



## ***Season Two:***

### ***Episode Five***

Mal arrived at her empty home. Her box of belongings tucked under her arm, she stepped inside and cast a glance at a photo of her and Richard, her husband. It was positioned on the wall, so it was always one of the first things she saw when she arrived. She smiled at the couple in the photo. It had been taken just a few months before the accident. They'd believed that only good things were ahead of them, and their smiles reflected that certainty. How quickly life could pull the rug from under you.

Her heart aching, she dropped the box by the door, feeling too exhausted to take it any farther. What was she going to do now? Her savings were pretty much exhausted. The mortgage was too much for her alone. And now she would either have to sell or foreclose.

All those little notes antagonizing her, suggesting she killed her husband, warning her to cash in on the life insurance policy. But there was no check to cash. Without the body, they refused to pay. Whoever was sending her these notes either had no clue as to the real situation or were exhibiting an even deeper level of cruelty. How could she pay a ransom when there was nothing to ransom?

Her initial thought when she saw the letter the Count dropped was that it must have come from Cordelia. But now it seemed so obvious she felt like a fool. It had been Millicent all along. Mal's husband was Millicent's son she gave up for adoption. And everyone knew Millicent had set her sights on the Count since he first stepped into Shady Bluff. Perhaps she wasn't as comfortable financially as she seemed.

Not for the first time, Mal experienced conflicting thoughts about the life insurance policy. On one hand, if the policy was paid out, the money would be a lifeline and get her out of a lot of debt, with plenty left over to be comfortable. But then again, wouldn't receiving it, cashing it, be like finally admitting that he was truly dead?

The night of the accident, they'd had a terrible fight. She remembered Richard storming out of the house, not even bothering to grab a coat or umbrella. It had been raining very hard, but she'd not cared. She remembered that. *Good riddance*, she remembered thinking as he disappeared into the downpour.

The funny thing was, she couldn't even remember what the fight had been about, other than money. They always argued about money. But she remembered distinctly waiting for him to return. And waiting and waiting.

By early morning, when she received a call that the car had been found at the bottom of the gorge leading from Platonic River to the sea, one crumpled mass of metal, she had known even before she picked up the phone that it was bad news.

But his body had not been found, assumed pulled out to sea. And now she was alone. And broke. And unemployed. She absentmindedly wiped tears from her face. She'd not even been aware she was crying.

She needed answers. And she wanted Millicent to pay for the pain she'd caused Richard. She picked up her phone and called the front desk. With any luck, the phone would ring back at the nurse's desk.

Sure enough, in four rings, she heard Susan, the night shift nurse, pick up. "Shady Bluff Senior Living," the weary voice on the other end answered.

"Susan, it's Mal. I was hoping it was you."

"Mal! What is going on? They told me you'd been fired," Susan said. Then, with suspicion, "Should you even be calling here?"

"Probably not, Susan. But I need your help."

Susan was not known for being the most approachable person, but Mal knew and trusted her team to do the right thing when called upon.

"I can't tell you everything, but it's very important that I get in touch with Count Dandy. I know you're not supposed to do this, but if I have to beg, I will. Can you look up his phone number for me?"

Back at Shady Bluff, The Count was watching for Millicent to return to the dining room. It seemed she had no qualms about making The Count wait for an interminable length of time for the meal to resume.

He was torn between simply leaving or staying put and appearing above it all when Millicent returned. She would have to be very obsequious to make up for this breach of etiquette.

But before he could make up his mind, his own phone buzzed in his pocket. The screen displayed an unknown, but local, number. Sighing, the Count answered the call. No point in him leaving the table too, he told himself.

As he listened to the caller, the Count began to sweat, and swear under his breath. No one, not even Mal, who was quickly telling the Count all she knew and all she wanted, heard the foul language. But someone one table away did notice the quick sheen of sweat pop out on his forehead.

*Someone's in some trouble*, Sara Lakshmi thought as the Count wiped his forehead. Of course, Sarah had some trouble of her own, involving two very insistent loan sharks. She cocked her head and focused her attention on the Count so that she might hear him should he say something other than the string of four-letter words that he'd muttered to himself when he first got the call. And then...

"I'm sure we could come to some, mutually beneficial arrangement, Ms. Practiss. I'm sure your recent widowhood has been quite a burden on you in several ways. I could help you get back on your feet, you know. Money is no object."

*Bingo*, thought Sara. She looked at her husband, Rakesh, who was methodically eating peas one by one. Even after 55 years of marriage, these little eccentricities touched her. Such a sweet, gentle husband. They'd not told anyone, but Rakesh had recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. The time they had together was now limited. A deadline of his ability to remember her and their life together had been given - a year, maybe two.

Which is why he must never find out about the situation she'd gotten them into. But maybe, just maybe, whatever was happening between the former Wellness Director and The Count could be lucrative for her, too. She made a mental note to go online and see what she could find on both.

She smiled and reached out to Rakesh, brushed his cheek with the back of her hand. He looked up and smiled. "I love you, Rakesh," she said.

"I love you, too," he said, looking surprised. Sara wasn't known for displays of affection. He took her hand and gave it a kiss.

*Credits*

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