

The Snow White Mystery

10:08 a.m.

Crunch. Scratch. Puff. Tick. Screech.

Crunching. Professor Dainotto bites into his apple, the *crunch* of its skin filling the quiet classroom. Its skin breaks and releases juice droplets which fall onto the pages of the book Professor Dainotto is reading. He flips to the next page.

Scratching. Students scribble short-form essays, the *scratch* of their pencils against the paper creating a cacophonous echo. Emma, Zach, Peter, Sarah, Rory, Grace, Alex, Vanessa. Ciro, the teaching assistant, watches for cheating. The students erase, cross-out, rush to write their final exams worth 60% of their grades.

Puffing. Professor Dainotto exhales his vape, the *puff* giving way to a plume of smoke. He waves the cloud away with his hand. He bites again into his apple.

Ticking. The clock's hands do not relent, the *tick* reminding students that time slips away as they scramble to finish their essays. The final essay questions suddenly feel daunting. Students bite their nails, pull at their hems, chew on their lips.

Screeching. Professor Dainotto's chair moves back, the *screech* of its feet against the ground piercing students' ears and ripping their focus away from their papers momentarily. Their eyes dart back to their papers. Then again to Professor Dainotto. Something is happening. Something not right.

Gasping.

Professor Dainotto grabs at the air, attempting to stand. Failing. His arms stretch before him, his fingers splay. His eyes bulge wider and wider, his mouth gaping open in want of air.

Plop. The apple rolls to the ground, falls. Bites taken out of the once perfect flesh.

Time seems to freeze. No one knows what to do. Students exchange worried glances. Some leap from their seats, others are paralyzed in fear.

Zach shouts, breaking the silence, “He’s having a heart attack!”

“Someone, call 911!” Ciro orders as he rushes toward Professor Dainotto, attempting to steady him to sit on the ground.

“I think he’s chokin’ or somethin’!” Peter calls out.

“It’s a heart attack! Are you stupid?” Zach fights back.

“No, he needs air!” Alex pushes in front of Ciro, pumping on Professor Dainotto’s chest. He leans over Professor Dainotto, performing mouth-to-mouth in an attempt to breath air into his lungs.

Rory rushes towards the front of the classroom, grabbing at the box in which Professor Dainotto keeps cellphones during exams. Sarah says three *Hail Marys*.

“The key, the key! I need the key!” Rory shouts. Grace runs to Professor Dainotto’s desk, finding the key in the top drawer. She rushes it over to Rory.

“We need help!” Zach yells into the hallway, hoping for somebody, anybody, to hear.

Alex’s arms tire and Ciro takes over pumping on Professor Dainotto’s chest. Rory finally unlocks the box, picks up the first phone she can find, and dials 911. An operator promises that help is on the way.

“My...my lips...” Alex looks up with wide eyes, panic striking his face. “I can’t feel my lips,” he tries to say—but the speech is garbled. He’s struggling to articulate his words, his face turning whiter and whiter as he strains to breathe.

“Help! My friend, he’s not okay!” Rory cries into the phone. “He needs help!”

“The...apple...” Alex forces out. He lies on the floor, closing his eyes in an attempt to save any energy.

The wail of sirens grows closer. A professor from the classroom next door rushes toward Alex and Professor Dainotto. Passing students crowd in the doorway trying to peek inside at the ensuing commotion. The sea of bodies parts when paramedics and officers swarm the room. The paramedics raise Professor Dainotto and Alex onto stretchers. Alex gasps for breath. Students yell and sob and cry. Yet, everything feels silent.



Rory

My eyes burn from crying. My chest feels tight, constricted. As if someone were holding me in a hug too tight and all I need is for them to release, but they just won't let me go. I gulp greedily at my water, my chest heaving with every inhale and exhale. My hands won't stop shaking. Grace sits next to me, massaging my hand. She whispers that I should slow down my breath, *count down from 10*. I give up at 7.

I look around at the others —8 of us in total. Emma, Zach, Peter, Sarah, Grace, Vanessa, Ciro and me. We are an unlikely group to be stuck together. In fact, I realize the only thing most of us have in common is that we're juniors and seniors in college. There's Emma, shy and timid, always wearing color-coordinated outfits like a child. Zach, an arrogant lacrosse player and a bit of a jerk. Peter and Sarah, fraternal twins, who are so close with one another yet so different. Peter is social and sporty, whereas Sarah spends all her time studying and going to church. Grace, my girlfriend, a free spirit who's a softie at heart. Vanessa, a total sorority girl who always seems more interested in her phone than class. Ciro, older (thirty or so) from Italy with a

thick accent who always tries to answer the questions Professor Dainotto skips over. And me, boring, studious, and always reading.

It had all happened so fast. The memories of the day now seemed like disjointed lurid nightmares. Scribbling on the tests as we rushed to finish them before the clock ran out. Then, so quickly, Professor Dainotto gasping, searching for breath. Then, Alex. The apple.

The emergency responders rushed into the room. The paramedics whisked Professor Dainotto and Alex away on stretchers. The police explained that *Professor Dainotto suffered a heart attack*, but *the doctors were doing everything in their power to save him*. They asked each of us for statements, wanting us to *explain exactly what had happened as we saw it*. Afterwards, they requested that we not leave the classroom.

Some students pace, some whisper, some sit eerily still. We all look wild, like caged animals yearning for escape. This morning feels like a nightmare you just keep hoping will end when you wake up. But, this won't end.

An hour or so passes, when, finally, a detective enters the room. We look up at her hopefully, expectantly. Her eyes betray nothing, her face solemn as she starts, "Hello, I'm sorry to be the bearer of such difficult news. My name is Detective Harver and I am with the Durham County Police Department." She pauses to let this information settle, knowing we are processing the information far more slowly than normally.

"Firstly, your classmate Alex OrNSTEAD is in stable condition at Duke Hospital. Although he is on a ventilator, doctors are confident that he will pull through." A sigh of relief ripples through the room. We exchange smiles. I squeeze Grace's hand.

She continues, "We are grateful for this news, though that is not all. This morning at 10:42 a.m., Professor Roberto Dainotto was pronounced dead." The room shudders with shock.

The news feels impossible—false. I want to scream. I half expect Detective Harver to break into a twisted smile, to explain away that this is all some cruel joke. Instead, she stares at us with pitying eyes and a ripple of grief washes through my body. I sense tears on my cheeks, and gulp at the air to stop myself from sobbing. Grace grabs tighter at my hand. I look over and realize her eyes are closed. I know she’s trying to visualize being somewhere else. I feel the slight shakes of her body and realize she is also crying. I wrap her into a hug.

Detective Harver scans the room, seeing the effect of her words. She takes a deep sigh, her brows furrowed with regret that she must deliver this news. *No, not regret*, I realize. *Something else—something more calculated*. Something like suspicion. She continues, “Although Professor Dainotto’s body showed the classic signs of a heart attack, the admittance of Alex Ornstead into Duke Hospital and your accounts of the events leading up to Mr. Dainotto’s passing led us to perform toxin screenings on both of them. We found trace amounts of aconite in both their systems—in Professor Dainotto’s, enough to kill him.”

“What is that?” Zach demands, pounding his thighs with his balled fists.

“Aconite is an herb,” Detective Miller answers.

“How did that, like...kill him, then?” Vanessa twists her gold rings around her fingers.

“In small doses it can be used for herbal remedies, but in slightly larger doses it is numbing to the touch. At just 2 mg, it is deadly to ingest orally.”

“He was poisoned?” Grace asks, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

Detective Harver nods slightly, “We believe that to be the case. The aconite was ingested orally and took only minutes to set in, leading us to conclude that the apple which Professor Dainotto was consuming at his time of death was laced with lethal dosages of the drug.”

A hum of confusion rushes through the room. What does this mean? What is the detective saying? Detective Harver calls our attention back to her, straining her voice above the vibration of noise which has swelled in the room.

“I am sorry to be so blunt in delivering this painful news. I am terribly sorry for your loss, and understand this morning was likely traumatic in many ways. It is my responsibility, however, to inform you that you are all suspects in this case. This classroom is now an active crime scene. As such, I am asking you all to follow a police escort to a nearby room in which you will await questioning. I know this is a lot of information to process, but I assure you we just want to find out the truth.”

The room fills again with commotion. Peter and Sarah’s eyes dart to one another. Emma’s arms wrap around herself in a hug. Ciro claps his hand to his mouth and looks at Zach with concern. Vanessa just keeps shaking her head. No one can believe it. My throat tightens, this time with something other than sadness—with fear, I realize, as Grace mutters “ow!” and I look down to find her hand white from my tightening grip.

“Sorry,” I offer, but my brain is elsewhere. It’s racing now, turning over the members of the room again and again in my head. The suspect list. Emma, Grace, Zach, Vanessa, Ciro, Sarah, Peter, and me. The detective is right. Whoever murdered Professor Dainotto knew that today was exam day and that our cellphones would be locked away. They had to know that we would not be able to call 911 in time to save him. It could have been any of us. How well do I really know my classmates?

It’s horribly ironic. The thought flashes in my mind for just a moment before I shoo it away for its coarseness. Yet, the fact stands. In a class devoted to studying Detective Novels, I cannot help but think of the irony of this situation—a real detective story at our fingertips. I

rebuke myself for the thought. Grace practices deep breathing next to me. She takes her glasses off and rests them on the table. She places her hands on her thighs and opens her palms to the ceiling. She's trying to calm herself down. It inspires me. I take a deep breath, trying to slow down the barrage of thoughts and images which tumble in my brain. But I can't stop thinking.

We all knew that Professor Dainotto was not a popular man. Students found him cold and arrogant. He responded to our questions with belittling and condescending comments. Other professors found him difficult to work with and were jealous of what they believed was an undeserved status within the university. He was known for exploiting his TA's, having them perform his menial errands, like fetching coffee, vape juice, meals, and dry-cleaning. There were even rumors of sexual liaisons with both graduate and undergraduate students. Yes, there was plenty to dislike about Professor Dainotto.

But who hated him enough to kill him?

"One more, difficult piece of news," Detective Harver's voice breaks through the sea of whispers and the pounding in my head. "Based on your statements regarding the day and the intended recipient of the apple, *we believe Professor Dainotto wasn't the planned victim of the perpetrator.*" A hush falls again through the room.

"Mr. Incoronato, you were the intended target!"



Ciro

"I don't know nofing. Dis don't make no sense! *Porca miseria!*"

"Mr. Incoronato, we understand that this is upsetting news to hear, but we need you to calm down so you can help us. Can you think of anyone who would want to hurt you?" Detective Miller stares at me wif his beady eyes.

“It don’t make no sense. I teaching assistant for Roberto for past two years. I never have no issues wif student in past! Den dis year...suddenly...”

“Mr. Incoronato, I’m sure this must be incredibly difficult. I know this is not easy to hear and I promise we are doing everything in our power to keep you safe. Tell us about the events leading up to finding the apple on your desk this morning.” Detective Harver’s curly hair shakes as she speaks.

I blink back de tears, finking about de apple I find on desk dis morning. “De apple...Dat is just final straw dat breaks de camel.” I look at Beady Eyes and Curly Hair to see if dey understand. Dey nod. I continue.

“Early dis year, de notes start. First as harmless. Dey say de fings like, ‘Dank you for being such a wonderful TA! You always help me learn’ or ‘You’re de best. You are such a good teacher.’ Dey are nice. I am surprised, yes. But I am not worried. Not yet.

“De notes are dere on random days. I come to my desk in de morning and find one. Always nice. Always make me feel good. Dey bring joy to bad days, and I fink *Wow, I am helping students*. You see, dis semester is bad time for me. Dese notes feel good.”

“Bad, how so?” Curly Hair cuts in.

I sigh out, embarrassed, “I end big serious relationship by being stupid.”

Beady Eyes raises a brow. I no want to tell dem, but I know I must, “I cheat. It was stupid, and I don’t have no good reason for doing dat. I know dere never is no good reason. But I no love her, not truly. And it moving too fast and I get drunk one night and I make de mistake terrible.”

Curly Hair scribbles in her notebook. “Do you think that your ex could want to hurt you? Could they be connected to anyone in the class today?”

“I...ah...*minchia*,” I mumble. I don’t want to get him in no trouble. He is good kid and he have such de hard life. His dad leave when he just de little boy and de kids bully him when he young. I weigh de option to tell or not in my head.

“Please, Mr. Incoronato. You need to tell us everything you know so we can rule out possible suspects.”

“*Bene*...Zach...he is Lorraine—my ex’s—son. I don’t know even if he knows dat de reason we end de relationship was I cheat! *Per favore*, I know he is innocent!”

Beady Eyes and Curly Hair clearly are unsure. I regret de telling dem. But I know I had to. Beady Eyes clears his froat, “We have to look at all possible suspects and follow all leads. Do you think Zach could have been leaving the notes?”

I fink on dat for de moment. But dat don’t make no sense. “I don’t fink so. Even if he angry wid me, he never will try to kill me. And, whoever leave de notes is good artist...Zach is no good at art.”

Curly Hair’s face light up, “The mysterious student started bringing art?”

“Sorry, I skip ahead.” I breafe out. I gafer de thoughts. “After few weeks of de notes, I make new decision. I no want to embarrass student, but I want to dank dem. I come to de class early fifteen minutes so I can be ready for de student when dey come. But, when I get to de class, de note is already dere.

“It makes me feel weird, to know de student came and left before I even get dere. I consider telling Roberto, but I don’t know how. I know nofing what to say. What issue is dere? A student leaves kind notes on my desk. How can I complain?”

“But it escalated?”

I nod. “De gifts start. Pencils, drawings, bakery food. It make me feel...weird. I feel bad. I no want de notes anymore. I want dem to stop. I try again to show up early, but de notes are already dere. I don’t know what to do! I tell Roberto finally.”

“What did Roberto say?” Beady Eyes tilts his head.

I chuckle, small, “He’s no super helpful. Roberto sometimes no very...sympafy person. He tells me de end of semester in just two weeks. He tells me to wait out. He says schoolchild crushes happen wif professors many time. Advice is not to panic. Since he’s my boss, I take de advice. He gives de directions: frow away de gifts and notes in de classroom trash to show I am not in interest. He say den, de mystery student eifer will reveal demselves or go away when semester ends.”

“How did you feel about this plan?” Curly Hair asks.

“I am nervous about it, but I agree. I mean, none of de gifts are anyfing too big or scary. *Infatti*, de more I repeat it to myself at de time, de more silly I feel for being worried. I had worked de self up over nofing. I tell de self dat it will go away when de semester end.

“Dis morning, when I find de apple, I was so happy to fink dat it will all soon be over. I was going to frow it away, but Roberto suggest instead dat he eat it. He say dat way, de mystery student sees dat I do not accept deir gift. I am unsure wif dis plan at first, but I follow what Roberto tell me to do. I respect him. I figure he knows de right choice.” De breaaf catches in my froat. I feel sick. I am so scared. I want to frow up. Why did I let him take de apple?

“Thank you for your help Mr. Incoronato. We promise we won’t rest until we find the person behind this,” Beady Eyes says.

“Is there anything else you would like to share to help the investigation at this time?” Curly Hair asks.

“Dere is one ofer fing,” I hesitate. Dey nod for me to continue, “Dere is one student who...I’ve fought wif recently. I’m sure it’s nofing but...”

“Who is it?” Detective Miller prompts.

“Sarah Reynolds. I’m scared she wants me dead.”



Sarah

My heart is flutterin’ fast as a hummingbird’s and I’m not sure how much longer I can take this agony. I say three Hail Marys. I try to get Peter to join me in sayin’ one, but he’s lost to his thoughts. I say an extra prayer askin’ Him for strength for Peter.

The police told us the apple core is missin’ and they can’t catch the killer ‘til they find it. They gotta have it to get DNA evidence and crosscheck it with the remains in Professor Dainotto’s body. Without that apple, they can’t know for sure who the killer is. I ask the Lord again for strength.

The police just took Ciro for questions in the other room. I’m terrified bout what he might say. Did anyone hear us fightin’ yesterday? I pray to God no one did. I can’t believe that was so recent. This morning and yesterday feel like forever ago.

I catch Rory starin’ at me. She looks away real fast, but I keep glarin’ at her. I have my heart in my mouth and my face turns red as a tomato. I know no one is lookin’ at me anymore, but it feels like everyone is starin’. It feels like they all know the truth.

Suddenly, I feel anger hot as coals for Rory. I didn’t even know I had it in me, but now it feels over-powerin’, as if I could blow my top just thinkin’ bout it. I start a prayer ‘gainst jealousy, but I get distracted when Rory looks back at me ‘gain.

She thinks she's so much better than me just 'cause she dates Grace. She doesn't know anythin' about sacrifice or love. Grace loved me first. We just couldn't be with each other at the time, but that doesn't mean forever. Rory's just spends all day with her head in her books and actin' like she's better than everyone else. I can feel myself gettin' worked up. I try to slow my breathin' down and pray for peace and calm.

Peter stares at me like a frightened cat. For a moment, I'm 'fraid he can see inside my brain. I'm terrified he knows 'bout Grace.

"How are ya feelin'?" I whisper.

Peter's eyes bore into me, "We shouldn't talk here."

I shudder. I'm scared stiff. My mind's racin' again. Anger, Rory, hurt, Grace, confusion, Peter. Repeatin' *The Hail Mary*. Tryin' to breathe. Strugglin' to take in the air. My head is poundin'. I feel Rory's big eyes starin' at me and I know I shouldn't do it, I know I should not engage, but I can't help myself and suddenly I find that I've leapt from my seat like a tiger at its prey, "Would ya quit starin' at me?"

Rory bobs her mouth open and shut like a fish searchin' for food. Grace squeezes her shoulder, soothin' her. The knot in my stomach tightens. Everyone in the room stares at us, watchin' like front row audience members to a cage fight.

Silence stretches on, 'til Rory breaks it. "What were you doing fighting with Ciro yesterday?"

The *tick* from the clock sounds loud as the siren of an ambulance. Time seems to stand still.

"Oh my god, what? What are you guys talking about?" Zach's eyes widen, he jolts up from his seat.

“It was nothin’ for y’all to worry about,” I barely whisper.

Vanessa leaps up, “Nothing for us to worry about? You don’t get to say that when we’re all stuck in a room because Professor Dainotto is dead!”

“I had nothin’ to do with that!” I plead.

“Oh yeah? Then why won’t you tell us about it?” Vanessa pushes.

“Guys, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to start a big commotion,” Rory calls but no one can hear her.

Their voices pile on top of one another like a complicated opera, except they’re all yelling and angry. It grows louder and louder. Zach and Vanessa start walkin’ toward me, like sharks circling the minnow they’re about to eat. The air grows thinner, their voices mountin’ ‘til I can’t hear myself think and suddenly I burst.

“Ciro caught me cheating!”

Silence. My voice drops to a whisper, “He said he would tell Professor Dainotto today,” I push down the sobs climbing in my throat. “Look, y’all, I’m on a full scholarship. If I got reported to honor board I could lose that scholarship and...our family can’t afford that...I’d have to leave...” The tears break through. I can’t help it. “If Hiro reported me to Professor Dainotto, I could’ve gotten kicked out of school. I was mad. I was hollerin’ at him. I know, I shouldn’t have yelled at him like that and I shouldn’t have done what I did—I know that now. But this...” I shake my head. Tears stream down my cheeks, “I would never do somethin’ like that. Please, believe me. Hand to God.”

The room is silent. Peter rests his hand on my shoulder. I realize I’ve stood up and suddenly find I no longer have the energy. I sit back down, curlin’ into Peter as he holds me.

Rory speaks first, her voice soft but honest, “I believe you.”

After what feels like ages, the humdrum of the classroom starts up ‘gain. People talk to one another, go on their phones, ignore lookin’ at me. Peter comforts me and thank God for a brother like him who would do anything for me.

Suddenly, my heart sinks to my stomach. I think back on the moments that just happened—everyone looked surprised ‘cept Peter. I never told him what happened with Ciro. I kept it from him on purpose. But Peter looked like he already knew. Like he had already takin’ care of it.

Peter would do anything for me.

As he holds me in his arms, I can’t stop thinking: *What have you done?*



Emma

STUPID! STUPID! STUPID! I’ve made a terrible mistake. A rash move which could cost me everything. *But I was in love. And I thought he loved me back.*

It all started early in the semester, just a few weeks into class. I’ve always been too scared to ask questions. I’ve been terrified of being laughed at and embarrassed. Professor Dainotto particularly intimidated me. He was the type of teacher who scoffed at bad questions or comments. He always let you know how much smarter he was than you. He seemed to get kicks out of making students and our TA feel small. I had decided I’d say nothing for the rest of the semester. I’d scribble doodles and keep my head down and just try to avoid ever getting called on.

But on that fateful day, I had a major question about the reading. I remember asking it, still, my hands shaking as I gathered the courage to speak to the class. *Ciro hopped in to answer it, before Professor Dainotto could say anything.* He looked at me with his big brown eyes and

told me it was “a very good question”. *I felt butterflies and fireworks bursting in my stomach.* A few days later, I left Ciro my first note.

I didn't want to come on too strong. My last few crushes had blocked me on social media and said that I was 'too much'. I mulled over the decision of what to write for days. I wanted to say just the perfect thing. I scoured the web, watched romantic comedies, and took notes from books about love. Many experts agreed that mystery adds to romance, so I decided on a message which was both sweet and personal, without giving too much away. I knew that in his heart he would know who left it, but I wanted to maintain some fun and flirty mystery. I had written and rewritten countless messages, trying over and over again for the perfect one. Finally, I landed on one which felt okay. I arrived to class fifteen minutes early, left it on his desk, and then left as not to be seen.

When Ciro didn't respond to the first message, I thought that maybe he hadn't gotten it. I waited a few days for some comment or message, or even a question asking if someone had left a note on his desk. But nothing came. So, I left another. Then, another.

I became worried he wasn't getting the notes at all, so I decided to stake out the classroom before he came to make sure that another person wasn't getting them first. On just my third day of sitting there, who arrived early, but Ciro? I remember the immense flood of relief I felt—I wasn't making it up! He cared about me back! So much, that he wanted to get there early to meet me.

Knowing my love was returned, I felt a rush. I wanted to shower *mi amore* with gifts, but many experts warned that items overly indulgent could seem like I was overcompensating for a weak relationship. Many books and movies suggested smaller tokens of my appreciation so that we could focus on our special bond, rather than materialistic objects. It had been our own secret

little game. I left gifts and notes for him, and got the pleasure of knowing that he read them and thought about me. Even though I never included my name to keep the fun of the game alive, I knew he knew it was me.

I still remember the day I found my cupcake in the trashcan. I had baked it for him—banana walnut, his favorite according to his Facebook profile. My heart had sunk to my feet. I'd fought through class just to keep a straight face and try to avoid the painful sense that it was all crumbling down. To my credit, I fought for our love. I baked new goodies, drew new portraits, wrote kind notes. I tried and tried and tried. But to no avail. My heart was broken continually as I found mounting items in the trash can. I felt I could sob, but I didn't want to let everyone else in on our secret love. I needed a final way to move on. A parting gift, if you will.

I decided on the apple, a symbol of his teaching prowess and all I learned during the semester both about literature and love. I had set it on his desk with a final note, a hopeful goodbye. I was heartbroken when I saw Professor Dainotto biting into my final gift to Ciro.



Peter

I always promised Mama I'd protect Sarah, even if I was her little bro. It was a joke my fam always had—as if because I spent four extra minutes in the womb I was Sarah's little bro. Sarah's always been super smart and took to school like a duck to water. She got straight "A"'s so easily, signed up for all the clubs, and was always a teacher's favorite. That was less true for me.

Of course, compared to most other people, I'm still smart. But, next to Sarah, I've always just been her little bro, laggin' behind and tryin' to keep up. I s'ppose for others they might get mad or jealous or somethin', but I could never be mad with Sarah.

Even though adults always made me feel dumber, Sarah never saw me that way. She'd stay up late with me helpin' on homework and, later on, college apps. She never asked for anything in return. She just kept bein' supportive of me and cheerin' me on and helpin' me whenever she could. The least I could do was promise to always protect her.

My protectin' her started simple, back in 2nd grade. Although school had come easy for Sarah, social stuff was harder. She had a ton of church friends, but at school she was made fun of. One day, on the playground a group of boys was makin' fun of her for doin' extra math alone at recess 'stead of playin'. They kept bullyin' her 'til I could no longer take it. I finally flew off the handle and knocked a few to the ground. I got in trouble for it, but I didn't mind at all. Seein' Sarah happy and feeling safe was all that mattered to me. After that, Sarah and I had a code: she helped with school, I helped with social.

We were shocked when we both got into the same college. Course, Sarah got a full ride while I was a regular admit, but it meant the world to me. It felt like all the hard work and late nights had paid off. I finally got to come to college and be with my sister. But, once gettin' here, things started to get a ton harder for me.

Sarah no longer really needed me. It was awesome to watch her thrive. She made a bunch of friends at the Catholic Center and loved her classes. Meanwhile, school was really tough for me. In high school, if I studied enough and sometimes had Sarah's help, I got by pretty well. It wasn't as easy for me as for Sarah, but I still got "A's". But here, I constantly felt behind. Sarah kept tryin' to help me, but I just couldn't keep up. I'd tried to meet with Professor Dainotto and Ciro countless times, but they were always so unhelpful and cold. They always just told me to work harder. I started pulling all-nighters, takin' caffeine pills to get through the day. But I couldn't. I was close to a "D" in the class, which would mean I'd have to take a leave of absence

from school. If I took a leave of absence, I'd lose my financial aid and couldn't come to school anymore. I was right on the edge of a "C", so I tried talkin' to them about extra credit or anything to help me out, but they were not understanding at all. They told me if I just worked harder maybe I'd get it. I tried to tell them I was workin' as hard as I could, but they didn't care. My whole grade rested on the final exam.

I tried to keep all of that a secret from Sarah—I didn't want her to worry 'bout me. But she could tell somethin' was wrong. When I finally broke down and told her the truth about my strugglin', she insisted on helpin' me more than usual. At first it was nice and low stakes. She'd take an extra look at my essay and maybe change a sentence here or there. It wasn't enough though, and I was still strugglin' pretty bad. I kept failin' quizzes though, and I was getting' real worried about the final exam. That's when Sarah came up with the plan for passin' me the answers to the test. That's when Ciro caught her.

Yesterday, during the multiple-choice section of the final, Sarah copied her answers onto an extra piece of paper. The plan was for her to go to the bathroom and leave the answers in the trashcan by the men's room. Then, I'd go and grab the answers from there. I was real nervous 'bout it and tried to talk Sarah out of it. But she knew I'd never pass without her help. She insisted it was fine. She promised nothing bad would happen. Sarah'd do anything for me.

Ciro must've seen her copyin' the answers on an extra sheet and slippin' it up her sleeve. Sarah never even made it to the trashcan. When he asked to speak with her after class, my stomach had done somersaults. Everyone spilled out of the classroom after class. I took a lap, then came back and hid by the door. I could hear everythin' they said.

Ciro promised not to tell Professor Dainotto if Sarah would just confess who the answers were for. But, Sarah refused to give me up. Ciro kept pressurin' her, askin' her to just tell him.

Sarah finally broke into sobs, hollerin' that she would lose her merit scholarship if Ciro reported her. Ciro told her to just tell him who the answers were for. But Sarah still wouldn't cave. Ciro told her she had 'til the end of today's class to let him know. Otherwise, he'd tell Professor Dainotto.

I ran to the staircase before Sarah left the classroom, and caught up with her at the exit to the building. Sarah was bawlin', so I asked her what happened. She quickly wiped her tears and told me that Ciro caught her cheating. I was about to tell her I'd heard it all and that she should give me up, when she lied: *Ciro promised he won't tell anyone since this is my first mistake.*

I knew right then that she wasn't ever gonna give me up, even if I begged her. I knew she was lyin'. I knew she was willin' to risk everythin' to protect me.

Today was my turn to protect her.



Rory

At 3:27 p.m. Detectives Miller and Harver burst into the room. Their faces are resolved, determined. I realize I'm holding my breath, gripping onto Grace's hand as I watch them scan the room. The room is silent; time seems to freeze. Then, they walk to Emma.

"Emma Wallen, will you come with us?"

Emma gazes at them with terror. Her big blue eyes blink back tears as her mouth gapes open, searching for words.

"What...why?" She stammers. "I've already answered all your questions...I've told you all that I know." Her words lack confidence. Her breath is uneven. She's panicking.

"We just have more we'd like to ask you, if you'll just step outside."

“I don’t know anything more, please, I’m telling you!” The words tumble out of Emma’s mouth. They sound empty, false.

“Miss Wallen we really don’t want to do this here, please if you’ll just come with us,” Detective Miller reaches for her arm.

“I don’t want to go anywhere with you!” She sounds petulant now, like a little child forced to take a nap.

Detective Harver exhales deeply, pityingly, “Miss Wallen, we are placing you under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say…”

Detective Harver’s voice blurs to the background as the realization of what is happening occurs. Grace takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes. Ciro’s brow creases in concern and confusion. Vanessa claps her hand to her mouth. Everyone exchanges glances with one another. Emma was always so quiet, so shy. Maybe she seemed a little odd, but certainly not like a killer. I feel a wave of nausea wash over me. Something feels incredibly wrong.

Emma cries out, “Fine, yes, I left the apple. But I wouldn’t kill Ciro! I love him!” Detective Miller approaches her carefully, taking her arms behind her back and cuffing them carefully.

Detective Harver explains slowly, deliberately, “Emma, although we have still not found the apple core, we have found your DNA on a range of items left for Mr. Incoronato in the weeks leading up to his attempted murder. Please, I’m advising you to stay quiet until you can seek the counsel of a lawyer.”

The room breaks into commotion, people yelling at one another and crying.

Zach yells, “You’re crazy!” to Emma. Vanessa calls, “How could you?” Tears form in Sarah’s eyes. Peter looks terrified. Ciro’s mouth drops open, relief flooding his face.

The police escort Emma out of the room. Detective Harver stays for a moment.

“Obviously, today has been an incredibly stressful day. We are thankful for your time and dedication to your professor. Unfortunately, we must ask that you stay for just a little while longer while we finish some processing. Though we promise you will all be released soon.”

The door clicks shut behind Detective Harver. Silence falls over everyone. Zach buries his head in his hands. Grace rests her head on my shoulder. Ciro stands at the window, smoking his cigarette through the screen.

“AH!!! I’m so stupid!” A pained wail pierces through the thick silence. We all turn toward Peter. He runs his hands through his hair, pulling at the ends. “Oh my GOD!”

Sarah runs her arms up and down Peter’s, trying to soothe him. “Hey, it’s okay.” But his body won’t relent. He can’t stop crying.

“I’m so dumb!” Peter reaches in his bag, “I’ve gotta show the detectives. Sarah, I thought you tried to kill him. I wanted to protect you...the way you’ve always protected me!” He’s babbling now, his hand searching his bag. He pulls a half-eaten apple from his backpack, the once white meat now browning. “I heard everythin’ yesterday. I thought when the detectives mentioned the apple that it was from you. I knew that Ciro had threatened to tell Professor Dainotto today. I thought you’d snapped and poisoned him!”

Sarah’s face turns bright red. Rage fills her eyes, “You thought I could murder someone? What’s wrong with you?! Do you even know me?”

“I’m so sorry Sarah, I just wanted to protect you!” Snot drips down Peter’s face. His words break through heavy sobs. He waves the apple in the air, “I’m goin’ to go to the detectives now. I’m gonna tell them everythin’!”

Everyone is staring. The *tick* of the clock marks the time which feels to drag on forever. Vanessa chews at her nails. Zach taps his foot. Ciro smokes his cigarette. Grace raps her fingers on the table. Peter races toward the door. Suddenly, it dawns on me.

“Wait!”

Peter turns to me, incredulous.

“Your hands! Are they numb?” Peter looks at me confused, not understanding. “Aconite. The detectives said that aconite is numbing to the touch. But you touched the apple both when you took it from the crime scene and now—so did your hands ever grow numb?”

Peter still doesn’t understand. He stares at me blankly, but still answers, “No...but I don’t get what you’re sayin’. What do you mean?”

“Oh my god,” I say to myself. Ciro looks at me terrified. I race toward the door, “Detective Harver, Detective Miller! I know what happened! It wasn’t the apple—it was the vape! I’m sorry Ciro, but you killed Professor Dainotto!”



Rory

Detective Miller and Detective Harver sit across from me at the police station, the glow of fluorescents lighting up their faces. I tap my hands on my lap nervously. I don’t like the feeling of being in the hot seat. I know the detectives must be a little suspicious of me. I both claim to have all the answers and be unlinked to the crime. I’m sure they don’t trust that both are true at the same time.

Detective Miller finally starts, “First of all we want to thank you for the tipoff on the poison and checking the vape.” He pauses somewhat sheepishly, then admits, “We had

previously not considered searching Ciro's bag since we believed him to be the intended victim. Upon your tip, we found trace amounts of aconite in his briefcase."

Detective Harver cuts in, "It was pretty impressive that you were able to figure it all out. After checking the apple, we found no traces of aconite. And upon your suggestion, after testing the vape, we found aconite remains. How did you realize it was the vape?"

"Okay, look. Throughout the day, I kept thinking back on this morning over and over. Something seemed off—missing. This morning Professor Dainotto was eating his apple and smoking his vape. Because we thought he was choking in the final moments, we didn't even consider the vape as the murder weapon. Maybe we would've eventually. But once the apple core went missing, we all just assumed that the apple had to be the murder weapon."

Detective Harver nods for me to continue. "But that didn't make sense. Ciro had dumped all of Emma's previous gifts from before into the trash. Why would you try to kill someone with something they'd never eat? When Peter produced the apple without numbed hands, a switch flipped. I realized the apple wasn't poisoned at all.

"All semester, we've studied detective novels. I've learned one thing for sure—if you want to kill someone and get away with it, you should base it off of their habits. We all knew Professor Dainotto used his vape every day. It was the perfect murder weapon."

"But how did you narrow it to Ciro?" Detective Miller cuts in.

"Professor Dainotto was notorious for making his teaching assistants perform demeaning chores for him. That included Ciro getting Professor Dainotto's vape juice. He had the perfect opportunity to poison it with aconite. Not to mention the fact that today was everyone else's final exam. After today, we were all done. The only person who had to stick around was Ciro.

Detective Harver smiles, “Today after confronting Ciro with the evidence we found against him, he confessed to the murder. He said he resented Professor Dainotto for both his position as a professor as well as the way he handled the Emma situation.”

Detective Miller continues, “Ciro knew that if he took out Professor Dainotto, he would become a professor—meaning higher pay, a fulltime job, and no more cruel treatment.”

Detective Harver cuts in, “The Emma situation was the final straw. Ciro tried repeatedly to tell Professor Dainotto his concerns and discomfort, but Professor Dainotto wouldn’t listen. Especially given Professor Dainotto’s rumored history of sexual liaisons with students...something inside Ciro finally snapped.”

I murmur to myself, “Ciro felt he was doing everyone—including himself—a favor.”

Detective Miller nods, “Precisely.” He shifts in his seat, “Alright. I promise, we’re almost done here, but there’s a few loose ends we’d like your thoughts on.” He consults his notes, “Why did Peter take the apple core if he had nothing to do with the murder?”

“In the commotion, after Alex blamed the apple, Peter got nervous. He heard Sarah and Ciro fighting the day before. He wasn’t thinking straight and thought Sarah must have planned it. He was rash—he knew his time was limited. He grabbed the apple and stuffed it in his bag, thinking that he was saving his sister. Really, he was just protecting the murderer. He was too jumpy and out of it to notice something important—the apple had no numbing effect on his hands. When Peter pulled it out of his bag, that’s when I realized there was no way that the apple had been poisoned with aconite.”

The detectives nod with understanding. “One final question: why did Ciro give Professor Dainotto the apple, if it wasn’t poisoned?”

“Ciro didn’t expect Professor Dainotto to eat that apple. I mean, Ciro had received countless goodies from Emma and not once had Professor Dainotto eaten one—they’d always ended up in the trashcan. Of course, Ciro didn’t know that the apple would be his undoing.

“Without the apple, his plan would have worked perfectly. You said yourself, aconite is meant to mirror the effects of a heart attack—that’s exactly what Ciro intended. We would have tried to call 911, but found our phones locked away, and Professor Dainotto would have passed away without suspicion. It was only because of the apple that people thought he was choking—and Alex gave him mouth-to-mouth. And it’s only because of Alex getting sick that you ran a toxicology report looking for poisons.

“The plan quickly spiraled out of Ciro’s control. He had to think quick. Once the apple core was missing, Ciro pivoted. He thought maybe he could blame the mystery student for the whole mess, knowing that there was no evidence of whether the apple was laced with anything or not. So, he gave you Emma’s earlier notes so you could fingerprint them and ID her as the killer.”

Detective Harver and Miller look at me, incredulous. Detective Harver shakes her head, “You’re truly something special.”

I give a wry smile back, “I owe all my detective skills to Ciro. Maybe if he hadn’t been such a good teacher, he would’ve gotten away with killing Professor Dainotto.”