

NO FURY

Vanessa inspected the number on the front of the envelope again. 743. The last digit was clearly a 3, not an 8. Definitely not her room. She read the message once more: "I dumped the package in the Everglades. Made some alligators a good lunch. I'll be up to see you at five. Have the money or you'll be making the 'gators a good dinner."

Her lips widened into the grin her mother used to call her hyena face. She tucked the note back into the envelope, which she secured in a tight grip. Time to get ready for dinner. The doors to one of the elevators opened, ejecting a gaggle of giggling teenaged girls barely tethered in skimpy bikinis. Even though it was February, the temperature was in the mid-70s,

typical of southeastern Florida. She could feel the story growing inside her.

Vanessa wheeled her luggage down the hall to her room. She kept her gaze forward and used her peripheral vision to notice that the door to 743 was ever so slightly ajar. Perhaps Chad was already in the room. She quickly tiptoed past, not wanting to be caught with the envelope in hand. Her heart leapt, but she forced a calm expression, like a python waiting for its target to inch closer.

Vanessa's bevy of dinner friends, sans two, were already seated at the restaurant table when she arrived, making a calculated entrance in her royal blue '70s throwback pantsuit, which she absolutely loved. She had purchased the matching earrings at a pawnshop one Saturday when out shopping with a good friend, who thought the lapis lazuli perfectly accented her eyes. To ensure undivided attention, she flashed her Cheshire smile to light up the room.

"How was your flight?" Jennifer, one of Vanessa's good friends who was looking fabulous with her new perm, pulled out the seat to her left. Grant, a well known and admired author originally from South Africa, sat to Jennifer's right.

Vanessa accepted the chair and glanced across at the two empty seats. "Good. Got in a little early." She checked her watch. A tad after six. Chad should be arriving shortly.

"I heard there was a little tiff," said Jennifer.

Vanessa observed the eye flick Jennifer gave toward the empty seats on the other side of the table and hid behind her smile. "I'm sure everyone's heard of their split by now. Chad and I had drinks in the lobby before I checked in."

"Are they coming?"

"He is, at least," replied Vanessa, using her eyes to forestall any further speculation.

Jennifer smirked. Vanessa gossiped with her about their fellow authors, keeping an unblocked view of the front door without seeming to. Patience. Stay calm. Breathe slowly.

The door opened. Vanessa discerned the concern written on Chad's face the moment their eyes met. But she had no intention of sharing such insight with anyone else there. Chad greeted everyone, and the mask he presented remained firmly attached. No one else seemed to have caught on.

"Where's Lucy?" asked the airhead Kinsey, who was sitting next to one of the empty seats. She was not a natural blonde. Vanessa suspected Kinsey envied her.

Vanessa noticed Jennifer's bemused glance but did not shift her gaze from Chad's face. His eyes quivered in fear. The visitor from the note had shown up.

Chad hesitated, imperceptibly enough for anyone who did not know. "I don't know. I thought she'd be here already." His eyes lowered.

"On the outs again." Grant spoke in his rich, deep voice. Vanessa absolutely loved his accent.

Chad ignored the comment, which was answer enough. Vanessa lightly flirted with him during dinner. Just enough to help calm him and to plant the suggestion of an evening rendezvous. No one would find that unusual, given their history.

She no longer needed the envelope and note. On her final stop to the powder room for the evening, Vanessa ripped both into tiny pieces and flushed them down the toilet. She fixed an errant strand of her hair and touched up her red lips before returning to the table.

Vanessa stopped by Chad's room during the night. They talked about old times and past regrets. Chad expressed his fears from earlier that evening, and Vanessa comforted him until he regained his confidence. They made love in the early hours. Vanessa made her search after he had fallen asleep and easily located her target. Chad was so predictable. She flipped through the contents in the envelope. He must have nearly

emptied his savings. She quietly exited 743, boldly leaving behind a garment where it could easily be seen, and padded down the hall to her room.

She thought she heard a pop an hour later, but it might have just been honeymooners enjoying a bottle of champagne. She savored a glass of wine in celebration of her triumph.

Vanessa did not see Chad during the morning and wondered how long it would be before anyone noticed. She joined the morning sessions on forensics and immersed her mind in the techniques the experts described. Which methods would be relevant to her story? If the sessions did not have set end times, she could have skipped lunch and not known it. Even her appetite was whet for gossip rather than food.

Vanessa convinced her group of friends to eat lunch at Bobby Bahia's, the hotel bar and grille. She wanted to stay close to witness the investigation. They grabbed a table out by the pool. A refreshing breeze kept the air clean and chilled Kinsey, who sulked because no one had wanted to join her off-site. If only the package had been Kinsey.

Shortly after the entrées were served, Vanessa noticed the anticipated police officer inside talking with the hostess. Their table was pointed out, and the officer came through the

glass door and approached. He spoke directly to Vanessa. She lightly dabbed at her lips to remove the moisture there.

"Yes, I know Chad," replied Vanessa. "We all do. Has he done something wrong?" She kept her stare vacant and slightly puzzled.

The officer flipped a page of a notebook he held in his hand. "When was the last time you saw him?"

Vanessa tried to appear appropriately ruffled. "Honestly, Officer, may I ask what this is about?"

"Please answer the question, ma'am."

Vanessa breathed out a bit heavier than usual. But not too heavily. No need to overdo it. "We had a few drinks in his room last night before going to bed." She looked around at her friends as if garnering support. Jennifer asked a question with her eyes, and Vanessa answered back in kind to remain quiet for now. "I really don't remember what time I left. It was late. Sometime after midnight."

The officer's lips tightened into a frown. He scribbled in his notebook. "Can you better pinpoint the time you left? It's important."

"He's dead, isn't he?" Kinsey's trembling hands hid her mouth, making her look like a frightened squirrel. Jennifer rolled her eyes. Vanessa wondered, yet again, how Kinsey had ever become a thriller writer.

"Officer." Vanessa decided it was time to take charge. "Why don't we go up to my room to talk?" She stood and gently guided him away from the table. "Jennifer, can you have them box up my lunch? I'll get it from you later."

The elevator stopped on the seventh floor, and Vanessa led him down the hall past the yellow crime scene tape barricading 743 to her room. She slipped the keycard into the lock and opened the door.

"Would you care for anything to drink while we talk?" Vanessa offered. She hung her purse on the back of the desk chair.

"Your room is not far from where the body was found." The officer remained standing as Vanessa sat in the cushioned chair beyond the bed. "What time did you say you left the room last night?"

"I don't remember a specific time. Like I said, I'm sure it was after midnight." Vanessa pasted a noncommittal smile on her face and waited for the next question.

The officer glanced at his notes. "How did you know Mr. Huntworth?"

"We were a couple for a time," said Vanessa. She glared so that her eyes glinted like a jaguar hypnotizing its prey. "But I'm sure you know that already."

Officer Not-About-To-Be-Outwitted caught her stare and smirked. "We found an article of clothing that I believed belongs to you in his room." Vanessa perceived that he was attempting his own mesmerizing trick. "Would you care to confirm this?"

Vanessa leaned back and draped her arms across the chair's rests. "I left a reminder for him from our night together." She raised her chin and puffed her lips. "I didn't want him to forget I had been there."

"And you weren't concerned about how his fiancée would react when she found out?"

Vanessa laughed slowly, enjoying the tangled web she traversed. "Turnabout is fair play, wouldn't you agree, Officer?"

The policeman kept his demeanor. Vanessa was impressed. He flipped back a few pages in his notebook. "Were you aware that a body of a woman was found this morning in the Everglades?"

Vanessa lowered her gaze and pretended to be bored. "No, I hadn't heard of any such thing? Is it important?"

"The identity has not been confirmed, but we believe the body to be that of Alaina Nguyen." His abrupt pause left the name hanging in the air.

Vanessa knew feigning surprise would not fool him. She chose to go with one of her famous snorts. "Did she fall in or was she pushed?"

The officer's eyebrows rose.

"Please, Officer, surely you must know by now I have no love for that woman." Vanessa inspected her nails. Let him guess at her emotional state. Most men she knew could not effectively read her. But she was not about to take chances with this man.

The policeman did not speak for a moment, but Vanessa chose to keep her eyes downward. She heard pages ruffling.

"When you left Mr. Huntworth last night, was he still alive?"

Vanessa raised her head to glare at him. "Very much so. Asleep but definitely alive."

"Did you see or hear anything out of the ordinary after you left?"

"Yes." Vanessa relaxed, sensing the interrogation nearing an end. "I thought I heard a pop, like a champagne cork popping off." She allowed tears to add a light sheen to her eyes. "I realize now, given that Chad is dead, and if he was shot, that I may have heard the gunshot." She wiped at her right eye. "I wish I could tell you more specifically at what time I heard the noise, but I was already in bed with my lights off and my eyes

closed. I didn't think it was anything more than honeymooners at the time."

Vanessa cleared her throat and grabbed a tissue to dry her eyes. The officer handed her a card and asked her to contact him if she remembered anything else that might help. She escorted him to the door and let him out.

Vanessa met with Jennifer for dinner after the afternoon sessions. Kinsey tagged along. Neither needed much convincing to stay at the hotel. News of Chad's murder and Alaina's possible death tethered them like bloodhounds on a case.

"Are you sure you're doing okay?" Jennifer asked for the umpteenth time that day. Vanessa appreciated the concern but was wearying from the attention.

"It's just simply awful what's happened," chimed in Kinsey. She held her hands clasped in front of her mouth. "I'm still reeling from the news. I can't imagine how it must be affecting you." She peered at Vanessa as if waiting for a handout. Whatever, Kinsey.

Vanessa sighed and put a faraway cast in her gaze. "It's hard to believe he's actually gone." She sat up straighter and faced Jennifer, allowing a gentle gratefulness to soften her countenance. "But I will be okay. Really."

Jennifer reached over and squeezed her hand. Vanessa put her other hand over Jennifer's, effectively blocking Kinsey from clutching at it.

The server set the check on the table, breaking the emotion. Vanessa rummaged in her purse and pulled a few bills from within an envelope.

"Where did you get all that?" asked Kinsey, being as nosy as ever.

Vanessa pasted a firm smile on her face. "I won a contest."

As they were walking through the lobby toward the elevators, Vanessa caught sight of the police officer, who had questioned her before, motioning to her while entering through the revolving door.

She handed her bag off to Jennifer. "Can you take this with you? I'll be up after we're done." She turned back to engage the officer. "I still don't remember anything else."

The officer strode forward until he was close enough to speak quietly and be understood. "We arrested a man by the name of Hunter Bradson in connection with the murders. He's confessed to both, but he says that Mr. Huntworth hired him to dispose of Ms. Nguyen's body." Vanessa waited patiently for him to continue. "Did you know anything about this?"

Vanessa answered, mindful to not let her gaze wander up and to the right and to not look down. "I had drinks with Chad when he first arrived here, and he made no mention of this."

"He says that he had some trouble collecting his fee. At first, Mr. Huntworth claimed that he never received a note concerning the fee, then when Bradson returned early this morning, Mr. Huntworth claimed he'd misplaced the cash he'd withdrawn to cover the fee." His eyes felt as if they were boring in to her. "We have confirmed that Mr. Huntworth made a withdrawal last night of an amount that matches this fee."

Vanessa did not avert her gaze. "I'm sorry, Officer, but Chad didn't mention any of this to me. Not yesterday or last night." She allowed her shoulders to relax. She was probably safe enough now.

The policeman's shoulders sagged. He shook his head and glanced away. "Have a good night."

Vanessa rode the elevator to the ninth floor and walked down the hall to the room where Jennifer was staying. She knocked and waited to be let in then followed Jennifer and sat in the chair offered to her.

Jennifer pulled at her hair like she always did when she felt uncomfortable. "I didn't realize you'd won a contest." Vanessa had always assumed Jennifer would reason it all out. She also knew Jennifer would never tell a soul.

"I did. Just not one for writing." Vanessa smirked and nodded toward her handbag, but Jennifer wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

"So it's over then." Jennifer shuddered.

Vanessa's nostrils flared and her eyes hardened to flint. "He never should have left me for her. I warned him that she'd be the death of him."

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