



Season Two:

Episode Fourteen

When Sara Lakshmi had asked to speak to the Count, she assumed that she could make her way into his good graces. Let him know she knew more than she actually did and see if he would slip up enough to reveal where she would be best utilized. A man like the Count had plenty of money. And if he didn't, he had friends.

But Dandy wasn't a man easily intimidated or coerced. He'd learned as a child that a little incentive and a little fear proved a potent combo for getting what one wanted. Over the years, he'd perfected his technique to ensure that almost any situation could be manipulated to come out in his favor.

Initially, his calls from Mal had set his heart hammering. He couldn't have Mal (no matter how justified she might feel her anger and grief to be) holding secrets above his head or thinking that she could use what she knew against him. Now or in the future.

And just when he was beginning to sweat, fate presented a way out.

"Whatever Mallory Practiss told you on the phone, I wouldn't believe her," Sara said. She'd found the Count in the second-floor demonstration kitchen, an area where residents could take cooking classes or attend special culinary-themed events. The kitchen was connected to two separate events spaces, yet led out to a completely different hall, making it a perfect escape route when one wanted to get away unnoticed.

"And what, pray tell, would you know about it?" the Count asked.

"I know that she's hiding something. Her husband's death was no accident if you ask me."

The Count raised an eyebrow. "Go on."

“She had a very large life insurance policy and they’d been arguing. Just seems kind of fishy to me,” said Sara.

“Indeed. But why would you care?”

“Let’s just say that Mal and I crossed paths several years ago. The meeting never had a full resolution.”

“So you come to me. Why? Is there some way I can help you?”

Sara’s face crumpled. She had not meant to cry in front of this man, but she couldn’t hold back the tears. “My husband. He needs help. He’s been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s...”

The Count contorted his face to its best approximation of sympathy.

“... and that means we will need money for his care. There’s no way that when the time comes we can afford to move him to memory care. And on top of that we have many debts.”

“I see,” said The Count. And he did. Money was the cause of most problems and often the only solution. “Dear Sara, I wish I could help you, but based on what you’re offering...”

“Information,” said Sara, tilting her head up to look the Count directly in the eyes.

“Information, yes. No matter what information you could offer, I don’t see that it would be worth the price of ongoing care for your husband.”

“What then? I’m a proud woman, Dandy, but I also know when a need is beyond me.”

The Count pulled out a letter. “For some time, Ms. Practiss has been receiving letters of a sort threatening her and demanding she cash her insurance payment. Did you know about these?”

Sara shook her head. “Did you write them?”

“Of course,” said the Count. Or rather, a former associate of mine did.” The Count paused a moment, knowing that the associate, Phillip Hedd, was likely completely out of the picture by now.

“Ms. Practiss has been ignoring my warnings for a very long time now. But as you know, she reached out to me this afternoon about some crucial information she claims to have. And then had the gall to ask me to help her financially.” The Count smiled, realizing how that might sound to Sara, who’d just asked him for the same thing. “Rest assured, your situation is entirely different from hers.

He continued, “I agreed to meet her at the Perfidy Cliffs tonight. I’d like you to go in my stead.”

“And do what?” Sara asked, a heavy ball seeming to form in her belly.

“All you have to do is talk to her, tell her that I’m on her side, but that no matter what we must act with caution and that she must be patient.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” said the Count.

“And you’ll help with my husband’s bills?”

“You’ll never have to worry about your husband’s healthcare needs again.”

Sara wiped tears from her eyes. She was grateful, yes, but also scared because she knew she couldn’t trust this man. And yet, the very promise of financial rescue was enough to make her take a leap of faith.

“Oh, one more thing, Sara.”

She turned back to the Count, who loomed over her. His smile was conspiratorial. “The bluffs are wet and slippery, I’m sure an *accident* would not be so surprising in those spots.”

Sara stared back at him blankly.

“Once you take care of our former nurse friend, you’ll never have to worry about your husband’s healthcare needs again.”

What would you do for enough money to ensure your loved one was taken care of? Sara’s grip on the steering wheel was iron and she kept looking in her rearview mirror to see if she was being followed. But it was a chilly, foggy night, the tarmac spreading out before and behind her in stillness and darkness, making her feel utterly alone.

She replayed the conversation, knowing that she had essentially led Count Dandy to believe she was willing to kill a woman for her husband’s security. But as a Sikh, she knew she could not take a human life. No, she told herself, she could not do what the Count wanted. She must warn Mal, tell her to run away. She would face the consequences of angering the Count.

She pulled into the parking lot off the highway that provided visitors access to the pathway along the cliff. There was only one other car – it must be Mal’s. Sara pulled her jacket tight, stepping into the fog, looking for Mal.

As she neared the cliff’s edge, the fog lifted and she practically gasped. Just beyond the precipice, the ocean stretched out as far as her eyes could see, the moon’s light reflecting against the dark water. It was beautiful and dramatic. She wished that Rakesh were here to see it with her.

Rakesh. She hoped he was having pleasant dreams. He was always such a sound sleeper, and she’d crushed two sleeping pills into his brandy after dinner just to be safe. He would never know she’d left.

“Sara, what are you doing here?”

Sara jumped. She turned to find Mal just a few feet from her. She looked entirely different out of her uniform. Her hair was down, giving her a more youthful appearance. Her clothes were also more flattering. She could see why Rakesh would have been attracted to her. But she pushed the thought out of her mind. That was in the past.

“I came here because of Count Dandy.”

“Is everyone at the community under his thumb?” Mal asked, then laughed. “I guess I am too. He promised to help me get revenge. Why did he send you?”

“I came to warn you. The Count, he is a very dangerous man. You shouldn’t trust him.”

“And why should I trust you? You may have forgotten what your husband did, but I didn’t.”

Sara was shocked. “What my husband did? You are as much to blame as he is. You both did wrong.”

“We had an affair when I was his student. He made me promises that he didn’t keep. He used his power to influence me.”

Sara closed her eyes. This was not something she wanted to talk about. She had moved past this, forgiven Rakesh, forgiven Mal. Why was she bringing this up when there were so much more pressing matters to worry about? She felt tears welling in her eyes. What had she gotten herself into?

“So why are you really here? You didn’t come all this way to warn me. Did the Count send you?”

Sara nodded. “He couldn’t come and he asked me to do so. He wanted me to tell you that he’s on your side, but that you must be patient. But when I got here, I realized that I couldn’t lie to you.”

“Why are you really here?” Mal asked. “What’s in it for you?”

Sara realized that no matter what she said, Mal was not going to believe her. “I only came to say what I have said. It’s up to you to do the right thing.” And she turned to leave.

“Do the right thing?” Mal laughed. “I’ve always done the right thing. Did you know your husband told me that he wanted to leave you and marry me? He said that you weren’t what he wanted in a wife. That only I could make him happy. But I told him to go back to you, to be a good husband. He said he didn’t love you.”

It was a mistake, Sara would later tell herself. But as Mal hurled the words at her, stinging her more than any slap could, she stepped forward. She only wanted to make Mal stop talking. She hadn’t accounted for the rocks on the

ground, or how close they were to the edge. No, she would tell herself, she hadn't thought about how close they were to the edge at all.

Sara didn't hit Mal or grab her. She simply pushed. Who could have known that Mal would lose her balance? That she would scream all the way down until her body hit the rocks below?

Sara fell to her knees and crawled to the edge and looked over. It was too dark to make out details, but she could see the silhouette of Mal's body splayed on the sharp rocks.

What have I done? Sara asked herself. She wanted to scream and cry, to take it back.

As she sat there, arrested in indecision, she did not see a figure step out of the shadows of a tree and run back along the path to the parking lot. She didn't know that the argument had been heard or that the push had been seen. Sara didn't even register the sound of an engine starting as the witness pulled away.

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