

Murder at the Hike Inn



Chapter 1

“Oooh, I’m so excited I can hardly stand it!! Check out my cute new boots!” Amanda gestured at her brand-new Vibram-soled hiking boots, complete with eye hooks for the bright-red laces. They were deep brown leather and looked to be twice the size of her feet, her toned calves poking out the tops like lollipop sticks.

“You are dangerously close to revealing your relentless optimism and cheerful disposition to everyone at this inn, and we’ve only just reached the trailhead.” Kitty Campbell eyed her friend’s feet, silently thinking that the boots were massive but unwilling to spoil their shared good mood. It had been long enough since she’d had something to be optimistic about. She dug into her pack, tucking the car keys into an inner pocket and shifting the contents to balance the weight better as she did so.

“I refuse to contain my bubbly outlook. The world is a good place, and I have awesome boots. They’re sturdy and practical. And, like, foamy.” Amanda bounced speculatively in place in her boots.

“Foamy?” Up to her elbow in her pack, working to grasp a rolled-up shirt that threatened to knot itself into a ball that would grind into her back the entire hike, Kitty paused and looked sideways at Amanda through her tangled auburn bangs.

“Yeah, like some kind of moon shoe or something, lightweight so you don’t feel like you’re hiking so much as... floating your way up the mountain.” Amanda pranced up and down the tarmac to demonstrate how magically her boots were going to operate.

Kitty extricated her arm and zipped the pack shut. “Come on, fancy pants. Let’s float you up this mountain before you realize that five miles can be a very long way. Especially when it’s uphill. And before you realize that boots can’t really be foamy.”

“Listen, you. We are going to have a really good time this weekend. You’ve had a ton of experience out here in

the wilds, so you're my guide. I require you to be cheerful and instructive, without being bossy or pedantic." Amanda grinned as she spoke.

"OK, Professor. I will do this for you. Because you're my very best friend in the entire world and I have sucked your soul dry as you nursed me through the Recent Unpleasantness and you have willingly sacrificed over and over and now it's my turn to be selfless and giving."

"And to have fun. You've more than earned a weekend of relaxation and fun." Amanda reached over to touch Kitty's arm. "Worst. Divorce. Ever."

"You got that right." Kitty grimaced ironically and turned to survey the trailhead, not quite able to meet her friend's eyes but grateful for her support.

"Well done. Love you," said Amanda.

"Love you, too. And...thanks for coming up with this plan. I really am looking forward to the weekend." At last she looked over and met Amanda's gaze.

Her friend winked at her. "Oooh, look. More people! Think we'll see anyone we know this weekend?" Amanda looked over Kitty's shoulder and watched as a dark blue SUV

pulled into the trail parking lot.

Kitty turned to see what Amanda was looking at, just as a large white passenger van pulled up alongside the SUV.

"I have no idea, but it seems statistically improbable. It's a small inn and the Appalachians are a big mountain range. But it looks like it's going to be a full house up there, all the same. Think this is some kind of tour group, maybe?" Kitty wasn't sure which she preferred: a weekend in the mountains with just her and her bestie in front of the fire, or a weekend with people who didn't know her story and would meet her where she was. Hard to say at this point, she thought. Maybe she'd feel more confident once she met the other guests.

Amanda was already walking toward the van to say hello, a bright smile on her face.

"Hi! I'm Amanda Fitzherbert! Are you headed to the Hike Inn, too?"

"Hey! Yeah! Nice to meet you. Dang, pretty morning, huh?" said the man stepping down from the SUV.

Amanda gestured toward Kitty. "This is my friend, Kitty Campbell. We were just getting organized to start the

hike up.”

The man reached out to shake hands with Kitty. “Adam Gonzalez, how are you?” He shook hands with Amanda and gestured behind him with his other hand. “These are my boys, Mateo and Gabriel.”

One of the boys called from the other side of the SUV, where they were both unloading gear, “Men, dad! We are MEN!” They both hooted and swung a high five. The smaller of the two struck a body builder pose and both dissolved in laughter.

“Pardon me, corrected again,” smiled Adam. “These are my MEN, Mateo and Gabriel. They’re both away at college now, but dad has a harder time letting go than the kids, you know?”

Kitty, who hadn’t lived with anyone under the age of twenty-five since she’d been in college herself, smiled at the easy camaraderie this man shared with his sons.

“We’re here for a guys weekend, yeah?” The last word was called over to the boys.

“Hoo-ah!!” they both replied, Mateo going so far as to lift his pack over his head and utter a blood-curdling warrior

cry.

Amanda raised her eyebrows and glanced over at Kitty, who could tell she was doing her best not to laugh. Amanda was always amused by the behavior of college boys, who seemed perpetually trapped between young warriors and overgrown puppies.

Out loud, Kitty laughed and asked Adam, “Nice! You guys do a lot of hiking?”

“Not since they were younger—you know, overnight camping at the national parks, that kind of thing. Not Outward Bound, or anything, but enough to really get a sense of the outdoors.” His hands were on his hips in a subconscious outdoorsman pose.

“As long as we don’t have to pitch a tent, right, Dad?” Mateo had joined them and set his pack at his feet next to the SUV’s rear tire. “One year, we’re out in the middle of the woods, and Dad—“

Leaving his pack behind on the tailgate, Gabriel joined them and jumped in on his brother’s story. This was clearly a tale that had been told before and polished to a shine. “Dad is up half the night trying to get the tent poles together, be-

cause apparently—“

“He bought it second-hand and didn’t bother to take it out of the bag, and half the poles had broken and couldn’t even go together anymore.” Mateo was barely suppressing his laughter. “No back-up poles, not another camper in sight, right? So we’re in the middle of nowhere, and he keeps saying, ‘Hang on boys, just a few more minutes. I’ve got this covered.’ It was HOURS.”

“Yeah,” Gabriel said, “We learned, like, every curse word we have ever known that night, sitting by the fire and seeing how many sticks we could burn while listening to Dad murder that tent, hoping he wouldn’t realize we could hear everything he was saying.”

“It was awesome,” said Mateo.

“It WAS awesome,” said Adam. “Maybe not the cursing part. But the rest. Was awesome.”

“Truth,” said Gabriel. He slung an arm comfortably over his father’s shoulders and gave him a gentle noogie.

“And what about you ladies? Here for the scenery or the exercise?” asked Adam, smiling, smoothing his hair and turning to Kitty and Amanda.

“A little of both,” Amanda replied. “Kitty’s the one with the outdoors experience, so I’m letting her be my guide.” Once again, Kitty was reminded that her friend—while not always known for her tact—was always on her side. Bless her, Kitty thought, for not presenting this trip as a post-divorce recovery session to this nice family, and for letting me just be ME this weekend. Having a friend since the ninth grade has some serious advantages.

“Oh, yeah?” said Adam, turning his attention to Kitty. “You’re an avid hiker, huh?”

“Well, it comes with my job. I spend a lot of time in the outdoors, mostly for research.”

“Scientist?” asked Adam.

“Social scientist,” Kitty replied. “I’m an archaeologist.”

“Wait! Everyone stop where you are!” Gabriel thrust his arms out to either side and assumed a defensive stance. Both Kitty and Amanda tensed up and looked around, concerned, but Mateo and Adam looked at one another with sardonic expressions.

Gabriel’s voice lowered. He looked from side to side

with lowered eyelids.

“Someone’s about to make an Indiana Jones joke. I can smell it.”

Kitty laughed in spite of herself. She wasn’t going to say it out loud, but every time she told someone what she did for a living, she held her breath for the inevitable fedora-and-whip references. Unexpected, but refreshing, to find a college kid who was one step ahead.

“Gabriel’s really community-minded, see,” said Mateo. “Always looking out to make sure no one gets side-swiped by a bad pun or obscure pop culture reference.”

“It’s my calling,” said Gabriel, returning to a casual stance and nodding mock-humbly. “I live to serve, ladies. I’m just glad I was here to protect you.”

“You and your wife must be really proud of your sons, Mr. Gonzalez. Smart boys, AND funny,” said Amanda.

“It’s Adam, please. And I am proud.”

No mention of the wife, Kitty thought. A quick glance at the boys revealed they’d gotten quiet at Amanda’s comment.

“For the record, I like Indiana Jones. But not

fedoras,” Kitty said, hoping to gloss over the awkward moment.

“Totally overdone, yo. I’m with you,” replied Gabriel, a grateful smile on his face.

“But don’t get her started on how he wasn’t really doing archaeology so much as robbing tombs, because she can go on all day,” interjected Amanda. “That thing with the golden idol? Apparently you’d never get away with that in real life.”

“There are LAWS,” Kitty said sternly.

“See?” Amanda said, raising her eyebrows.

Kitty looked over Adam’s shoulder as some of the passengers from the white van were beginning to trickle toward the large wooden sign that marked the boundary between the parking lot and the trailhead, where their hike would begin. She noticed two of the women, both older, one with short graying hair and the other with a neat spinster’s bun under her khaki sun hat, stop at the verge between the asphalt and the acorn-strewn packed dirt edging the trail, pointing and chattering animatedly. One bent down and collected a small weed from the side of the trail, and the two

bent their eyes over it, deep in excited discussion. A tall man carrying a very nice camera shot a photo over their heads and walked past them toward the start of the hike.

Adam said, “Looks like we’d better join those folks and get moving. Five miles isn’t going to hike itself! Boys, let’s get our packs.”

“Just waiting on you, old man!” said Gabriel.

“Ladies, if you’ll excuse me?” Adam headed to the back of the SUV as Gabriel began to gather his gear.

Kitty turned to Amanda, who was shouldering her pack, a small lightweight model Kitty had recommended. Kitty began to reach for her own pack and was distracted by the sound of voices coming from the last couple to leave the white van. Their heads were close together, and while they kept their volume low, it was clear they were disagreeing about something.

I know that tone way too well, thought Kitty. *That’s marital squabbling. Awesome.* She grimaced. Maybe not what she was looking for this weekend. She hoped they’d work it out before arriving at the top of the mountain.

The woman looked up and caught Kitty’s eye, who

quickly glanced away, hoping she wasn’t giving a rude look. How many times had Amanda told her she had zero poker face? *No game,* thought Kitty. *Like a pane of glass, me and my feelings.*

In her desperation for something else on which to rest her eyes, Kitty saw the driver of the van, standing on the running board by the driver’s seat. He was wearing boots and a flannel shirt over cargo pants that were frayed at the hems, and had an old, worn baseball cap on his head. He seemed to be watching the hikers as they began the climb toward the Inn.

“What’s up?” asked Amanda, joining Kitty and following her gaze. The man was looking at his phone in the shade of his hat.

“Nothing. You got your stuff?”

“I guess. Just the pack, right? You sure the car will be OK here over the weekend?” Amanda asked.

Kitty replied, “Yeah, I paid the park fee at the self-service shed. We’re all set.”

As she was talking, Kitty looked over to the SUV. The two boys and their father had all their gear on their backs

and were laughing together as they headed toward the start of the trail.

“Then let’s get this weekend on the road!” Amanda cried. “Rest! Relaxation! Sisterly togetherness!”

Kitty laughed. Yes, that was just what she needed. Some quiet and the sound of the breeze in the leaves above her.

They stepped off the tarmac and onto the trail.