

THE ESCAPE GAME

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THE ESCAPE GAME



MARISSA MEYER & TAMARA MOSS

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For all the friends and family who have tolerated having total strangers lock us in a room together and demand that we solve random puzzles in order to escape. It is a peculiar passion, and I appreciate you humoring me.

—**Marissa**

To Chris, for being my partner in crime. To Marguerite, for hiring a limo to take me to an escape room. And to Scout, because you had to share me with this manuscript for so long.

—**Tamara**



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SEASON FOUR FINALE

A Bloody Good Time Was Had by All



Sierra paced the greenroom, fidgeting with her lip ring as her skirts dragged across the carpet. It had taken several members of the costuming department to wrestle her into this monstrosity of a Victorian-era dress. The corset was suffocating, the ruffles enormous, the lace itchy as hell. The outfits were supposed to be a clue to the finale's theme, but there were too many options. A parlor mystery? A hot-air balloon race? The *Titanic*?

Sprawled out on the sofa, his tailcoat on his knees, Cruz moaned. "That breakfast sandwich is not sitting well with me. Why did they get us changed so early?"

"More mind games," drawled Elijah, their team captain, sitting at the table. He looked half asleep. No wonder, considering he was up swimming at an ungodly hour that morning.

Not that Sierra could talk—she hadn't exactly slept last night, either.

She continued to pace. She had to keep moving or anxiety would eat her alive. *Two hours*. Two more hours and this nightmare of a game show would be over. They could win. That prize money could be hers.

"You feeling okay?" Missy said. At first Sierra thought the question was for Cruz, still groaning on the couch. But no. Missy was watching *her*.

"Yeah, sure. Just want to get this over with."

"We need to stay focused." Elijah opened his eyes. "Now more than ever."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"I'm serious, Sierra. Maybe there's something you want to tell us? We've got the time."

"Now that you mention it, I have been meaning to point out what a pretentious asshat you are."

Cruz snorted. "I'm going to miss you all."

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“I mean about you and Alicia,” said Elijah. “There was a lot of shouting last night.”

Sierra’s mouth went dry. The villa walls weren’t exactly sound-proof, and Elijah had a bad habit of following Alicia around like a lost puppy.

“None of your business,” she snapped. Alicia had been even more condescending and cagey than usual last night, and Sierra was still pissed off about it.

“I didn’t see her this morning,” Elijah said. “What did you say to make her so upset?”

“How about you focus on the game rather than my goddamn sister?”

A knock drew their attention to the door. Vera stalked in, wearing her usual sparkly outfit and scowl. “Team Hourglass, there’s been a change. You’re going to run the game first.”

Elijah frowned. “Why?”

“Because Ranielle said so. She wants you on set. Now.”

Cruz climbed to his feet. “Sure thing. Right after I make a quick pit stop.”

He ran to the restroom while Sierra followed the others out of the greenroom. They’d never changed the filming schedule before, but she didn’t mind. She could practically smell the cash prize. She didn’t need Alicia, or her charity, or her judgments.

The crew hurried to set them up with earpieces and lapel mics. Cruz returned looking a little better, a makeup assistant touched up Sierra’s black lipstick, and before Sierra could catch her breath, the contestants were ushered onto the set, where the show’s icons—Fitzy and Louis—were waiting. Missy cheered and gave them high fives.

“Team Hourglass!” yelled James “Fitzy” Fitzgerald. “You’ve made it to the finale!”

Sierra hated Fitzy. Maybe it was his Australian surfer persona—

that sun-bleached hair, his easy grin, his terrible jokes. Or maybe it was that he was a clueless teenage sidekick next to—

“Welcome,” said Louis Augustus Russell. The Game Master was nearly twenty years older, tall and barrel-chested, with a light brown goatee and his signature newsboy cap. He looked more like a WWE fighter than the genius who designed some of the nation’s most beloved escape rooms. He hooked his thumbs into his suspenders. “You’re about to be tested as never before.”

“I bet Sierra’s ready to flaunt that cash in her sister’s face,” Fitzzy said, waggling his eyebrows.

Sierra clenched her jaw. The producers had been milking the built-in family dynamics since the beginning. Fans had compared the sisters in every possible way, from their skills (Alicia was “gifted and clever”; Sierra was “scrappy and cunning”) to their looks (Alicia’s straight nose and olive skin tone were reminiscent of a Grecian goddess, while Sierra looked like “Hades’s sickly goth stepchild”—thanks for that, anonymous commenter).

Alicia was the fan favorite, and Sierra was the villain.

In Sierra’s earpiece, the director ordered, “Give us something good.”

“I’m ready to slaughter her,” Sierra said, deadpan.

Fitzzy choked out a surprised laugh. “We can’t wait.”

Sierra noticed with vindictive pleasure that the makeup team had failed to completely cover the dark shadows under his eyes. He’d been up late livestreaming the show’s time-honored season recap for his Australian fans, and it showed. Perfect Fitzzy didn’t look so perfect today.

“This has been one cutthroat season. These teams have fought tooth and nail to be here, and we’re expecting one epic finale.” Fitzzy addressed the Game Master. “Here we go, Louis. Any advice for Team Hourglass?”

“Yes,” Louis said, “and I hope they’ll take it to heart.” He paused

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for dramatic effect. “In order to be victorious, you have to be willing to get your hands a little . . . *bloody*.”

“Blood, huh?” Cruz cackled and elbowed Sierra in the ribs. “Right up your alley.”

They were given blindfolds, then guided toward the next set. Sierra had gotten used to the chaos of the studio. The constant movement of cameras and lights and set pieces. Interns running back and forth with clipboards and cups of coffee. The makeup team, powder brushes primed and ready, because heaven forbid the general public noticed that Fitzzy had *pores*.

But then a door closed, and the sounds dulled until it was just their own heavy breathing. Sierra’s heartbeat ratcheted. They were inside the escape room.

“Team Hourglass in position,” someone said through their earpieces. “Finale is a go.”

“Team Hourglass,” boomed Fitzzy. “When I say ‘escape,’ you may remove your blindfolds and begin. In three . . . two . . . one . . . *Escape!*”

Sierra threw her blindfold to the floor. Dim, flickering light came from ensconced torches. A coffin sat in the center of the room. Three plastic skeletons hung on the walls with strings of garlic bulbs around their necks.

“Vampires,” she whispered, thinking of the Game Master’s clue. In order to escape, they would have to get their hands bloody. They would have to slay the vampire.

Cruz had already charged for the coffin and was examining the lid. “Locked. Three-digit code.” He punctuated the statement with a muffled groan, pressing a hand to his side.

Sierra swore, hoping he wasn’t about to spew all over the room’s carefully orchestrated clues. That would be the icing on the cake of this season’s absolute shit show.

The team searched the skeletons and found a crucifix and a velvet

pouch, padlocked. The third skeleton had a parchment that turned out to be a map.

“We need to find a key,” Missy said, tugging on the padlock.

“Does this mean anything?” Sierra indicated a row of dark splotches on the concrete floor and what seemed to be tracks in the dust that led to the coffin. The splotches looked like water droplets but could have been paint, or even fake blood.

“Dunno,” said Elijah. “Let’s focus on this three-digit code for now.”

Three numbers. Three skeletons. Three—

“Strings of garlic!” Sierra cried. With that realization, the code worked itself out easily—just a matter of counting the bulbs. Elijah entered the digits and the coffin’s lid clicked open.

On top of a lumpy bed of black velvet sat a long wooden stake, pointed sharply on one end. Sierra inspected it. “No markings that I can see.”

“Maybe it’s for killing Dracula at the end,” Missy said.

“There are words here.” Cruz pointed at sharply scrawled letters on the underside of the coffin’s lid. Sierra had to squint to see them in the torchlight and could picture one of the hidden cameras zooming in at the same time.

WE GET WHAT WE DESERVE

That had to be an anagram. Her mind was already whirling with possibilities as she took a handful of the velvet, which felt cool and strangely damp, and yanked it out of the coffin.

The world stilled. Her blood ran frigid. She blinked several times, sure she was seeing things.

“Oh god,” said Cruz, before turning and vomiting onto the floor.

The director’s voice screamed through their earpieces, bringing the game to a halt. “What the *hell*?”

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The team gaped—first at the coffin, and then at Sierra, standing with the velvet clutched in one hand and the wooden stake in the other.

Staring down at the unnaturally still, unnaturally pale body of her older sister.