental instability require a 24/7 caretaker, otherwise they live here, where staff is still always on call should they need assistance, but otherwise they’re free to make plans on their own terms. When their physical or mental wellbeing comes into question, that is when the staff reaches out to family to move them to either Assisted Living, or in the worst-case scenario, the hospice. The hospice is where residents are placed to be cared for when their comfort becomes the only concern without curative intent. In other words, it’s where they go to die.

It's around 9:30 and I decide I've listened to enough drama between these ladies. There's no way to check whether Darrien was poisoned by the meal delivered to his room, but I'll give the benefit of the doubt and say he's alive and well in there. Meanwhile, both Terrence and Larry—the rivals for Margaret's affection—have left and gone downstairs within half an hour of each other.

The other residents are getting their breakfasts and proceeding with their morning activities, so I follow a couple of residents down into the elevator and we proceed back to the lobby. I decide to check the corridors that I hadn't checked previously.

The hallway just beyond the bathroom leads into a Bingo Room with several tables and a desk at the front. The room has plenty of windows that look out into the garden. On my way to the second hallway, I see over at the craft table is Terrence, who despite his trembling hands, is gluing googly eyes to a cardboard cut-out designed to look like a person with the details colored in with sharpie. It's crudely done, but I'm impressed he can do all of that and barely get any glue or ink on himself. He looks weak at first glance, but there is a fervent determination that is almost unnerving.

Regardless, I'm glad to see he's alright. Now I just need to ensure he hasn't done away with his rival. I fly to the second hallway, which begins just beyond the elevator, and I find a few rooms. In the first is a room with many tables, like the Bingo Room. However, this one has a single man who, curiously, is playing chess with no opponent. I'm impressed with the confidence in which he makes moves on both sides. He catches me idling about and speaks as if jesting with me.

“You can play the next game, little guy,” he chuckles openly. “I’m just replaying my match with Kaplowitz in my fifties.” He’s amused at his joke, as well as his play, as black trumps white with a few sacrificial but dominant plays.

I leave him be and move to the next room. As I approach, I hear a piano. Sure enough, this room has an organ in the back, and rows and rows of seats lining up in its direction. The man controlling the ivory keys is none other than Larry, whose body sways in accordance with the rhythm and his face quivers as if he’s trying to smell the music.

I leave the piano room and look at the end of the hallway. There’s a door that leads out into the veranda. The veranda has a walkway that leads back to the entrance into the lobby, and even further to the garden next to the Bingo Room.

I return to the lobby to witness Cynthia coming to the craft table. I expect her to greet Terrence or at least chastise him as she’s done with everyone else, but instead she merely gathers some material for her knitting and returns to the elevator. As the elevator doors open, a bunch of residents come flooding out to the corridor I just left.

“This way for Mass, for everyone who would like to attend,” Julia calls out to the residents in the lobby. Some resting in the blue seats wake up and join her, and I decide it’s in my best interest to follow. The group enters the piano room where Larry is still serenading himself, but he doesn’t let their invasion stop him from persisting. Instead, he only begins to play louder, to accommodate for the residents loudly speaking amongst themselves.

Among the people here, there are a few familiar faces. In addition to Larry on the organ, both Margaret and Terrence come in separately and help make up the attendees. And to my

surprise, the dozer Sydney is sitting on the side with some others who are all wearing blue robes. This would suggest that she'll be singing in the choir.

The time is now 10am. Mass is proceeding normally but I keep a watchful eye as I cling to the ceiling. I don't really need to listen to the sermon—I'm already dead, after all. But I see Sydney shaking violently, so I decide to flap my wings. She's breathing heavily, huffing like a wrestler seething with vengeance. Father tries to talk over her at first, as I figure this must be a natural occurrence, then stops completely. The breathing quiets. She coughs and raises a thumbs up.

I'm relieved until I consider what other dangers there are. Everyone in this room should be fine—nobody in their right mind would attempt to kill in such a crowded room. However, Cynthia and Darrien are all by themselves upstairs with only the kitchen staff just barely paying attention to them. I fly out of the room as fast as I can, zooming past Julia as she disinfects the floors in the chess room. I reach the elevator but there's nobody to press it for me. I can see directly to my side an old woman angrily huffing as she hugs the wall. I know that look; she's already snapped. With hesitation, I flutter in front of her before clinging to the elevator button.

“Fudging heck!” she whimpers, the searing rage pushing against her Catholic upbringing as she swats at me. I duck out of the way just in time for her hand to make contact with the button. Then I merely flutter inside and wait for the elevator doors to close and take me up.

In hindsight, I realize I could try flying through a window on the second floor, but I have yet to find a window that's left ajar. From what I've observed, all of them have been closed from the inside, giving me zero chance of ascending besides use of the elevator. Anyway, I discover right away both Cynthia and Darrien on the second floor. Cynthia is knitting away—the scarf

she's making is baby blue with traces of red patterns that I have yet to recognize. And Darrien is finally out of his room, intently reading a gripping mystery novel. I glide over to him to see how far he's gotten, but he's merely glancing at the fifth page. His eyes scan from side-to-side, side-to-side, like he's losing focus and keeps forgetting his place, and somehow, I feel for him.

I recall earlier that Darrien couldn't see me. I figured this was due to his eyesight, but Darrien's capable of reading just fine, even muttering the words to himself correctly without eyeglasses. In fact, I'm fluttering in front of the pages he's looking at with my wings outstretched, and he has no trouble reading past me. For some reason, I am completely invisible to him.

Due to my small size, even the smallest of tremors gives me great anxiety. As Darrien raises his arms to shut his book, I take off at once and observe his next move. He returns to his room to set the book down before pressing the elevator button. Cynthia bats him an eye but says nothing. It makes sense she's not at Mass; to be honest, no God would want to take her when she dies. Or at least, that's how I feel watching so many good people be ridiculed by that gaze.

I follow Darrien to the lobby, and people are now filing out of mass. Margaret coos at a man who's whistling. Hearing her rave about this man leads Terrence to attempt the same, but instead he merely drools on himself and shake his head in frustration. Larry steps out on the veranda and congratulates himself on a job well-done while sniffing the lilies.

I flutter over the crowd and into the piano room, where Sydney is dog-tired and slumped in her chair. I shuffle between the rooms downstairs and everyone seems to be preoccupied with themselves. Darrien goes to the chess room to play a match with the chess player, Margaret goes upstairs, and Terrence takes a seat in the lobby to continue his "whistling."

Larry has a habit of talking to himself, and as I sip on the sunflowers in the veranda through my proboscis, he mutters how he wishes “she would notice his talent.” But then he aggrandizes himself, and claims it will surely happen, that he’ll surely win her heart.

If he likes her so much, he could at least make the effort of talking to her. But that’s the thing. As we age, we revert to how we were in middle school; conceited and completely aloof. We like each other over the silliest things; in Margaret’s case, she likes the one guy with lips wet enough to still whistle. Meanwhile, Terrence is spitting dribbles out of his pie hole and pinching his forehead at the embarrassing show he puts on. The effort’s commendable, though.

The time is 11:30. An announcement is made that Bingo will start at 12 and lunch will start right after at 1. It’s clear which of those events has everyone excited as the residents excitedly assess their “plans.” Everyone has a lucky seat, a lucky Bingo buddy. One woman even got a four-leaf clover from her daughter, saying this time, she’ll win for sure. Margaret comes downstairs with Cynthia and they move to the piano room together where Sydney is still resting after mass. Cynthia tells her immediately to go to bed, but the girl pleads that Bingo is coming up. The knitter says her body can’t handle Bingo (which is a line I’m surprised is delivered with a straight face), until Margaret interjects that she can play for the whole hour, then rest up in the afternoon. Cynthia and Margaret argue between themselves until Sydney shuffles out of the room like a kid who got out of trouble.

It’s 12pm and all the residents take their seats in the Bingo Room. Margaret wheels over to the table the girls are sitting at, and Larry walks over to pull the chair away and lock her wheelchair in place in front of the table. She thanks him with a cooing giggle as she’s now seated comfortably in the middle of the room, not far from the Bingo caller. Margaret’s attempts to calm Cynthia have left the bitter woman stone-faced. Darrien sits in the back of the room like a

delinquent. Larry returns to his seat, observing the women while afar, while Terrence ignores them all completely, nodding his head enthusiastically like a prize fighter ready to enter the ring.

The chatting ceases the minute the Bingo caller starts tumbling the balls. The tumbler is of a simple design: a big, metallic sphere with a slide where balls come out for the caller to announce, and a door in the sphere itself where the balls tumble to return the ball at the end of the game. The balls themselves are made of wood and are painted according to what column they belong. From the way the balls clatter and push against the tumbler as it revolves, it sounds like the wooden balls are fairly dense and much heavier than a typical Bingo set, leading me to believe this is some kind of cheap knock-off.

The caller is a volunteer no older than 16, and from what I've heard from the groans of the residents, nobody seems to like her. She loudly tumbles the machine that randomizes which ball rolls out. The weight of the balls only makes the tumbler appear more unstable. Even to a butterfly that can hardly hear, I need to cling to the ceiling and stop fluttering my wings just to silence the noise. Terrence is sitting at the front, and he keeps his lips tucked but it's clear he wants the violent clattering to stop.

Julia talks with another nurse outside, and apparently this volunteer, Francine, is a volunteer from a local high school. She's been told to tumble the balls more quietly, but they don't want to fire her—after all, she's a volunteer. And she needs these hours to enter the National Honor Society to help with her college applications. To me, it sounds like they're pitying her for an atrocious (albeit well-intentioned) performance.

Despite how loudly she pronounces the numbers, many of the residents aren't placing chips on the numbers that are clearly called. The only one who lands every single one is Darrien,

which would explain not only why he could afford to sit in the back, but how he's winning most of the games they play.

"Bingo," he calls again. He reads the numbers back, and sure enough, that's his fourth game. Of course, it's not that impressive given the number of players who keep missing numbers. "I'll take a peppermint this time, thank you."

The caller gets out of her seat and delivers him a York Peppermint Patty (one of my favorites, personally). He's stashed the other candies, but he gobbles this one up right away, so I'm guessing he likes them too.

Sure enough, the rest of the event goes with no further incident, and I'm shocked; if anything, I would have been sure someone would be kicked to the floor from Bingo. Residents exit the room bitterly nagging about who took their lucky seat, and one woman offers a prayer up to the Lord questioning why He thought she deserved to lose. Terrence shakes his head, refusing the loss like it were a game of skill rather than elderly gambling. Everyone leaves the room, and after admiring the garden through the open window, Larry leaves as well.

Since it's now 1pm, we're right on time for lunch. Sliced meats, mixed vegetables, and warm tomato soup are served in such small portions that the residents don't need to worry about lots of chewing or spilling food as they deliver it to their mouths. Sydney asks Julia to deliver her food to her room as she's escorted to the elevator by another nurse. Meanwhile, the other residents all take their meals graciously and eat, some participating in the chatter about the games of Bingo. Apparently, this particular ball tumbler has been used for many years, and they've been talking about getting it replaced.

Darrien is the first to go as he finishes his meal with no trouble. I consider following him to check on Sydney, but Larry is approached by Terrence. The man is shaking, which is typical for him, but that combined with the bugeyes he's making creates a beastly appearance. I'd never imagine a quivering geezer who plays with googly eyes to be so menacing, but he pulls the look anyway.

"You don't—" he stutters, then catches his breath. He points at Margaret and bends his arms in front of him.

Larry narrows his eyes to read through the charades act. "Oh, you mean when I got her situated in her seat?" He removes the napkin tucked into his collar and snickers. "My apologies for being a *gentleman*. Maybe next time, *you* can take that responsibility. That is, if your body's even capable of it."

Terrence says nothing (not that he has a choice). Instead, he throws his hands up in exasperation and marches away, looking back with angry glances as Larry returns to his meal.

Shortly afterwards, Margaret and Larry get up to leave, but they do so separately. Larry goes to the chess room and begins speaking with the chess player. I overhear the pianist share a story about how he met his first wife: some girl he never talked to but found "enchanting" lived in an apartment complex. There was a sudden vacancy in the room right next to hers. He took all the money he'd been saving up and spent it to get that room on a whim. They saw each other every time they got the mail, and one day, he asked her out and she said yes.

"There just aren't any good love stories anymore!" Larry exclaims. After pacing across the room as he shared his tale, he gives up and reclines back into his seat, seemingly defeated and bouncing his leg.

“Perhaps the quality of those stories,” the chess player suggests before pausing for thought, “matters only to those *in* the relationship.”

“Pah! Don’t make me laugh!”

Larry’s passion for romanticism cannot be understated although what he considers “romance” is certainly up for debate. While romance was once persistence and risk-taking, now we would call that stalking and a lack of self-care.

Regardless, I take this opportunity to follow Margaret, who presses the elevator button. I follow her up to the second floor, where in addition to her, both Darrien and the bedridden Sydney should now be residing.

It’s strange to consider I could be trapped with the killer in this elevator. If they knew this humble butterfly attempts to thwart them, they wouldn’t hesitate to squat me and bash me with whatever they’re carrying in their hand. In Margaret’s case, it’s a fresh plate of food.

Fresh? Didn’t Sydney already ask Julia to fetch her a plate? Why would she need two? I realize I must make another risky maneuver, so I dive onto the plate and place my feet on top of the ingredients. Butterflies can smell through their feet, and with six of them, it allows me to detect whether there’s anything funky on this plate in no time. I’m able to do so before Margaret notices and shakes the plate to shoo me away. I detect nothing out of the ordinary; I doubt she—nor any of the residents here—will have access to poisons that can avoid cursory detection.

The elevator door opens, and I see Darrien in the living room watching Sherlock Holmes, the classic-est of classics. Margaret knocks on Sydney’s door and opens. She says Sydney hasn’t been eating so she brought an extra plate. The bedridden woman thanks her, but says Julia gave strict orders not to overeat.

“Pssh, those nurses know nothing,” Margaret says as she waves her hand. She rests a hand on her stomach and pinches it quickly. “They told me I needed to cut back, but that’s when I got friends to sneak food to my room.”

“Well regardless,” Sydney says weakly. “At least you’re looking out for me. Unlike some people.”

Margaret laughs. “Some people expect everyone to be as strait-laced as they are.”

“And show no concern, neither.”

Sydney closes her eyes and Margaret takes this as her clue to go. I follow her out the door, but she forgets to close it behind her. A frail woman is sleeping with the door left open, and there’s still plenty of time for a murder to take place. The kitchen staff are all downstairs for the moment serving lunch. Margaret goes to her room and shuts the door, and the only other resident on this floor is Darrien, who can’t even see me. In the meanwhile, all I can do is stay on this floor and keep an eye out.

Larry comes up the elevator and he is livid. I try to get his attention to help me shut Sydney’s door. He might be conceited, but at least he’s chivalrous. Instead, he slams his door shut before I can even go to him. Last I saw him, he was in that philosophical argument about “love stories” with the chess player.

The time is now 2:30pm. Larry is still in his room and Darrien is fast asleep as Holmes continues to unravel the case. Margaret leaves her room and takes the elevator downstairs. Half an hour later, Larry moves towards the elevator, but stops when he sees Sydney’s door left open. I move towards the door, hoping he’ll take my lead, but instead he ignores it and presses the

elevator button. I enter the elevator after him, since the only person left on this floor besides sleeping beauty is Darrien, who is most certainly fast asleep himself.

I truly thought he was as chivalrous as he's been saying, but his lack of tact to close Sydney's door suggests he's merely putting on a front for Margaret. There's not even any guilt written on his face. I will never get used to riding the elevator with someone I need to acknowledge as a suspect.

Downstairs, the lobby is occupied by residents using iPads, including Margaret. This must have been the event she needed to get ready for. I follow Larry, and as I do so, I find Terrence in the chess room as he continues to practice his whistling. Cynthia is sitting out on the veranda, knitting her scarf which reads "To my favorite grandson." That's sweet; as I've been playing detective today, I fail to acknowledge these residents as actual people. If I aspire to solve this crime-in-the-making, I should be doing just that from the get-go.

As I watch Cynthia on the balcony, Larry is behind me staring outside towards her before stepping into the piano room and playing his music. He plays with feeling; Margaret is in the lobby not too far away, and I'm honestly swooned by his music.

Around 3:30pm, Cynthia is content with her work for the time being and proceeds to go upstairs. Not too long after, the chess player tells Terrence, in the nicest way possible, to practice his whistling elsewhere. Margaret is talking to her friends from the iPad club and Larry is playing piano, so I can't imagine either of them are in any danger. Instead, I decide to follow Terrence upstairs.

The first thing I notice is that Sydney's door is now closed which alleviates my concern. Terrence goes to his room and shuts the door, so I decide to check on Darrien, who is now in the kitchen after the staff has returned to prepare dinner.

"I am *so* hungry," he tells them, clutching his stomach and making a face as if writing in pain. "Could I please have some sort of snack to eat before dinnertime?"

After some quiet bickering amongst the employees, one of the younger chefs begrudgingly preps him a small bowl of baked beans to get him out of the kitchen.

Cynthia is examining her handiwork. When the elevator doors open, she lowers her product and Margaret wheels over towards her and keeps her company, just like always. At 4:30pm, Sydney opens her door and goes straight to the elevator. She's alive and well, so that's a good sign. Behind me, Terrence exits his room and waves to Darrien as he sits across from him.

"You can't," he murmurs before his lips slip and he can't finish the sentence. "You cheat—"

"I cheated?" Darrien interrupts. "You and everyone else accuses me of cheating!"

In Bingo? How does one even cheat in Bingo? What goes wrong in someone's life that they start to believe gambling for candy is something one would cheat at?

"You can't—come—to Bingo." He says, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows. It takes a lot out of him as he forces each word from his mouth.

"Idiots," Cynthia murmurs without looking up.

Darrien isn't amused like I am. But then again, he's the one getting accused, not me.

“If you’re going to give me that kind of mouth,” Darrien tells him, “I don’t think I want to participate at all.” With that, he quickly snarfs up his beans before returning to his room.

After this, Terrence returns to his room, as he has nothing to talk to Margaret about with Cynthia in such close proximity. She bats him an angry eye, holding her sewing needles tightly as he walks past to get to his room. Another resident exits their room, and I follow them down the elevator to check on Sydney and Larry.

When I get out of the elevator, Larry steps out of the downstairs bathroom. His leather shoes are shining nicely, and I fly over him so he doesn’t notice me as he steps into the elevator. After this encounter, I look around and spot Sydney stepping out onto the veranda, complaining to herself how Cynthia shows no concern for her health.

“She’s so young and pretty,” she says as she clicks her tongue. “She doesn’t have the same limits I do.” She kicks a wooden post with her foot and shouts out “Oh, Christ!”

She removes her shoe, and even though the kick was just a tap on the post, her toe is purple, faintly resembling a raisin. I realize at once a flaw in my thinking; I’ve been looking for things that could kill normal people, like overdoses and canes you could use to beat someone to death. But this is a retirement home; something that barely irritates a normal person can cause great pain to the residents here. Internal bleeding and unyielding coughing fits are just as deadly for these residents, and I must be even more vigilant to detect any potential source of danger.

I don’t have much time left. The residents will probably go to sleep around 9pm, and it’s already 5:30pm. The dinner announcement is made and everyone proceeds to go downstairs, where a second announcement is made.

“Just a reminder, today is our monthly Special Bingo Night!” Julia yells so everyone can hear. “In addition to the Bingo we played earlier today, we will be playing again at 6:30pm. That’s in one hour!”

Before the food is served, I check the items with my feet to ensure that nothing seems out of the ordinary. Afterwards, I take this opportunity to fly into the Bingo Room since it’s on this particular night that the incident occurs.

There’s an open window. No windows in this building have been open, as they can only be opened on the inside. It was like this when we left the room, too. Something in this room is important enough to someone that it was worth getting to via the window.

Everyone at dinner is discussing their lucky seats and their lucky people, just like before. If there’s anything I’ve learned, the elderly want consistency, and what doesn’t work once they expect to work the next time. And what works the last time, they expect will work again. I flutter to the elevator, as I now know everything: who plans to strike whom, how, and why. Now I just need someone to help me stop it.

That person is sitting in his room, told off by Terrence not to bother coming to Bingo because he’s “cheating.” I flutter in front of Julia, in the hopes that she’ll follow me to the elevator. She does smile at me, recognizing me as the butterfly that Cynthia wanted to get rid of early today. But she doesn’t leave her post and helps the kitchen staff serve dinner to the residents.

I’ll need to convince her there’s a reason to go upstairs. I flutter in front of her to catch her attention, then glide, one-by-one, over the heads of all the residents. It takes a minute for this to sink in.

“Thirty, thirty-one... oh, where’s Darrien?” she asks rhetorically. I don’t even need to guide her to the elevator, so instead, I merely follow.

Once upstairs, she knocks twice, calling out his name before opening the door. This is a nostalgic process for me by now, and just like this morning, he is sitting in his chair next to his incomplete jigsaw puzzle.

“What’s wrong?” Julia asks, stepping inside and taking a seat on his bed. “You could’ve told me if you wanted dinner taken to your room.”

“That’d be good, thanks.” He’s not looking her in the eye. “But that’s not the problem.”

“Then what is?”

Darrien takes a moment to answer. He doesn’t get into his confrontation from Terrence earlier today, instead asking about a more general concern.

“What if you can do something that nobody else can? You’re just trying to live your own life, but you worry you’ll only make things more complicated for others?”

Julia puts a finger to her chin. She has vastly fewer years, so it’s strange to think he’ll ask *her* for advice.

“I don’t know,” she says at last.

“That’s it?” He’s as disappointed as I am.

“It’s something only you can do, right? Then it’s your responsibility; you can decide for yourself.”

She gets up to leave, but before she does so, she turns around and says: "You're a smart man. I've seen you watch Sherlock Holmes. He always made the right choice, no matter how difficult."

Darrien asks if she could fetch his dinner. She nods enthusiastically, then I fly out of the room before she shuts the door behind her.

This wasn't how this was supposed to go. He would be dashing to the Bingo Room right now and crack the case before Bingo begins and the incident occurs. I'm sure now that Darrien knows everything that's going to happen just like I do. But what he doesn't know is the prophecy I've been told: that the events of today will result in someone's death.

I follow Julia back downstairs. The time is 6:30pm and everyone's filing in to play Bingo. Everyone is in their same seats, persisting that their luck is the best. Larry offers once again to move a chair out of the way so Margaret can get properly situated at a table. Terrence is sitting at the front, ready to go big or go home. The girls are all sitting together, although Sydney refuses to answer any of Cynthia's inquiries about her day. All that's missing is the man who dominates the Bingo Room, Darrien, whose seat in the very back is left unattended, as if it's a throne that cannot be overtaken, even in his absence.

The Bingo caller, Francine, begins tumbling the balls violently in the machine as she's prone to do. I can see through the wiring of the tumbler that the hefty wooden balls bounce off each other and against the flimsy cage as they attempt to break free. They'll inevitably escape one way or another, whether it's through the slide that Francine uses to call the numbers, or out of the door that's sealed shut. I-19, B-8, G-55...

Then it happens, all at once. Francine stirs the tumbler more vigorously, and the persistent revolutions of the machine cause the door to pop open. Dozens of weighty wooden Bingo balls, all flooding out at an insane velocity, head straight towards the middle of the room where Margaret's seat is parked. She looks towards them and screams, but someone steps in front of her and swats them away.

Darrien is here. By some miracle, he found something within himself to show up. And just in time, too.

“Everyone, out of the room *right* now,” he announces. He gestures for Cynthia to help roll Margaret out of the room, who is still in shock. Everyone rushes out and blocks the entrance to the Bingo Room as they pour out into the lobby. Francine, confusedly, steps out of her seat.

“That’s never happened before,” she panics, “I didn’t mean to—”

“You didn’t do anything,” he says. “Someone unscrewed the tumbler to launch those balls. If anything, you’re just as much of a victim as Margaret could’ve been.”

Francine doesn’t respond. How could she respond, believing for a moment she was nearly responsible for someone’s death? It’s a tender but thankless moment, and she walks past Darrien to exit the room.

Someone else attempts to leave as well, but Darrien places his arm on their shoulder. “You stay with me. We need to talk.”

“Talk? Talk about what?” they ask. The feigned innocence does nothing to change Darrien’s expression of utter disappointment.

“We’re talking about how you snuck into the Bingo Room to tamper with the tumbler. Everyone’s been saying it would one day break, especially if it’s operated by Francine. And when they happened, everyone would chalk it up to being a mere accident.”

“Well, it was an accident!”

“Then how do you explain the open window? You know just as well as I do that the windows can only be open from the inside. Those windows were not open prior to us playing earlier this afternoon.”

“What’s an open window have to do with it? If I did it, I would’ve needed to come in here to mess with the tumbler. You can check with the security guard in the library, I didn’t walk by him.”

“That’s why the open window means everything. You’re right, you didn’t walk *to* the Bingo Room past the security guard. You took the path from the veranda through the front entrance to the windows. Then you stepped into the open window.”

“If that’s true, then security—no, everyone would’ve seen me covered in dirt. The only way through that window is by stepping into the garden!”

They could leave at any time, say “I don’t have time for this” and storm out. Darrien has no hold on them. But it’s *because* of their guilt that they want to eliminate these suspicions. Stump Darrien so he drops his accusations. If the culprit can convince him, then maybe they can convince themselves they did nothing wrong.

“No, you definitely got rid of the dirt,” Darrien insisted. “After tampering with the tumbler, you stepped into the bathroom, which is conveniently right next to the hallway leading

up to the Bingo Room. You could sneak in there without security noticing where you came from.”

“Don’t make me laugh! You have proof of that, right?”

“I do. Just look down at yours shoes.”

They do so, and peer annoyingly at their spotless footwear. The culprit clicks their tongue and stammers.

“Your shoes weren’t so shiny earlier today. You must have stepped into the restroom and washed them before drying them off. But in doing so, they look in much better position than when you first put them on today. Can you tell me why that is, Larry?”

The culprit grips his cane and raises it over his head. Darrien reads the movement and punches him once in the gut, bringing him to his knees.

“Fine, fine,” Larry said at last. “I messed with the machine. But what do you think I was trying to do?”

“Exactly what was about to happen. You were aiming to injure Margaret. Enough to send her to Assisted Living.”

“You don’t know that. I could’ve hit Francine, *or* I could’ve missed entirely.”

But I know. The prophecy *said*, “Someone will kill someone else.” There’s no way for them to know that, but that was the assuredly the expected outcome of tonight.

“That’s true,” Darrien cautiously admits. Even as he compliments one who he disdains, the stand-in detective still carefully selects his words. “Using the Bingo tumbler’s an ingenious method, but it’s also unreliable. But there’s an undeniable perk. If you messed up and it misses,

congrats, nobody would ever think to check it for tampering. As we already discussed, everyone assumed it was bound to break anyway.”

“Then what’s the point of talking to me? I promise I won’t do it again.” Larry’s smiling from ear to ear, unable to contain himself.

“We all play Bingo. When you lose, you try the same thing again. And again. And don’t change anything. Whenever you lose, it’s of no consequence to you so long as they keep the same tumbler. You could try this as many times as you’d like, at least until they order a replacement. Eventually you’re bound to win, am I right? You were just lucky you ‘won’ the first time.”

Larry says nothing. Darrien knows what he was trying to do, and he has already proven how. The pianist is clinging to any argument he can to stop Darrien in his tracks.

“Then *why* would I do all this? You know what people say about my feelings for Margaret. You’ve seen how—”

“How you moved her in her wheelchair to the center of the room, directly in the line of fire? Yeah, real chivalrous, pal. Can you even say, ‘I love Margaret?’”

“What a stupid question!”

“Then answer it brilliantly.” Darrien snorts his nose, ready to be amused.

Larry, on the other hand, is sweating bullets, unable to escape his own heart. “I love—I love...”

The pause is durational and awkward, and after listening to enough of Larry’s muttering, Darrien chooses to interrupt him.

“You don’t love Margaret. You love *love*. Margaret was in the way of the woman you truly adored. Isn’t that right?”

Larry sighs. For a romantic like him, denying his own feelings when asked directly would be the greatest sin of all. That’s probably what Darrien’s driving at, and how he wishes to corner him.

“You’re absolutely right,” the culprit admits at last. “The woman I love is Cynthia.”

“There we go,” Darrien replies calmly. “And you might have had a chance to if you just *talked* to her.”

I can hear from outside Julia checking on Margaret, who is still in shock. Nobody’s pushing through into the Bingo Room, because most likely, they expected everyone to evacuate. So, nobody is leaving the room until this argument is over.

“Ooooooh, *this* again!” Larry grits his teeth. “All romance is based on the *story*. You don’t meet the love of your life through cheap one-liners. Only through risk, through passion and grit!”

“What you did was endanger the life of her closest friend—and her next-door neighbor. And that’s what made Margaret your target, wasn’t it?”

“I-I don’t know what you mean...”

“You didn’t care about Margaret. She meant nothing to you—obviously, as you were willing to put her in the hospital. What you wanted was her room, which is directly next to Cynthia’s.”

Larry swallows the spit in his mouth and sighs.

“I spoke with Theodore too, after your little fight,” Darrien continues. Given the context, I suppose Theodore is the chess player Larry argued with earlier today. “You met your last wife the same way, didn’t you? Her neighbor had an accident, and you threw all your money to take that room as soon as possible. It’s the proximity effect, right? We prefer making connections with people who are in close proximity because it’s more convenient. It’s no wonder she fell in love with you.”

Darrien continues. “But then you trampled your own love story you held so dear. You tried to make it happen again with a new woman who interested you. You set up a trap to look like an accident, and when she was put into Assisted Living or even the hospice for whatever damage you caused her, you simply had to write out a check and you could move right next to Cynthia. Nobody would think anything of it. And that’s exactly what you were aiming for with this scheme.”

Larry can’t talk. From the vacancy in his eyes, he’s lost any will to fight.

“You can’t prove any of this, though. Can you?” He looked up at Darrien who was towering over him. His question was less of a threat and more of a request for mercy.

“With the danger you put Margaret in, no doubt cops will come to investigate. Your footprints by the window and in the garden, coupled with any prints you may have left on the Bingo tumbler, are more than enough to convict you. The difficulty is proving your attempt to injure Margaret specifically.”

“You can’t, can you? So, I’m not going to prison!” He’s so relieved to hear that, still keeling over the ground with that crooked smile on his face. It’s sickening.

“Maybe not. But once you’re proven to have set up the tumbler to explode, Theodore and I can testify against you. The fact you set Margaret’s chair in the same position every time, how often you stare at Cynthia, we can prove you’re guilty. Maybe not enough to get a sentence, but enough to prove you’re clearly unstable.”

Larry snickers. “And what exactly will that do?”

“It’s enough to have you moved to Assisted Living. Someone who’s willing to set up a trap this elaborate just to hurt someone and take their room is not at all in the right state of mind, don’t you agree?”

The smile leaves Larry’s face and he looks just like a beggar. “Please, please don’t tell on me.”

“Too late,” Darrien replies with a straight face. “I already decided before I came in to stop your little scheme.”

Darrien motions to leave, but Larry’s fear turns to anger. He grabs his cane and juts it in front of Darrien in an attempt to trip him. The “detective” not only recognizes this, but steps on the cane and breaks it half before walking out of the room.

Larry is in tears. Not that I have any remorse for him at this point. I flutter after Darrien to witness his next move.

He paces past the residents in the lobby over to the security guard in the front desk. He explains the gist of what Larry’s done, and instructs the guard to go into the Bingo Room and make sure Larry doesn’t have a chance to clean up the evidence that points him to the crime.

“Also,” Darrien says. “We’ll have to make sure restraining orders are filed on him, for both Cynthia and Margaret’s safety.”

The guard is somewhat confused, but thanks him for the info and runs off to complete his newly assigned tasks. Darrien moves to the lobby, sinks into one of the blue chairs, and closes his eyes.

I realize now why he and I work so well together. *I am* Darrien. It explains why he’s the only one who can’t see me. Not only that, but how I was so quick to adapt to this crime-solving, and it accounts for my memories of old age and retirement. The mother I recall is the same as his. Which means he’ll someday die of the heart condition that killed me. At least he lived his best life, with the help of a certain miracle—me.

Behind me, Cynthia and Sydney are sitting with Margaret, who’s still recovering from that experience. Cynthia’s gripping her hand and saying everything will be alright. Sydney’s clasping her hands in prayer, then turns to Cynthia and says, “I didn’t know you had the capacity to care so much.”

“Of course I care,” she replies blandly. “What a stupid thing to say.”

“You think everything I say is stupid.”

“Because I want what’s best for you, and you don’t take care of yourself. You left your door open while you were sleeping.”

“Oh really? And how do you know—”

“Who do you think shut it?”

Sydney flashes her a smile and Cynthia can't help but do the same. Margaret looks back at them and some of the pink has returned to her rosy face. The three share a hug, which warms my heart. However, Margaret struggles to break free when she hears whistling. But it's not the whistling man; it's none other than Terrence. He might be striding with confidence, but his animated expressions end up reminding me more of Mickey Mouse in "Steamboat Willie." Regardless, Margaret cocks her head over to peek at him, and smiles flirtatiously at what she's seeing. Her friends take notice and force her back into the hug.