

FROM

Security

BY GINA WOHLSDORF



The maze is twenty-five hundred yards square. Destin Management Group planted hedges before they even began construction on the hotel, since plants can't be paid to hurry like contractors can. The hedges are twelve feet tall, lush, rounded smooth as sanded wood, and currently a dark black green. This is because the hotel is straight and monolithic, a stark white block on a flat stretch of Santa Barbara beach, the kind of building that inspires arguments about whether its simplistic appearance is a great leap forward in design, or whether a child with a crayon and a napkin could have drawn it while waiting for a five-dollar grilled cheese. It's visible from the Pacific Coast Highway but only just. The driveway is quite long so as to accommodate the hedge maze, which is the size of half a football field, and it is darkening, now, in the hotel's shadow.

In the maze's center, the dark red roses are immaculate, thanks to four hours of grooming and possibly because Sid, a freckled and obese landscape technician, is singing "O Danny Boy" in his surprisingly gentle tenor. He told the landscape architect that romantic serenades are the secret to growing flawless red roses; fragile flowers need to know they're loved. He also told the landscape architect he hated the hotel and would take the contract on the condition he never had to go inside. "It looks like a goddamn tooth. Like a tooth somebody yanked out and stuck on the beach." He pointed at the hotel and spat in its direction, unaware anyone was listening. "Like it'd bite you when you weren't watching close."

Manderley Resort does look somewhat like a tooth. Kinder metaphors like "jewel" and "main sail" are more prominent in the marketing materials. Ads in every medium have ensured that Manderley is the talk of its

demographic. Every third billboard in Los Angeles splashes a quote from *Travel* magazine about how tasteful, how opulent, and how special Manderley will be once it opens in August. It is now mid-July. More tasteful and more opulent invitations arrived at the households of LA's elite yesterday. It's going to be the Party of the Year. It says so on the invitation. Charles Destin — owner of Destin Management Group, owner of Manderley Resort — does not know how to throw a party that is anything but the Party of the Year.

In the maze, Sid's wrist beeps, signaling the end of his workday. He croons his final verse to the dry, rose-heavy air — "For you will *bend*" — snipping deep into a hedge so that a perfect bloom's absence isn't blight on the foliage. He slides his large clippers through a fat loop in his tool belt and takes a smaller pair from a thin loop, trimming the thorns from the rose's twelve-inch stem. Sid goes to the fountain at the center of the maze. Immense, made of stone, themed on fruit and hummingbirds, it sits dank and murky, its wide rim holding the detritus of Sid's labor: excised leaf clots and thorny branches overflowing a black bucket, and plastic sandwich bags bunched in a rusted silver lunch pail. Sid tweezes the rose between thumb and forefinger, setting it on the fountain's rim with exaggerated care. Using a *schmaltzy pianissimo* for the final strains of his ballad, he picks up the bucket, shuts his lunch pail and locks it, and departs from the maze's center, taking the first right turn in his favored route, which is effective but not remotely efficient.

On the nineteenth floor, Tessa is boarding the elevator. Its soft *ding* carries to the ballroom's ceiling, thirty feet above her, and bounces off the mural there: a sunset sky in muted pinks and oranges, playing host to a dozen subtle, and subtly modern, cherubim. Their fleshy faces all stare down instead of up. The ballroom's enormous west-facing windows trap the earliest phases of an actual sunset. Bars of light and shadow crosshatch tables set with china finer than bone. White napkins are folded in the shapes of swans, magnolias, seashells. Only a few are folded in the shape of napkins. A clutch of red roses serves as each table's centerpiece, and if a guest asks, staff is to confirm that the roses are from Manderley's garden, though they're not. Tessa placed a standing order with a florist last week to deliver fifty dozen every Monday.

She holds the elevator's glass doors open with her left boot and takes a final look at the southeast corner of the ballroom, where Jules is holding the

base of a twenty-foot ladder. Jules's husband and catering partner, Justin, is finishing the pyramid of a thousand champagne flutes they began at seven this morning. At the Party of the Year, Charles Destin intends to climb this ladder and pour a bottle of champagne, the fizz of which will overflow the glass at the apex, to the four glasses under it, and so on, into a thousand glasses. A thin plastic hose worms up through the pyramid. The hose runs to a storage room, where four large tanks of champagne will finish the work that Destin's pouring will start. Destin compared the illusion of the single bottle of Cristal filling a thousand glasses to the miracle of Jesus and his disciples feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. When Destin made this comparison, Tessa rolled her eyes so hard, one of her contact lenses fell out.

In the elevator, she presses the button for the eleventh floor. The glass doors slide shut, the nineteenth floor rises in front of her, and Tessa's posture slackens, an exhale showing in her shoulders. She's pretty, but not an obvious pretty. She tried modeling in college ("Because I'm a twig," she said once), and the photographers told her she only looked right in three-quarter profile, due to a face that's a little long, a chin that's weak, and cheekbones that don't protuberate. Tessa's the kind of person who latches onto criticism thankfully and treats compliments like insults. It's infuriating.

She makes a check mark on her clipboard as the eighteenth floor passes, and another as the seventeenth floor appears underneath her. The elevator is excruciatingly slow. This is because it is diamond shaped and made of glass. Every day at five o'clock, Tessa descends from the ballroom to the foyer, scrutinizing each floor for problems, and the process takes an hour. She usually walks the halls, but she doesn't have time for that today. Her view from the elevator consists of the long hallway that links the north and south wings of guest rooms — the middle stem of a letter *I* — and this doubtlessly grates on her, to check off the premises as passing inspection without inspecting them thoroughly. The front sheet of her clipboard shows a diagram of Manderley's layout with floors numbered one through twenty. The twentieth floor is shaded.

Tessa makes a check mark on her diagram for the sixteenth floor. She taps her boot impatiently. Before the fifteenth floor appears, she makes a check mark in its space. She pinches the bridge of her nose, her eyes falling shut

and staying that way, which means when the fifteenth floor does appear, and Vivica in the bright white hallway spies Tessa in the elevator and waves, Tessa doesn't see her. Vivica is carrying a purple bottle of carpet cleaner and a white cloth, which she flaps ineffectually until Tessa sinks out of sight. Vivica's mouth draws down in disappointment. She walks toward the north end of the hall, turns left, and sinks to her knees in the entryway of Room 1516. She sprays the carpet cleaner on a round, red stain the size of a quarter and curses it in a flurry of Spanish. She thinks an electrician cut himself. This is not what happened.

The Killer is on the seventh floor. He's washing his hands in Room 717, scrubbing vivid red from his nail beds and knuckles into the bathroom sink. He picks a fine, light hair from his shirt cuff, studies it with brief interest, and flicks it behind him. It lands on the white bath mat. The water in the sink is paling from a strange, swirled red orange to a shade that matches the gold leaf of the taps. A knife the length of an average man's forearm is drying on a white towel beside the basket of assorted guest soaps.

Tessa opens her eyes at the fourteenth floor, nods, and makes a firm check mark.

She waits, and makes another for the twelfth floor.

There is no thirteenth floor; Charles Destin is extremely superstitious.

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ISBN 978-1-61620-562-1

On Sale June 2016