

**WHODUNNIT?**

**Murder in Mystery Manor**

# **WHODUNNIT?**

## **Murder in Mystery Manor**

**Anthony E. Zuiker**

**H Y P E R I O N**

New York

Copyright © 2013 Greengrass Productions, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without the written permission of the Publisher. Printed in the United States of America. For information address Hyperion, 1500 Broadway, New York, New York 10036.

FIRST EDITION

To MICHELLE,  
my wife and my muse

Murder is always a mistake—  
one should never do anything  
one cannot talk about after dinner.

—*Oscar Wilde*

# CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: <b>The New Caretaker</b>	1
CHAPTER 2: <b>The Westlake Estate</b>	4
CHAPTER 3: <b>The Guests Arrive</b>	11
CHAPTER 4: <b>The Mansion</b>	23
CHAPTER 5: <b>The Game Begins</b>	31
CHAPTER 6: <b>The Rules</b>	35
CHAPTER 7: <b>Shot Through the Heart</b>	41
CHAPTER 8: <b>Grilled</b>	46
CHAPTER 9: <b>Secret Admirer</b>	50
CHAPTER 10: <b>A Literal Smoking Gun</b>	54
CHAPTER 11: <b>Scared or Spared</b>	61
CHAPTER 12: <b>Hung Out to Dry</b>	67
CHAPTER 13: <b>The Second Victim</b>	72
CHAPTER 14: <b>The West Lake Noose</b>	75
CHAPTER 15: <b>Indecent Exposure</b>	78
CHAPTER 16: <b>Cutting the Cord</b>	83

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER 17: <b>Cracking Flags</b>	88
CHAPTER 18: <b>A Much-Needed Break</b>	96
CHAPTER 19: <b>Qing Ding Pearl</b>	102
CHAPTER 20: <b>The Third Victim</b>	107
CHAPTER 21: <b>Stabbing Westward</b>	109
CHAPTER 22: <b>Lowered Expectations</b>	112
CHAPTER 23: <b>Spoiled Dinner</b>	115
CHAPTER 24: <b>Good Fortune</b>	118
CHAPTER 25: <b>Worst to First</b>	125
CHAPTER 26: <b>Kick the Bucket Seats</b>	130
CHAPTER 27: <b>The Fourth and Fifth Victims</b>	132
CHAPTER 28: <b>A Weightless Passenger</b>	135
CHAPTER 29: <b>CSI Saves the Day</b>	138
CHAPTER 30: <b>Autopilot</b>	141
CHAPTER 31: <b>They Bought the Ant Farm</b>	144
CHAPTER 32: <b>Reward</b>	150
CHAPTER 33: <b>Human Popsicle</b>	155
CHAPTER 34: <b>The Sixth Victim</b>	157
CHAPTER 35: <b>Winter Wonderland</b>	159
CHAPTER 36: <b>Human Ice Cubes</b>	163
CHAPTER 37: <b>No Habla Español</b>	166
CHAPTER 38: <b>The Maze</b>	172
CHAPTER 39: <b>Before I Melt</b>	177
CHAPTER 40: <b>The Accusation</b>	182
CHAPTER 41: <b>Jaws versus the Gimp</b>	187
CHAPTER 42: <b>The Seventh Victim</b>	190

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER 43: <b>The Floater</b>	192
CHAPTER 44: <b>Jaws's Last Meal</b>	195
CHAPTER 45: <b>The Power of Question</b>	201
CHAPTER 46: <b>354 Species</b>	208
CHAPTER 47: <b>Ties Are for Soccer and Suits</b>	212
CHAPTER 48: <b>Endgame</b>	217
CHAPTER 49: <b>The Eighth and Ninth Victims</b>	220
CHAPTER 50: <b>Crime Scene</b>	225
CHAPTER 51: <b>Morgue</b>	228
CHAPTER 52: <b>Last Known Whereabouts</b>	231
CHAPTER 53: <b>The Treasure Hunt</b>	233
CHAPTER 54: <b>Whodunnit?</b>	236
CHAPTER 55: <b>No Escape</b>	242
CHAPTER 56: <b>The Curse</b>	245
<b>Epilogue</b>	248
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	251

**WHODUNNIT?**

**Murder in Mystery Manor**

## CHAPTER 1

---

### THE NEW CARETAKER

As the taxi drove up the long gravel driveway leading toward the mansion at the center of the Westlake Estate, the lone passenger adjusted his tie and tried to ignore the nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach telling him that he was making the biggest mistake of his life. *Of course this is the right thing to do*, he told himself again and again on the seemingly endless drive from the iron gates at the entrance to the mansion itself. As a man with considerable training and experience in his field, he'd already been making a comfortable living. But with a significantly higher salary, this new opportunity had been simply impossible to pass up.

It had almost seemed too good to be true, honestly. Were it not for the \$5,000 check he'd received just to consider the job offer, he would have concluded as much and written the whole thing off as a joke without giving it a second thought. But the check and the offer had both turned out to be quite real.

The passenger examined his faint reflection in the window as the taxi curved around a massive marble fountain in

front of the mansion. Years of serving others had actually been surprisingly kind to the man's handsome face. His gray-streaked black hair and the faint creases that appeared at the corners of his eyes when he smiled were the only real evidence of the man's true age.

The taxi stopped and the passenger held out \$40 to the cabdriver.

"It's already been taken care of," the driver said.

"Very well then," the passenger said, his smooth English accent and strict, formal diction making him sound more like the owner of the estate than its new caretaker.

"Do you need help with your bags?" the cabdriver asked.

"No, that's quite all right, thank you," the passenger replied as he opened his door.

He held his entire life in two large suitcases as he stood and faced the mansion's front entrance. The taxi's tires crunched over the gravel as it pulled away behind him. The man waited there, staring at the mansion for several moments before moving. Once again, he had to fight off the strange notion that he was getting himself involved in something he would later regret. Something that he wouldn't ever be able to escape.

But he dismissed that idea for the nonsense it likely was. There was a finality to his dismissal this time. Such notions were, of course, preposterous. He was a man of logic and reason, after all. And logic said that this was merely another head butler position on a new estate, nothing more. One that came with some unusual employment terms and stipulations, true. But just the same, he was being well compensated for such aversions to the norm, so it evened out.

With a clear head, the man ascended the massive granite stairs that led to the mansion's front doors. He set down his suitcases and pressed the doorbell. The sound of the chimes

coming from behind the heavy set of oak doors fell short of matching the grandiose presence of the mansion itself, but only slightly.

After just a few short moments, the left door opened and the man was face-to-face with a young woman, perhaps thirty, dressed in a conservative and traditional maid uniform. She was pretty in a way that most people would miss if they did not have a reason to look twice.

“You must be Mr. Giles,” she said.

“Please, madam, call me Giles.”

“Well, Giles, please come in,” she said, stepping aside. “I will show you to the head butler’s living quarters.”

“Very well,” Giles said as he picked up his suitcases and entered the huge manor at the heart of the Westlake Estate.

## CHAPTER 2

---

### THE WESTLAKE ESTATE

Giles was already quite familiar with the Westlake Estate upon his arrival, despite having never been there before. He'd been sent numerous maps of the estate and its various buildings by his employer several weeks in advance. And he'd studied them carefully in the days leading up to the start of his employment.

After all, it would be somewhat difficult to step in as acting estate manager if he wasn't already well acquainted with the grounds.

The estate was, simply put, massive. In fact, it was the single largest estate that Giles had ever worked on. Or even seen for that matter. And he'd worked for royalty, powerful politicians, and international celebrities of the highest fame and fortune.

The estate grounds covered almost forty acres of land. A huge, well-manicured lawn surrounded the mansion. A modest lake, West Lake to be precise, sat one hundred yards east of the mansion, complete with two boathouses and three large docks. Forest extended out beyond the lake and toward the outskirts of the estate grounds on all sides.

A large garden spilled out from the back of the mansion adjacent to a sprawling granite-and-slate patio with nine sets of stone tables and benches, several grilling stations, and a recreational gaming house. A lush pool surrounded by palm trees and other assorted tropical plants dominated the center of the patio area. Behind it stood a two-story pool house that most people would have been proud to call their permanent residence.

Elsewhere, sprinkled throughout the estate grounds, one could find a stable stocked with horses from some of the country's finest breeders; a large, detached garage with enough room to house at least thirty-five automobiles; a small, now-defunct winery; and a well-manicured hedge maze.

Tucked away behind the mansion, almost as if the estate were embarrassed by its existence, stood a modest three-story structure that would provide housing to the estate's various employees when fully staffed. At the moment, however, the staff house remained mostly vacant. In Giles's opinion, the Westlake Estate was grossly, almost negligently understaffed, given its size and scope. At present, the staff consisted of two chefs, five maids, one stableboy, one groundskeeper, four porters or male servants, and one maintenance superintendent. And now, of course, Giles himself. At full capacity, the estate would have required at least forty live-in employees, if not more.

But Giles had been warned about the estate's reduced staff when he'd been offered the job. It was one of the reasons his new salary was considerably higher than that which he had previously earned. Not told in person, though. Giles had yet to meet his employer face-to-face. It was another of the more unusual details surrounding Giles's new employment. In fact, hardly any of the details surrounding the shift into his new circumstances were usual at all.

For the past seven years, Giles had been the head butler and house manager in charge of the staff and affairs at a large estate just north of San Diego. The owner, Mr. Agins, had made the majority of his wealth in real estate and then later multiplied his fortune by trading stock options in the 1990s. That is, he'd hired a team of energetic and talented young college graduates to trade options with his money. But the point is that he'd certainly made a lot of money over the years. Enough to buy a large estate on prime Southern California beachfront.

Mr. Agins had always been a fair, if not somewhat detached, employer. Which had made the decision to leave especially difficult. Giles had carved out a relatively comfortable routine in seven years of working for Mr. Agins on his estate. Giles had even managed to get the rest of the staff performing at, or at least near, his own standards, which was a difficult enough challenge to begin with.

Having the highest of standards for personal service and professionalism was one of the things drilled into the graduates of the world's foremost school for butlers. Not that Giles had especially needed that portion of his training. Growing up in a working-class family in Wales, Giles had always possessed higher standards than his surroundings. He'd always yearned to not only improve his own life—to rise up above where he'd been raised and what he knew—but to also do the same for others around him. He always did his best to help around the house, and even attempted to instill that same drive and attention to detail in his younger siblings while acting as their interim father figure when their real father passed away at a relatively young age.

But Giles's top-notch domestic service training was invaluable just the same, no doubt. There was much more to being a butler, an excellent butler at that, than merely pos-

sessing attention to detail and high standards of excellence in service. He was also trained in all manner of administrative duties, crisis management, and seasonal grounds and residential upkeep, among a vast list of other functions. To merely say his training was extensive would not do it justice.

Upon graduation, Giles had traveled the world, working for some of the most powerful and wealthy families in six countries. After more than fifteen years of service abroad, he eventually found himself back in the United States, working for Mr. Agins. It was a smaller estate and smaller job than he'd grown accustomed to. Prior to working for Mr. Agins, he'd been employed on an estate owned by a member of the French royal family.

But Mr. Agins had offered a very competitive salary, good benefits, and the opportunity to run every aspect of his estate, down to the groundskeeping and even the care of the family pets. It was something that Giles had long wanted to do, run an estate in its entirety from top to bottom. It was something the larger, more affluent estates of royalty would never be able to offer due to their sheer size. Additionally, Giles had always been drawn to the United States for some reason he couldn't quite explain. It was almost as if there was an unnatural quality to the dichotomy of a traditional British-style butler operating and existing on American estates that Giles quite liked.

So Giles had accepted the job working for Mr. Agins. And he'd performed quite well, running the entirety of Agins's eight-acre estate for the past seven years. Giles would have perhaps even been quite happy to have stayed there until his retirement. But then one Monday in late March, he'd gotten a letter that changed everything.

It had arrived in an obviously expensive envelope made of thick paper stock and stamped with the official Westlake

Estate emblem. Giles did not get much mail addressed to him directly, especially not from random estates with which he'd never before been associated. Butlers were not the sort to be poached from employers regularly. Mobility within the profession usually took action on the part of the butler, not potential employers.

Therefore Giles had already known this was no ordinary letter before he'd even opened it. But the \$5,000 cashier's check inside, made out to Arthur Giles, certainly cemented that fact. The check was accompanied by a typed, two-page letter on similarly expensive paper—the kind of paper so richly textured that one might suspect it had been woven by hand individually, given the kind of artisanal attention normally reserved for custom-made furniture. The letter, printed on official Westlake Estate letterhead, read as such:

Dear Mr. Giles,

I do hope this letter has found you well. I wish to start by apologizing for the unusual nature of this letter and what is to follow. However, it is necessary in order to serve both of our purposes in kind. For starters, I wish to remain anonymous for the duration of this transaction. In due time, we will meet face-to-face and get to know each other on a more authentic and personal level, but for now, you may simply regard me as "X."

Please find enclosed a check in the amount of \$5,000, payable to yourself, one Mr. Arthur Giles originally of Newport, Wales. This check is yours to redeem and keep regardless of your response to this letter. I merely offer it as a token of appreciation for your time.

## WHODUNNIT? MURDER IN MYSTERY MANOR

I am writing you in the present to offer you a job. I would like you to become the new house manager of my estate. This will be no ordinary butler position, however. First, I ask that you sign a contract committing you to my service for the duration of your life, or until you reach the age of seventy, whichever occurs first. Second, some rather unusual events may befall the estate from time to time. Third, the estate shall be functioning with a reduced staff for much of your service. There are many more details to discuss, of course, but I have taken enough of your time for now.

Were you to accept the position of butler at the Westlake Estate, you would indeed be well compensated for the unusual nature and length of your employment. Your salary would start at \$150,000 annually, plus a healthy benefits package. It is a hefty price, no doubt, but I desire a butler with experience, diplomacy, and decorum. And that, my sources tell me, would be you, Mr. Giles.

Should you have an interest in this position, please reply posthaste via US mail to the address above. This offer of employment will only be valid until April 8. I do hope to hear from you soon.

Warm regards,

X

**After exchanging a few more letters with X, discussing the details further, and then giving the matter serious and deliberate consideration, Giles eventually accepted the offer. How could he not, after all? He had always been ambitious and hardworking, and he could not pass up the opportunity to become one of the most successful individuals in his field.**

Giles's acceptance was followed shortly thereafter by a contract, some typical employment paperwork, and a modest signing bonus of \$7,000, allowing him to get his affairs in order as soon as possible. He was then given the official street address of the estate and a start date. And then nothing more.

Now here he was on day one of his employment. Serving an empty mansion. And in charge of a small house staff with no one to cater to. Of course, unbeknownst to Giles, that would all soon change.

In the most unusual and horrifying of ways.

## CHAPTER 3

---

### THE GUESTS ARRIVE

Giles watched from the top of the granite stairs in front of the mansion as, one by one, the limousines arrived, circling the huge marble fountain carefully. The long black cars looked out of place, almost barbaric in some strange way, in front of such an ornate manor.

As the first limousine stopped by the stairs, Giles rested his hand on the small note card in his pocket. It contained the opening speech he was to give to the guests upon their arrival. X's latest set of instructions had been quite clear that he was to wait until every last one of the ten guests had arrived before addressing them with the information on the card.

Giles ran his finger along the card, but then withdrew his hand and placed it behind his back, straightening his posture. He would not need to reference it, after all. He'd memorized the contents of the card the night before and had rehearsed it several times that morning. Giles typically was not the sort to rehearse speeches or welcome messages, but given that this was his first official interaction as acting head butler with real, live guests of the Westlake Estate, he wanted to ensure that it went as smoothly as possible.

One week after his employment at the estate began, Giles had received notice of the guests' impending arrival. It had been his first correspondence from X since the message relaying his official start date.

Giles had already begun to feel uneasy again about his new employment situation even before that first set of instructions arrived. For one, there was no cell phone service anywhere on the estate grounds. Not that Giles was particularly attached to his phone in a typical modern way, but just the same, it had served as his primary link to the outside world for a good portion of his years as a live-in butler. And two, there was also no working Internet service that Giles could find anywhere on the estate grounds. The only links to the outside world were a small network of telephone landlines and the regular US Postal Service. This information had not been relayed to Giles prior to his employment, and he did not consider it to be a minor detail worthy of a mere oversight. He viewed X's withholding of this information as particularly manipulative and perhaps even outwardly deceptive. Which, in Giles's experience, did not bode well for their future interactions.

But beyond that, Giles's first and second set of instructions from X had also carried with them the return of that sinking feeling in his stomach. The one that he'd had to suppress in the taxi on the way there. The one that had told him he'd made the biggest mistake of his life by accepting this job.

The first correspondence from X had come via mail, again on estate letterhead. The message was simple, direct, and to the point:

Dear Giles,

Ten guests will be arriving in seven days. Please prepare the estate accordingly for their arrival. I've in-

cluded a short dossier for each guest, as well as which room I have designated for him or her. Also enclosed is a menu for the week of their stay. You will receive further instructions the day before their arrival.

Best wishes,  
X

**The dossiers were short, listing only very basic information for each guest, such as job, age, and hometown.** They would all be staying in estate suites with attached bathrooms located on the third and fourth floors of the mansion. Giles didn't think much about the first message and simply acted accordingly, ensuring that the house staff cleaned and prepared the suites, as well as placing food orders to accommodate the menu set by X.

But the second set of instructions, the ones that had come the day before the guests were scheduled to arrive, had completely unnerved Giles. In truth, it had done quite a bit more than merely unnerve him. It was actually the precise moment in which Giles knew for certain that he was doomed.

Dear Giles,

Our ten guests arrive tomorrow. I do hope that you've prepared the estate as such. My guests believe that they've won a sweepstakes contest that they entered online several weeks ago. They will arrive under the pretenses of having won a "Live Like a Billionaire for a Week" getaway vacation package. What they don't know is that I have something much more fun in store for them.

They will all be playing a game. A game with the

highest of stakes. You and the other staff will be the administrators, the curators or referees, of this game. You and your staff must adhere to my every instruction. It is imperative. The staff has been given an applicable variation of this same message. Any attempt to deviate from my instructions, or escape estate grounds, or warn the guests, will result in your immediate death, as well as the deaths of your closest loved ones.

Unfortunately, Mr. Giles, this is no joke. As much as it may seem like a hoax, I assure you that I am deadly serious. Escape is impossible. The gates surrounding the estate grounds have all been electrified with a current exceeding 60,000 volts, more than enough to kill a person instantly.

You will also find enclosed instructions for the guests upon their arrival. Please wait until all ten have arrived before relaying the welcome message. Additionally, you will find an envelope containing the instructions for the game itself. You are to read this to them once the game begins. You will know the correct time to do this when it arrives. Opening the envelope early will not bode well for you, Giles, so I advise you to not entertain such thoughts.

But fear not, dear sir, for if you do your job well and follow my instructions, you will not be harmed. In fact, if you perform your duties well enough, you may even get a bonus out of this!

Regards,  
X

Giles's first instinct after reading this message had been to laugh. But once he started entertaining the thought that it might actually be real, his second impulse had been to run.

To gather his things and head for the exit. He looked around the foyer, where he'd opened and read the letter.

An antique, brass-plated African Blackwood telephone sat on an imported, handcrafted Carpathian elm table by the front door. There were still the landlines, Giles realized. He'd used this very phone just a week ago to call in the food order for the guests' stay. He took two quick steps toward the phone and picked up the receiver.

No dial tone. Nothing but silence.

Of course, he should have known better. X had obviously cut the telephone service. This whole thing had clearly been carefully planned, so why would X make such a simple oversight as to leave the phone lines intact? The entire estate was now completely cut off from the outside world.

Just then, Patricia, one of the senior maids on staff, rushed past Giles, her copy of the letter clutched in her hand. Tears streaked down her face as she burst out the mansion's front doors. Giles didn't react at first. He almost couldn't. He was still in shock himself.

But then he saw Patricia running down the gravel driveway. He knew she was headed for the front gate. And he knew right then that this was no joke and that he had to stop her.

He rushed out the door and ran after her.

"Patricia, my dear!" he called out. "Please, don't!"

But she didn't listen. She just kept running. Giles followed her, gaining ground, but not fast enough. She arrived at the iron front gates and reached out toward the manual release lever.

"No!" Giles yelled, but he was too late. Although she likely wouldn't have listened to him either way.

As soon as her hand made contact with the iron gate, there was a crack of electricity. An arc of blue light fired

around her arm, and sparks flared out on all sides, almost as if the gate was spitting them out of some unseen mouth.

Patricia flew through the air back toward Giles, covering the fifteen feet between them with remarkable speed. He sidestepped her flight path and she landed on the gravel with a lifeless thud that he would never forget.

He didn't need to be a coroner to see right away that she was dead. Her vacant stare and the smell of burning flesh, something Giles had never smelled before, and certainly never wanted to smell again, told him as much. Her copy of X's letter was still clutched tightly in her lifeless, steaming hand.

That had been almost exactly twenty-four hours before the first guest's limousine graced the driveway. Patricia's body had since been cleared away and disposed of by the estate maintenance super a short time later. It had been a most effective warning to the rest of the staff, including Giles: this was indeed deadly serious. Their only chance for survival was to play along and do as they were instructed. So that's what they collectively decided to do. Giles had called a meeting in the foyer a short time later. If they were going to do this, they all needed to be on board and be committed to X's vision. It was clearly their only way out alive.

As for the guests, Giles could only imagine what sorts of horrors X had in store for them.

And now here they were, arriving right on schedule. The first limousine stopped and the driver hurried around to the side facing the mansion. He opened the back passenger door and a tan, lean leg as long and sleek as the Willis Tower emerged. A red high heel stabbed at the gravel beneath the car with a kind of definitive purpose that Giles would have been drawn to if he wasn't currently busy working for an apparent psychopath.

The limo driver shifted uncomfortably next to the open door, likely wondering how long was too long to stand there and stare at the leg.

Then the passenger's hand emerged. The driver grabbed it and helped her out of the car, before moving around to the trunk for her luggage.

The woman wore a small but somehow still classy red dress. It was not the sort of outfit Giles would have assumed made for comfortable travel. He recognized her from the dossier.

Sophia Evans, 34, unemployed, the housewife of a renowned plastic surgeon. Giles wondered what had been appealing enough to enter a contest to live like a billionaire for a week when she was surely already a millionaire herself, even if only through marriage. But, as Giles well knew, there was no limit to the very human desire for *more*. He spent his career catering to the needs of people for whom the word "enough" simply did not exist.

In person, Mrs. Evans was tall, trim, and sculpted in a way that can only be paid for. Her face was striking, more gorgeous at first glance than it was in reality, but still thoroughly seductive nonetheless. She had an air of expectancy about her, as if she'd been doted on by everyone her whole life in both big and small moments alike, and had no regrets or misgivings about that.

"Welcome, Mrs. Evans," Giles said. "Allow me."

He grabbed her two suitcases as the limo pulled away. He handed them to one of the estate's porters currently on staff.

"Take these to Mrs. Evans's room, please," Giles said.

The porter nodded and hurried inside the house, struggling with the weight of two full-sized Louis Vuitton suitcases packed to capacity.

“Please wait here, Mrs. Evans, while the other guests arrive,” Giles said. “I will have Gabrielle out shortly with some refreshments.”

The guests arrived one after the other in matching black limousines. Giles recognized each of them from their dossiers.

Emily Moreland, 23, college student pursuing a dual major in business and marketing. She was cute, if not pretty. She had muted, shoulder-length blond hair and wore jeans and a green bird-print blouse. She was quick to smile, quicker to laugh, and wasted no time in making easy conversation with the other guests once they began arriving.

Thomas Gatling, 32, electrical engineer. He was tall and thin with an already receding hairline and glasses with frames that he likely hadn’t updated in a decade or more. He wore a short-sleeved white dress shirt, no tie, tucked into faded tan pants with black dress shoes. He seemed shy and completely unable to strike up a conversation on his own, only talking when asked a direct question. And even then, there was a subtle, but awkward, flailing to his responses.

Frank Ponder, 66, retired deputy sheriff. He wasn’t particularly tall, but he was solid, almost imposing. He had the look of a man who had spent his entire life working hard and found it difficult to relax for even an hour, let alone a full day or week. Even still, he seemed personable enough, despite the fact that Giles did not see him smile once as they waited for the rest of the guests.

Parker Sharpe, 28, former NCAA Division I starting quarterback, now a financial analyst. He clearly still worked out as if he played organized football and didn’t attempt to hide it. He wore tailored gray wool pants and a light blue dress shirt that hugged him in all the right places. He had an easy smile with dimples that were impossible to miss. It was

no surprise that he always had someone to talk to from the moment he arrived. Even Giles would admit that he had an almost magnetic quality about him.

Bryce Kellerman, 20, college dropout, currently unemployed and living with his parents. He wore tight jeans with a pouf of red boxers sticking out from the absurdly low waistline in the back. His green T-shirt bore an artistic print of a panda on the front. Even underneath a black-and-white baseball hat with a nearly straight brim, his relief was clearly evident when he spotted Emily, someone else near his own age. He gravitated toward her almost immediately.

David Cho, 51, patent attorney. He dressed like you might expect for an attorney. He wore a gray suit and blue shirt with no tie and black loafers. He seemed particularly excited to be there and wasted no time bypassing the trays of champagne flutes, instead ordering a martini. He was already working on finishing his second by the time the tenth guest arrived.

Jacqueline Bossart, 68, retired nurse, mother of five, and grandmother of nine more. She wore a navy-blue sundress and a straw hat with a matching blue ribbon. Jacqueline appeared to be the sort of woman who got the most out of life, wasting no time lighting a cigarette upon stepping out of the limousine. She had a vibrant energy, even at 68, and her face almost told a story in itself, having so much character along with a whole lifetime of pain and joy tucked behind her eyes. Not that she had any problems spinning lengthy and loud stories verbally, that is. Her thunderous, raspy laugh could be heard accentuating conversations all across the front steps and probably even all the way out near the middle of West Lake.

Darrel Gleason, 38, high school science teacher and head junior varsity football coach. Darrel looked like a typical

coach. He arrived wearing USC athletic mesh shorts and a matching cardinal USC T-shirt. He was a big man with the build of a former high school athlete who had since consumed about 1,260 beers too many. His gut heaved, and he perspired as if it were 98 degrees instead of a more pleasant 76. But he also seemed oddly jovial, in a brutish sort of way that Giles commonly associated with most American sports.

The last guest to arrive was Guadalupe Ferrara, 39, account executive at a household name cosmetics retailer. She stepped out of the limo in a formal, practiced way. As if she were going to work, rather than starting a weeklong vacation package she'd won in a contest. She was even dressed for work in an expensive gray suit with her hair pulled back into a professional, no-frills bun. She was the only guest who refused a drink when offered, and as soon as the porter had taken her bags inside, she faced Giles as if she were anxious to get down to discussing a business deal of some sort.

Once the last limousine had pulled away, Giles cleared his throat. All the guests, aside from Guadalupe, were now in several small groups engaged in excited conversation with one another. He once again brushed the card in his pocket, but again resisted taking it out to read the message he'd already memorized. As odd and terrifying as this experience had become, he was still a professional and intended to do his job as such.

"Welcome, guests!" Giles said, not shouting, but projecting his voice in a trained way that quickly silenced the ten visitors. "As you know, you've all won the Live Like a Billionaire for a Week Sweepstakes. Congratulations. What you don't know is that you're also here to play a game."

This news was met with murmurs from the ten guests. Most seemed intrigued, and a few even excited. Only Guadalupe, who remained expressionless, and Frank, the now-

scowling retired sheriff, seemed less than thrilled with this revelation.

“The very nature of this game,” Giles continued, “some of you will like, and others most certainly will not. The rules and object of this game will become apparent in due time. But for now, please, let us show you to your rooms so that you may get unpacked and familiarized with the mansion itself. You have four hours to explore the grounds, relax, and enjoy the surroundings.

“As some of you may have noticed, your cellular devices will not work here. This is in accordance to the prize package waivers you all signed before you came. Our host wants to simulate a true vacation *getaway* experience, and as such there is also no Internet or landline telephone service available to you. Fear not, the staff does have access to landlines in the event of an emergency, and your families were all given the number to reach us here should they have an emergency of some sort, yes?”

He paused for questions, but there were none. All of this information had been laid out to them before they accepted the prize package, so none of this should have been a surprise to the guests.

“Good,” Giles continued. “Well then, dinner will be served this evening at seven P.M. sharp in the formal dining room, which is located just off the main foyer. Don’t be late, and dress appropriately for a celebratory dinner. After all, you’ve won tickets to the most exciting week of your lives!”

As Giles finished his welcome speech, what he didn’t and couldn’t have known that afternoon was that his employer, X, had heard the whole thing. Not only had X heard the speech, but X had been there in person, present among the ten guests, listening along with the rest of them. Because not only had ten guests arrived at the Westlake Estate that

afternoon, but its owner and host was one of those ten.

And X had big plans for the week ahead. Big and exciting plans indeed. Plans that involved life and death, dismemberments and decapitations, explosions, and all other sorts of fun and games.

Fun and games that would begin that very same night.

## CHAPTER 4

---

# THE MANSION

**F**or the next several hours, the ten guests explored the mansion. Almost tentatively, at first. Quietly. But as more drinks were delivered by the waitstaff, and they grew accustomed to the idea that this was, indeed, their new home for the next week, they grew louder, more excited, and almost probing in their exploration of the Westlake Estate mansion.

As the guests moved throughout the manor, they found room after endless room of lavish style and grandeur. It was the sort of lifestyle that most people only dreamed of.

The main foyer at the front entrance was a grand sight in itself. Upon entering the mansion's double doors, the guests first saw the massive dual staircases flanking an authentic, ancient Greek statue. The stairs spiraled up on each side to a second floor hallway, which overlooked the foyer behind polished marble banisters.

In the various mansion rooms, guests found ornately framed original artwork, rugs more expensive than most cars, and custom-built mahogany furniture. Some rooms had more modern amenities and styling, but most were

fashioned in a more classical way with many early European influences.

Several of the guests found their way out to the lush gardens and then to the adjacent patio. Sophia took off her heels and sat at the pool's edge, allowing her long legs to glide back and forth in the clear water as she sipped on another flute of Cristal. David, the middle-aged lawyer, flanked her on one side, standing over her nervously. He attempted to seem more interested in her husband and two kids (both pregnancies via surrogate, of course), rather than in her long legs and tight dress.

"Yeah, definitely, my kids love soccer, too," he said lamely as his gaze faltered.

Sophia didn't say anything back. She just let him soak up the view. It was hard to blame him, after all. She interacted with men of his type all the time. Bored at home, bored with their wives, bored at work. She excited them, and she loved it.

Just the same, she definitely wasn't interested in Mr. Cho. At least not in that way. He simply was not her type, aside from his wealth. But her husband already had money, so what good was that alone in another man? Parker was the one guest who had definitely caught her eye, but for now he was off gallivanting with the two younger people. So, as it were, she let David think she might be interested in him. After all, any attention that he devoted to her still felt good, even if the bearer of it was a complete bore.

Frank and Thomas had wandered into the trophy room. Mounted animal heads lined the walls on all sides. There were deer, a mountain lion, a gazelle, a pair of tigers, and even an elephant's head. A bearskin rug sprawled across the floor in front of a massive fireplace.

Frank sat on a red velvet couch beneath a wall of tro-

phies. He gazed up at a massive swordfish hanging from chains above him. Then he grinned for the first time since he'd arrived. The smile looked somewhat awkward on the ex-sheriff's naturally stern face.

"I like this couch," he said, shifting in it purposefully. "It's way more comfortable than it looks."

Thomas, the nerdy-looking engineer, nodded as he stood nearby, examining a small animal he didn't recognize mounted above the fireplace.

"This room is so garish," he said quietly, moving his gaze from one animal to the next.

"What?" Frank said. "This is a man's room! I mean, just look at that swordfish. It's a beauty. I caught one just like it. Two . . . no, it was three, yeah, three summers ago, when I was in Puerto Vallarta with my wife. She always insists that I need to get out more. She usually gets me to go on her damn vacations by allowing me at least a day to fish. I didn't even want to come here this week. But she insisted. I still don't know why she had to enter me into this damn drawing."

"You had to be dragged here?" Thomas asked. "I like my job and all, but this is *paradise*."

He certainly sounded enthused, but there was something about the way he said it that didn't ring true for Frank.

"I don't know, I definitely didn't sign up for some god-damned silly game or whatever that Brit was babbling about," he said.

"Look, just try to relax, Frank," Thomas said in an oddly stiff sort of way. "You might enjoy yourself."

"You sound like my wife now," Frank said, but then reluctantly smiled. He once again leaned back on the sofa and looked up at the swordfish. "Maybe you're right," he admitted, holding up his glass of Dalmore forty-year reserve.

“Especially in this room, on this couch, with scotch this good in my hand.”

Thomas nodded and smiled awkwardly. He let a few moments of silence pass and then asked what he’d been dying to since they’d been dismissed.

“So, what do you suppose the game is going to be, anyway? The one that the butler was talking about?” he asked.

Frank looked at Thomas for a moment. He realized he didn’t have an answer for him. Thomas seemed to pick up on it and they both shrugged in unison under the watchful, glassy-eyed gaze of the beasts hanging all around them.

Elsewhere in the mansion, other guests were wondering the exact same thing. Some were even openly speculating.

“Maybe this is, like, some sort of new reality show or something. And there’s, like, hidden cameras all around us?” Bryce said as he leafed through a huge book with leather binding.

Bryce, Emily, and Parker, the three youngest guests, had found their way to the massive library. It was two stories of wall-to-wall books of all kinds. Several ladders with wheels on tracks were spaced throughout the room. Emily had led them there in hopes of discovering some sort of clue as to who the owner of the mansion might be.

“Yeah, but what would be the point of the show?” Parker asked.

“I don’t know, dude,” Bryce said, getting more excited as he got further into his theory, “maybe, like, they put us all in a house together and then see how we all interact? Kind of like *The Real World*, except nobody knows, right? You know, since, like, people act differently than they really would when they know they’re gonna be on TV? It’s, like, hidden camera *Real World! Hidden World!*”

“Maybe,” Parker said, trying to decide if Bryce was joking or just simply stupid.

“That’s not what’s going on,” Emily said. “I mean, you need to sign waivers and stuff like that to be on TV. Besides, they’re not going to serve *you*, a minor, alcohol and then film it and air it on ABC. This isn’t a TV show, no way. I wonder if it’s going to be some kind of ‘Most Dangerous Game’-type thing.”

Bryce, looking every bit the unemployed stoner he likely was, and Parker, seemingly a typical, douche-y jock, just looked at her with blank stares. She had to hold back a laugh.

“It’s this story,” she explained, “where this rich guy hunts people for sport.”

“Oh, crap!” Bryce said. “That better not be what this is.”

“It’s not—that’s completely ridiculous,” Parker said.

“Look, guy, you never know,” Bryce said.

Parker rolled his eyes and then the three of them laughed. Just then one of the maids entered the library with an empty tray and asked them if they wanted more beverages. All three ordered another without hesitating.

Jacqueline and Darrel were the first to find what was perhaps the mansion’s most grandiose display of luxury and excess. After a quick stroll through the gardens, and brief passes through a study and then a gaming room, which contained a pool table and several LCD TVs, they stumbled upon the mansion’s aquarium.

The aquarium room was lined with massive fish tanks from wall to wall. Each tank had a label next to it, describing the species of sea life found within its confines. There were aquarium staples, such as a tank containing a puffer fish, seahorses, and several other brightly colored tropical

fish. There was a tank of piranha, one with a large octopus, and many others housing wide varieties of familiar and unfamiliar sea creatures.

But the showpiece was the huge tank at the far end of the room, taking up one entire wall. It was almost as large as the tanks at commercial aquariums. Swimming around behind the glass were some stingray, a few larger fish, and several full-grown sharks. The biggest was at least nine feet long and circled around and around in slow, smooth strokes, gliding as if it were being propelled by stealth engines rather than natural biomechanics.

“Hey, wow, it’s a bull shark,” Darrel said. “That’s pretty unusual for an aquarium. It’s actually the most dangerous shark species known. Even more dangerous than great whites.”

“Really?” Jacqueline asked, genuinely fascinated.

“Yeah, it’s the most aggressive species in the world. I’ve heard bull sharks have higher testosterone levels than any other *animal* in existence. Not just other sharks, but more testosterone than *all* animals. They’re basically the perfect killers. Aggressive, powerful, and completely remorseless.”

“How do you know all this?” Jacqueline asked with a grin. “Are you some sort of marine biologist or something?”

Darrel laughed and shook his head.

“No, Shark Week!”

Jacqueline laughed back. Her laugh was grainy and full, the sort of laugh that can only be achieved by years of smoking. But there was something about it that Darrel liked. It was loud, almost too loud, but it also was infectious. It made him want to laugh along with her.

“Yeah, I’m really just a high school science teacher and football coach,” he said.

“Don’t you do that!” she said.

“What?”

“Don’t say ‘just’ a teacher,” Jacqueline scolded. “Teachers are the fabric of our society. Without them, there’d be no doctors or marine biologists or lawyers or anything like that. Be proud!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Darrel said with a grin. “What about you? What do you do?”

“Me? I’m retired, honey!” she said. “Me, working at this age, no way. But before I retired, I was just a nurse.”

Darrel opened his mouth to give her the very same lecture, but she slapped him on the arm playfully before he could say anything.

“Don’t even say it, Shark Man!” she said, and then downed the rest of her champagne.

The only guest who didn’t really explore the mansion was Guadalupe. She instead retreated to her room to take a bath. Bubble baths were one of the few luxuries she allowed herself regularly. They helped ease her mind, helped her stay focused. She knew she needed to relax and try to have fun more often, but at the same time, recreational sloth was a virtue of the unsuccessful. It was frivolous. She’d grown up poor enough to know that she never wanted to experience being poor again. The shame of having a father who was out of work slightly more often than he was drunk, which was a considerable amount of time, was worse than having no father at all in her opinion.

But the bathroom attached to her suite was immaculate, and the sight of it had made taking a predinner bath nearly impossible to resist. The tub itself was a thing of absolute beauty and perfection, unmatched by almost anything she’d ever seen before. It was a claw-foot tub, larger and deeper than any she’d been in previously. The four claw feet were made of polished silver, and even she could plainly see how

expensive they were. But the tub also had Jacuzzi jets. Twenty-eight, by her count.

She'd long dreamed of owning a tub like this. Antique styling, modern amenities. That was Guadalupe's taste in a nutshell. She knew from her own searching that tubs like these often cost at least \$3,000, usually more. It wasn't that she couldn't afford one. At least, technically that wasn't true. She did have the money. But at the same time, such purchases were reserved for retirement. She had to prioritize her budget until then.

Regardless, the tub was here, now, in front of her. And she was going to take advantage of that as often as possible during her week's stay at Westlake Estate.

## CHAPTER 5

---

### THE GAME BEGINS

The first guest showed up in the large formal dining room at 6:39 P.M.

“Ah, Mr. Gatling, you’re early,” Giles said as he noticed that the man still had not changed out of that horrible short-sleeved oxford shirt.

“Yeah, sorry, I, uh, hate to be late,” Thomas said. “You know.”

“Very well, sir, no problem at all,” Giles said. “Please, find your seat and I will have someone out here for a drink order right away. Please do not touch anything on the table until the dinner begins.”

Thomas circled around the huge dinner table. It was large enough for thirty place settings but was presently set for just ten at one end. Above each salad plate was a folded placard with names printed on them in gold foil. He moved around the table until he found the placard that read: THOMAS GATLING.

He sat down and looked around at the rest of the dining room. It was vast, with ceilings easily forty feet high. Two elaborate crystal chandeliers were suspended above each

end of the table. The walls were covered in framed paintings, surely originals, spaced between gold sconces. At the far end of the dining room, directly opposite where the places were set, was a marble bust of the god Eros on top of a stone pedestal.

Each of the ten spots at the table was set with the same items: one small salad plate, a full array of sterling silver flatware, a maroon napkin with gold thread accents, a water glass, a wineglass, and a party popper. Thomas picked up and examined his party popper. It appeared to be just a run-of-the-mill party popper, the same kind he used to get as a kid on New Year's Eve. The kind where you grab each end and pull, resulting in a loud bang and mild explosion of confetti and strings.

"Put that down, please," Giles said behind him. "No touching until all of the guests arrive."

"Sorry," Thomas mumbled, and set down his party popper.

"It's quite all right. Unfortunately, our waitstaff is currently busy helping the chefs plate the first courses. Can I personally get you something to drink besides water?"

Thomas shook his head.

Giles nodded and left the room again. A short time later, the second guest arrived. It was Frank Ponder, the former sheriff and apparently avid sport fisherman. He was wearing a dress shirt and tie, and he looked as uncomfortable in them as he likely felt.

"Hi, again," Frank said as he searched for his spot. "Thomas, right?"

"Did you stay on that couch the whole time?" Thomas asked, not bothering to answer Frank's question.

Thomas had left the trophy room after only a half hour. The creepiness of the staring animals had been too much for

him. When he'd left, Frank had still been parked on the sofa underneath the swordfish, sipping on his third glass of aged scotch.

"Of course!" Frank said. "That is my idea of heaven. That sofa with that scotch. I'm really starting to appreciate that my wife nagged me into doing this."

He laughed at his own joke and Thomas forced a few chuckles in return. What else was he supposed to do? He'd never really been very good at small talk.

One by one, the other guests began arriving and finding their assigned seats at the table. Giles greeted each of them with the instructions to not touch their place settings until told to do so. It didn't take long for the chatter to begin. The guests really hadn't stopped drinking since they'd arrived, after all, save for the past hour when they'd each retired to their suites to change into more formal attire for the welcome dinner.

The predinner conversations ranged from what they thought was going on, to the lavishness of the estate, to what they did for a living. Sophia was the last to arrive, making her customary late entrance. Giles gathered the attention of the room with a standard, preemptive clanging of a spoon against a glass.

"Thank you all for attending our wonderful welcome dinner," Giles said, reciting another memorized speech from a set of instructions he'd found in his quarters an hour after he'd welcomed the guests to the estate. "Congratulations on being here and winning the online sweepstakes contest. On behalf of our wonderful and gracious host, I wish to once again welcome you to what is sure to be the most exciting week of your lives. To kick it all off with a *bang*, I'd like you to pick up your party poppers at this time. On the count backward from three, let's pull them

apart and get this marvelous week started in style, shall we?”

There was a nervous pause and excited murmurs as the ten guests raised their party poppers. Then the countdown began, disjointed at first, but totally in sync by the time they hit two.

“Three!”

“Two!”

“One!”

There was a relatively loud chorus of bangs as they all pulled apart their party poppers. Confetti soared across the table. And then there were the sudden screams as they realized that the guest seated at the head of the table had burst into flames. Flames so hot they glowed blue and white instead of the more traditional orange and yellow. The guest let out a single, horrifying scream that momentarily drowned out everything else, before slumping over onto the floor, still ablaze in a flaming pile of former estate guest.