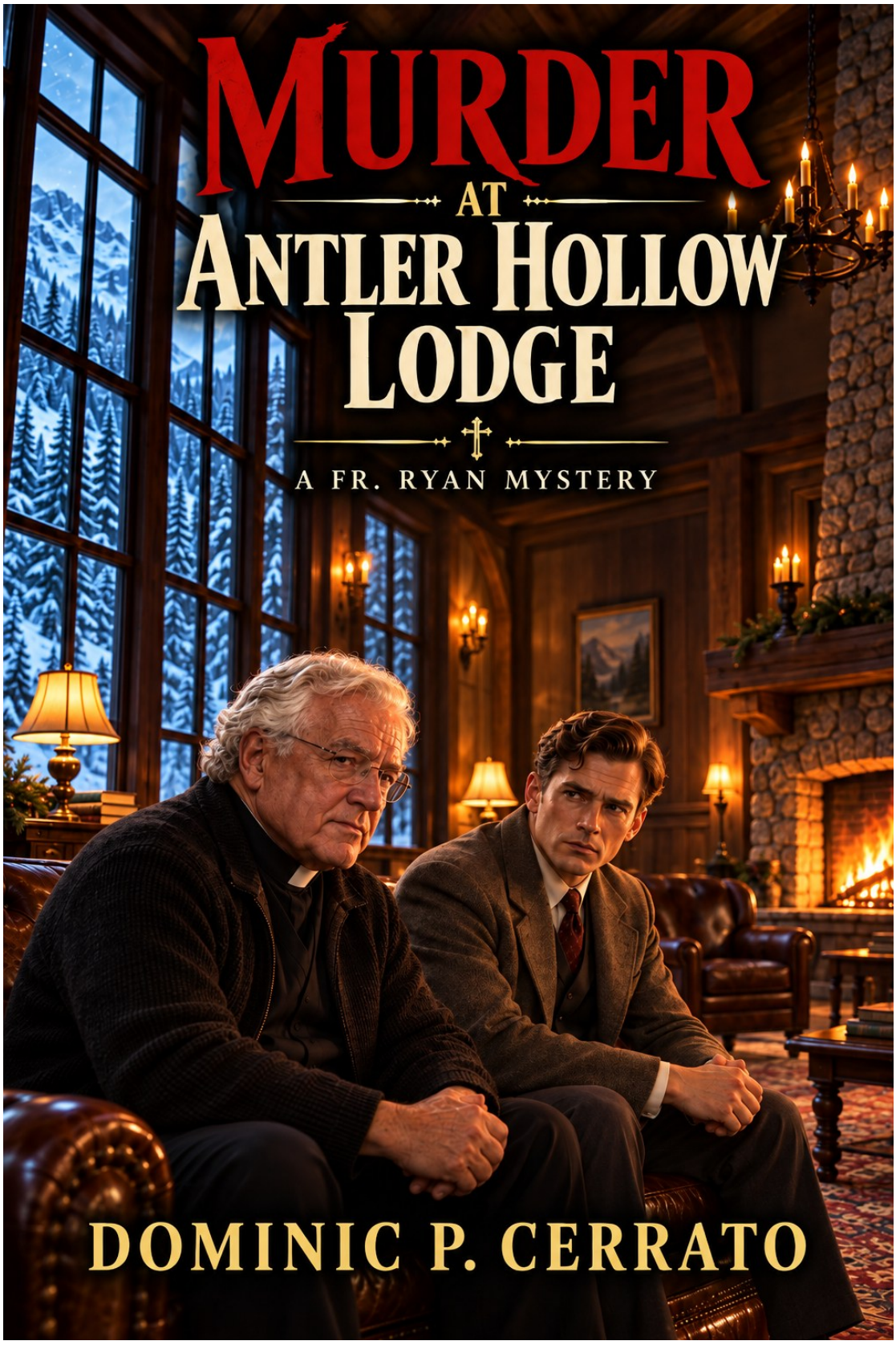

MURDER
AT
ANTLER HOLLOW
LODGE
A FR. RYAN MYSTERY
DOMINIC P. CERRATO

MURDER AT ANTLER HOLLOW LODGE

MURDER AT ANTLER HOLLOW LODGE

A Father Ryan Mystery
Book 1

DOMINIC P. CERRATO

A Novel

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To my wife, Judi,

My companion in life's mysteries,
my joy in its discoveries, and my
greatest blessing in all its chapters.

With all my love.

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Cast of Characters

The Visitors from New York

Father Sean Ryan — A seventy-six-year-old retired Catholic priest and former professor of philosophy and moral theology. An observant student of human nature, possessed of a keen intellect, a gentle manner, and a distinctly Irish sense of humor.

Andrew "Andy" Ryan — Father Sean's thirty-two-year-old nephew, whom he raised from childhood. A former wartime intelligence officer and now a Special Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, assigned to New York. Practical, resourceful, and experienced in the investigation of crimes.

The Whitcomb Family

Harrison Whitcomb — The wealthy and formidable proprietor of Antler Hollow Lodge. A man accustomed to authority, whose considerable fortune and forceful personality have earned him influence, obedience, and more than a few resentments.

Eleanor Whitcomb — Harrison's second wife. An elegant and reserved woman whose outward composure conceals an unhappy domestic life.

Richard Whitcomb — Harrison's son. A restless and frequently embittered man whose strained relationship with his father has long been apparent to those familiar with the family.

Clara Whitcomb — Harrison's granddaughter and the daughter of his late daughter, Catherine. Intelligent, independent, and capable, she assists in managing the lodge and its accounts. Her determination and sharp wit do not always make her an easy acquaintance.

The Guests of Antler Hollow Lodge

Edmund Hawthorne — A longtime business associate of Harrison Whitcomb, involved in investments and financial arrangements extending back many years. A dignified gentleman whose guarded manner suggests a preference for discretion.

Nathaniel Price — A prosperous businessman and occasional sportsman. Opinionated, outspoken, and seldom reluctant to express his views, particularly when they concern Harrison Whitcomb.

Dr. Samuel Mercer — A retired physician and guest of the lodge. Intelligent, skeptical, and inclined toward practical explanations, he possesses a keen interest in human behavior and little patience for unfounded speculation.

Mrs. Margaret Vale — A reserved and carefully spoken guest whose quiet manner and thoughtful observations distinguish her from the more outspoken members of the company. She appears particularly sympathetic toward Clara.

The Lodge Staff

Charles Pembroke — The lodge's meticulous manager, responsible for its daily operation and the comfort of its guests. Punctilious, discreet, and deeply conscious of his responsibilities to the Whitcomb household.

Thomas Hayes — The lodge's experienced caretaker and maintenance man. Practical, resourceful, and thoroughly familiar with the building's aging machinery, service corridors, and numerous architectural peculiarities.

Ruth Collins — A young housemaid, conscientious and rather timid. Accustomed to carrying out her duties quietly, she is more comfortable remaining unnoticed than becoming the center of attention.

The County Authorities

Sheriff Daniel Keating — The county sheriff, an experienced and methodical lawman responsible for investigating serious crimes within his jurisdiction. Patient in questioning witnesses and cautious in drawing conclusions.

Deputy Frank Dugan — Sheriff Keating's deputy, who assists with interviews, photographs, the examination of evidence, and the practical demands of the investigation.

A Chronology of Events

Friday, October 15
Two visitors from New York arrive at Antler Hollow Lodge for what promises to be a quiet autumn holiday. An unexpected snowstorm begins that evening.

Saturday, October 16
The mountain awakens beneath a heavy blanket of snow. An alarming discovery disrupts the household, while impassable roads isolate the lodge from the outside world.

Sunday, October 17
As the storm subsides, questions begin to emerge. Communication with the valley remains difficult.

Monday, October 18
The guests and staff find themselves increasingly occupied with events they cannot fully explain.

Tuesday, October 19
Attention turns toward the lodge's history and the relationships among those gathered beneath its roof.

Wednesday, October 20
Uneasiness grows as the investigation becomes increasingly personal.

Thursday, October 21
The mountain road begins to reopen, bringing long-awaited assistance from the valley.

Friday, October 22
Official inquiries continue, and the occupants of the lodge begin to confront difficult questions.

Saturday, October 23
The history of Antler Hollow Lodge assumes renewed importance as the investigation progresses.

Sunday, October 24
The consequences of long-kept secrets begin to affect the household.

Monday, October 25
The search for answers intensifies, and familiar explanations become less certain.

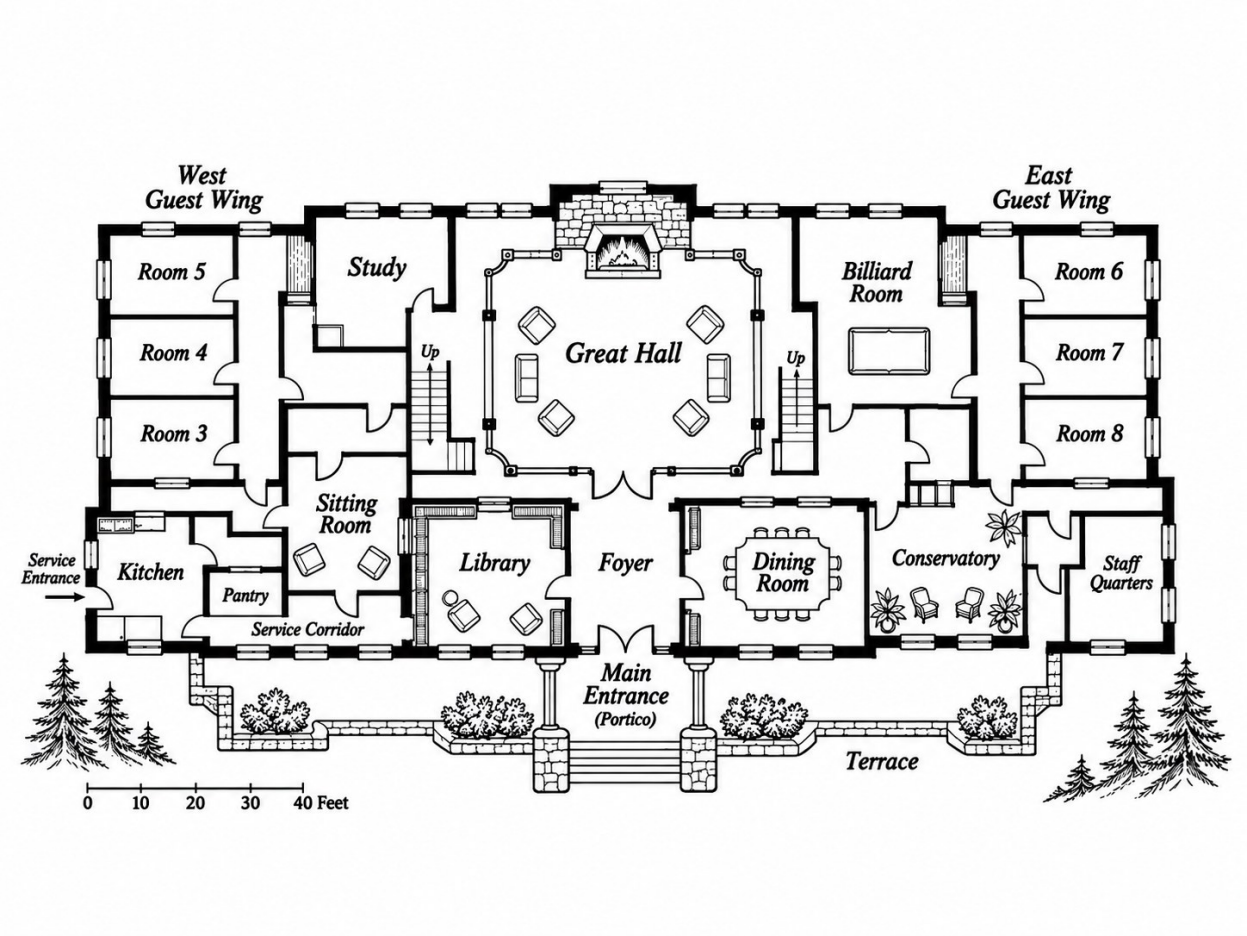
Tuesday, October 26
The principal guests and members of the household gather in the Great Hall as the investigation approaches its conclusion.

Wednesday, October 27
The household begins to adjust to the events of the preceding days.

Thursday, October 28
Preparations for departure and decisions about the future occupy those remaining at the lodge.

Friday, October 29
The journey home begins, bringing an extraordinary fortnight in the Pennsylvania mountains to its close.

Antler Hollow Lodge Floor Plan



Series Introduction

The Father Ryan Mysteries

Some mysteries begin with a crime. Others begin with a secret that has waited years to be discovered. In either case, the truth is rarely what it first appears to be.

Set in postwar America, *The Father Ryan Mysteries* follows the adventures of an unlikely investigative pair: Father Sean Ryan, a retired Catholic priest and professor of philosophy and his nephew, Andrew "Andy" Ryan, a special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Their relationship, however, is much closer than that of uncle and nephew. When Andy's parents died while he was still a young boy, Father Sean took him into his home and raised him as his own son. Over the years, their bond grew into one of deep paternal affection, mutual trust, and enduring loyalty. To Andy, Father Sean is not simply his uncle but the man who has been his father in every meaningful sense.

Father Sean possesses a keen understanding of human nature, sharpened by decades of teaching, priestly ministry, and pastoral encounters. He recognizes the fears, ambitions, resentments, and loyalties that influence human behavior. Andy, a veteran of wartime intelligence, approaches each mystery with the discipline of a professional investigator, relying upon evidence, careful observation, and logical deduction.

Their different approaches prove remarkably complementary. Father Sean is particularly interested in *why* people act as they do, while Andy concentrates on establishing *what* happened and *how*. Together, they discover that the smallest detail or an apparently innocent remark may hold the key to an otherwise baffling crime.

Yet the heart of the series is not simply their ability to solve mysteries. Their companionship is marked by affection, mutual respect, spirited conversations, and a distinctly Irish sense of humor. Whether debating philosophy, playing chess, or unraveling a perplexing clue, their relationship brings warmth and occasional levity to circumstances that are often anything but amusing.

In the tradition of the classic detective novel, each Father Ryan mystery presents a seemingly inexplicable crime, a collection of memorable characters, carefully concealed clues, and a solution that emerges through observation and reason. Woven naturally into these adventures are enduring questions about conscience, justice, and the complexities of the human heart.

The series begins in October 1948 with *Murder at Antler Hollow Lodge*, when Father Sean and Andy leave New York for their annual holiday at a secluded Pennsylvania mountain resort. What promises to be a peaceful retreat becomes a baffling mystery when a snowstorm isolates the lodge and its troubled household, drawing the two men into an investigation neither anticipated.

In *A Deadly Passage*, the second book, Father Sean and Andy embark on a voyage aboard the *S.S. Providence*, where a reunion of former wartime intelligence operatives takes a deadly turn.

Against the backdrop of postwar America, old loyalties, buried secrets, and the lingering consequences of wartime betrayal converge in a mystery whose origins reach back to the Second World War.

The third installment, *A Most Perfect Crime*, brings the investigation to New York City, where the disappearance of a priceless sapphire from a seemingly secure case presents an almost impossible puzzle. As the Ryans confront an ingenious deception involving powerful interests and carefully concealed motives, they discover that even the most perfect crime may contain the smallest flaw.

Across these three adventures, Father Sean and Andy encounter mysteries that challenge their intellect, test their judgment, and deepen their understanding of human nature. Along the way, new relationships enrich their lives, transforming what begins as an unlikely investigative partnership into something larger: an enduring story of family, friendship, faith, and the search for truth.

For the reader, it is an invitation to accompany them – one mystery at a time.

Chapter One: Road to Antler Hollow

Friday, October 15, 1948

A Change of Plans

The trouble with Antler Hollow Lodge began before either of the Ryan men had seen it.

It began, as so many unfortunate things do, with a letter.

The letter arrived at Father Sean Ryan's four-story brownstone on Manhattan's Upper West Side on a wet October morning in 1948, bearing the familiar insignia of the resort where he and his nephew had spent their annual holiday for nearly fifteen years. Its message was brief, courteous, and devastating.

Briarwood Inn would be closed for extensive renovations until the following spring.

Father Sean read the letter twice, folded it neatly, and placed it beside his coffee.

"Well," he said to the empty kitchen, "there goes civilization."

Outside, the rain rattled against the tall windows overlooking the street. Somewhere in the old brownstone, a radiator knocked three times, paused, and knocked again, as though agreeing with him.

The retired priest was a somewhat heavyset man whose expressive eyebrows and quick, dark eyes suggested that he had never entirely surrendered to the solemn business of growing old. His thinning white hair was carefully combed, his black clerical suit had been pressed with the attention of someone accustomed to ecclesiastical propriety, and his gold wire-rimmed spectacles had a habit of slipping down his nose whenever he encountered something particularly foolish.

He glanced again at the offending letter.

"Renovations," he murmured. "A perfectly respectable word for destroying a man's peace of mind."

He had no particular objection to improvement. He merely believed that improvement was often undertaken by people insufficiently acquainted with what was already good.

For nearly fifteen years, he and Andrew had occupied the same two rooms overlooking the lake at Briarwood Inn, a comfortable retreat in the Catskills. They had breakfast at eight, walked in the woods when the weather permitted, and argued amiably about everything from Aristotle to the fortunes of the New York Yankees. In the evenings, they played chess beside the dining-

room fire, where Father Sean invariably accused his nephew of possessing a dangerously mechanical imagination.

Andrew invariably won.

Neither had ever suggested abandoning the arrangement.

The annual holiday was more than a pleasant habit. It was one of the few remaining threads of uninterrupted companionship in lives that had become increasingly crowded with obligations.

For Father Sean, whose years as a seminary professor had eventually given way to retirement, it was a chance to spend time with the boy he had raised without the distractions of appointments, correspondence, and the innumerable demands that seem to accumulate around a priest, even one officially relieved of his duties.

For Andrew, it was something rather different.

It was the only week of the year in which he could be reasonably certain that no one would ask him to find a missing person, question a witness, or explain why a respectable American citizen had turned out to be a foreign agent.

At thirty-two, Andrew Ryan had spent enough time in the service of his country to have acquired two uncomfortable convictions: that people were seldom what they appeared to be, and that the people most anxious to seem respectable generally deserved the closest scrutiny.

His wartime service in military intelligence had sharpened both convictions. His subsequent work as a special agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, based in New York, had done little to soften them.

Father Sean, who had known Andrew since infancy, considered this a professional deformity.

He also considered it one of the reasons his nephew needed an annual holiday.

The two men had been bound together by more than blood.

When Andrew's parents died, Father Sean had assumed responsibility for raising him. It had not been an easy arrangement. A priest accustomed to the orderly life of study, prayer, and teaching had suddenly found himself responsible for a grieving child whose interests ran more toward baseball, automobiles, and occasional fistfights than toward the finer distinctions of moral philosophy.

But affection had accomplished what discipline alone could not.

Father Sean had never attempted to replace Andy's father. He had simply been there – through childhood disappointments, adolescent rebellions, and the difficult years when a boy discovers that growing older does not necessarily mean growing wiser. Somewhere along the way, Andy

had stopped thinking of his uncle as the man who had taken him in and begun thinking of him as the man who had raised him.

Their arguments were frequent, their loyalty unquestioned, and their affection generally expressed through a form of verbal combat that outsiders occasionally mistook for genuine disagreement.

By the time Andrew arrived that evening, Father Sean had made other arrangements.

Andrew entered the study, removed his fedora, and glanced toward the hallway.

"Where's Mrs. O'Leary?"

"Visiting her sister in New Jersey. She'll be back on Thursday."

"And you've managed to survive without her?"

"Barely. I've discovered that keeping house requires considerably more skill than teaching philosophy."

Andy grinned. "You mean you've had to make your own breakfast?"

"Among other indignities. I begin to understand why Mrs. O'Leary considers us both hopeless."

Mrs. O'Leary had kept house for Father Sean during his years at the rectory and had remained with him after his retirement. She had helped raise Andy, and neither man had ever regarded her as merely an employee. Though she maintained a small residence of her own, she spent so much of her time at the Ryan household that her absence was immediately felt. She was family, though she occasionally maintained that caring for the two Ryans required the patience of a saint and the authority of a prison warden.

"Well," Andy said, settling into a chair, "I hope you've been managing."

"My dear boy, it's nearly impossible to get along without that woman. I'm beginning to suspect she knows it."

"She's known it for years."

Father Sean smiled.

"Quite right. Now, tell me, Andrew, have you ever heard of Antler Hollow Lodge?"

"Should I have?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Whether you intend to accompany me there next week."

"What happened to Briarwood?"

"It's fallen victim to progress."

"Progress?"

"Renovations. They intend to replace the plumbing, modernize the kitchen, and install something called a cocktail lounge."

"That sounds reasonable."

"My dear boy, a cocktail lounge is precisely what people invent when they've forgotten how to enjoy a drink."

Andrew smiled and loosened his tie.

"Where's this new place?"

"In the mountains of Pennsylvania. Several hours from the city. A rather splendid lodge, according to the brochure."

"According to the brochure?"

"Of course. I haven't been there. Neither have you. That should make us both equally ignorant, which is a promising beginning for a vacation."

Andrew dropped into the armchair opposite his uncle.

"And you've already booked it."

"Naturally."

"Without asking me."

"I assumed you intended to honor our annual arrangement."

"I do."

"Then I've spared you the burden of making a decision."

Andrew studied him for a moment.

"You know, Uncle Sean, for a man who spent his life teaching philosophy, you've a remarkable talent for avoiding an argument."

"Quite the contrary. I've spent my life learning which arguments are worth having."

He passed the brochure across the desk.

Andrew examined the photograph on its cover.

A vast timber-and-stone structure stood against a forested mountainside, its steep gables and enormous chimneys suggesting something between a hunting lodge and a medieval fortress. Beneath the photograph, elaborate lettering proclaimed:

ANTLER HOLLOW LODGE

An Exclusive Mountain Retreat

Where Nature Offers Rest and Hospitality Provides Comfort

"Looks expensive," Andrew said.

"It is."

"Then why are we going?"

"Because I've discovered that comfort is a luxury worth paying for, especially when the alternative involves sleeping on a mattress designed by a sadist."

Andrew turned the page.

"Secluded location. Private grounds. Fine dining. Hunting, fishing, woodland trails." He glanced up. "Sounds pleasant enough."

"Then it's settled."

"Did you ask whether they have a telephone?"

"Certainly."

"And?"

"They have several."

"Good."

"I told the manager we wouldn't require one."

Andrew looked up sharply.

“Uncle Sean.”

The priest removed his spectacles.

“Andrew, the Bureau survived for many years before you joined it. I’ve every confidence it can survive another seven days without your assistance.”

“That’s not the point.”

“It’s very nearly the whole point.”

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Father Sean leaned back, and something gentler entered his expression.

“Your work’s important. I know that. But it isn’t the only important thing in your life.”

Andrew looked toward the rain-streaked window.

He’d heard such remarks before. They were ordinarily followed by an inquiry about a young woman whose name he’d mentioned once, perhaps months earlier.

This time, his uncle surprised him.

“One day, Andrew, you may discover that all the cases you’ve solved and all the criminals you’ve put behind bars won’t matter quite so much as the people you’ve loved.”

Andrew glanced toward him.

“That’s a cheerful thought.”

“It’s intended to be.”

“Sounds more like a sermon.”

“Then consider yourself fortunate. I’ve condensed it considerably.”

The priest smiled, though his eyes remained serious.

“I don’t ask much of you, my boy. One week. No investigations. No mysterious disappearances. No telegrams from Washington. Just the two of us.”

Andrew looked at the familiar face across the desk.

He remembered that same face bent over a schoolbook when he was eight, sternly explaining fractions. He remembered it in the hospital after his parents had died, when the priest had taken his hand and told him that he'd be coming home with him. And he remembered the years that followed: shared meals, evening prayers, arguments, laughter, and the unspoken assurance that whatever else the world might take away, Uncle Sean would remain.

He set down the brochure.

"All right," he said. "One week."

"Splendid."

"No investigations."

"Excellent."

"No telegrams."

"Music to my ears."

"And no lectures about marriage."

Father Sean considered this.

"I can promise you the first three."

The Lodge in the Mist

The final miles to Antler Hollow Lodge were not encouraging.

They had left New York early that morning, crossing into Pennsylvania beneath a pale autumn sky. By noon they were well into the mountains, following a succession of increasingly narrow roads that seemed determined to lead them away from every recognizable sign of civilization.

They stopped for lunch at a roadside diner where Father Sean declared the coffee an offense against both agriculture and civilization.

The waitress, an older woman with a pleasant face and an impressive capacity for conversation, had asked where they were headed.

"Antler Hollow Lodge," Andy told her.

She paused with the coffeepot in her hand.

"Antler Hollow?"

"That's right."

"Well, you've got another hour or so, depending on the road."

"Is it that bad?"

"Road's fine, mostly. It's the weather you've got to watch."

Father Sean looked toward the window.

"Does it change quickly?"

"Up there? Faster than a woman changing her mind about a hat."

She smiled and refilled his cup.

"You boys staying long?"

"A week," Andy said.

The waitress considered that.

"Well, I hope you enjoy yourselves."

Something in her manner caught Andy's attention.

"You know the place?"

"Everybody around here knows Antler Hollow."

"Ever been there?"

"Once or twice. Years ago."

"What's it like?"

She looked toward the kitchen.

"Big."

Andy waited.

The woman adjusted her apron.

"Real big. Folks used to come from all over. Philadelphia, New York, even Chicago. Some of the richest people in the country."

"And now?"

"Oh, they still have their guests."

She set down the coffeepot.

"Though I don't suppose it's quite what it used to be."

"Why's that?"

The waitress glanced toward Father Sean.

"Places change. People do too."

Then she moved away to serve another customer.

Andy watched her go.

"Friendly woman."

"Very," Father Sean replied.

"Didn't tell us much."

"Perhaps there wasn't much to tell."

"Or perhaps she didn't want to tell us."

The priest stirred his coffee.

"Andrew, we've been on the road for several hours, and you've already begun questioning innocent waitresses."

"I asked three questions."

"Four."

"Who's counting?"

"I am. Somebody ought to."

They finished their lunch and resumed the journey.

By late afternoon, the highway had narrowed into a winding mountain road, and the wooded hills gathered around them.

Andy drove a dark green 1946 Buick Roadmaster, purchased used the previous spring. It had a powerful engine, comfortable seats, and a heater that worked when properly threatened.

Father Sean occupied the passenger seat with a folded road map on his knees.

“Another six miles,” he announced.

“You said that ten minutes ago.”

“The map said it.”

“Then the map’s a liar.”

“It may simply possess a different understanding of distance.”

Andy turned the wheel sharply to negotiate a bend.

Beyond the windshield, the road disappeared between tall hemlocks, their dark branches interlacing above the gravel like the ribs of some enormous animal. The afternoon sun had vanished behind a ceiling of low cloud. Wisps of mist moved across the road, gathering in the hollows.

There had been no houses for several miles.

No stores.

No filling stations.

Not even a telephone pole.

“Are you sure we’re going in the right direction?” Andy asked.

“Perfectly.”

“Because if this road gets any narrower, we’ll have to drive on two wheels.”

“Think of it as an opportunity to develop your skills.”

“I developed my skills in Europe. I’d hoped to retire them.”

“Then perhaps you should drive more slowly.”

Andy gave him a sidelong glance.

“Is that a suggestion or a command?”

"At this point in our journey, I doubt the distinction matters."

A few minutes later they passed a weathered wooden sign.

ANTLER HOLLOW LODGE – 3 MILES

An arrow pointed into a narrower road disappearing among the trees.

Andy braked.

"Three miles," he said. "According to that."

Father Sean peered over his spectacles.

"Apparently the establishment measures distance differently from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania."

Andy turned onto the road.

The tires crunched over gravel. Branches scraped lightly against the roof, and the forest crowded so closely on either side that the trees seemed less like scenery than silent spectators.

Then the road dipped suddenly.

The mist thickened.

And through the pale gray vapor, Antler Hollow Lodge emerged.

Andy instinctively eased his foot from the accelerator.

"Good Lord," he murmured.

Father Sean leaned forward.

"Well," he said softly. "That is rather impressive."

The lodge rose from a shelf of dark stone above the hollow, immense and brooding beneath the mist. Its lower walls were constructed of rough-cut granite, its upper floors of weathered timber darkened almost to black by age and rain. Great sloping roofs descended over rows of narrow windows. Three massive chimneys climbed into the fog, and an antlered crest projected above the main entrance.

The central building was flanked by two long wings, each ending in a steep gable. The windows were unevenly lit. Most remained dark.

A broad terrace extended along the front, overlooking a steep descent into the forest. Beyond it, nothing was visible but mist and the faint outlines of distant trees.

The place had been built on a scale suggesting extravagant wealth, but its architecture possessed none of the easy welcome of the country houses Andy had seen in England during the war. It seemed designed less to invite visitors than to impress upon them the insignificance of their arrival.

There was something faintly theatrical about it, as though an entire castle had been transported from Europe and instructed to pretend it was a hunting lodge.

"Who built this place?" Andy asked.

Father Sean consulted the brochure.

"A wealthy industrialist, apparently. Early in the century. The Whitcomb family acquired it later."

"Did the original owner dislike people?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because anyone who builds a house this far from civilization must have wanted to make sure nobody could visit unexpectedly."

"Or perhaps he hoped that those who did visit would have something worthwhile to say."

Andy glanced at his uncle.

"Then I'm surprised you brought me."

"Charity, Andrew. A priest must practice charity."

They drove beneath a stone archway and entered a broad courtyard.

A bronze stag stood at its center, mounted upon a circular pedestal. Rain had stained the statue green, and one antler was broken near the tip. Behind it, a semicircular driveway led to the entrance beneath a heavy timber portico.

Only three automobiles occupied the gravel parking area.

An older Packard stood near the east wing. Beside it was a black Cadillac sedan with whitewall tires, its polished surface beaded with moisture. A faded delivery truck had been backed beneath a covered passageway farther along the building.

Andy parked beside the Packard and switched off the engine.

The sudden silence was remarkable.

No traffic.

No voices.

Not even the sound of birds.

Only the soft ticking of the cooling engine and the faint movement of wind in the trees.

Father Sean opened his door.

“Come along, Andrew. Let’s see whether civilization has survived indoors.”

An Uncertain Welcome

The enormous front doors opened before they reached them.

A thin man in a charcoal-gray suit stood beneath the portico, his posture so erect that Andy wondered whether he’d been trained by the military or by a particularly unforgiving dancing instructor.

“Father Ryan?”

His voice was low and meticulously controlled.

“Yes.”

“Welcome to Antler Hollow Lodge. I’m Charles Pembroke, the manager.”

He inclined his head.

“We’re delighted you’ve arrived safely.”

“Thank you,” Father Sean replied. “The road made the journey something of an adventure.”

Pembroke permitted a small smile.

“The mountain approaches can be rather difficult in unsettled weather.”

“They’re certainly enthusiastic about discouraging strangers,” Andy said.

The manager’s eyes moved to him.

“Mr. Ryan, I presume.”

"Andrew Ryan."

"A pleasure, sir."

Pembroke glanced toward the car.

"If you'll leave your luggage, we'll have it brought to your rooms."

Andy hesitated.

"I can manage it."

"Quite unnecessary, sir. Mr. Hayes will attend to it."

"Hayes?"

"Our caretaker. He assists with the luggage when we're short of staff."

Andy looked toward the delivery truck.

"Busy fellow?"

"Indispensable."

There was something about Pembroke's delivery that made the word sound less like praise than resignation.

He turned toward the entrance.

"Please. You must be anxious to get settled before dinner."

They followed him through the heavy oak doors.

And entered the Great Hall.

For a moment, even Andy forgot to be suspicious.

The room was enormous.

Its ceiling rose three stories above a floor of dark, polished wood, supported by great timber beams blackened with age. A gallery ran along three sides of the hall, its carved balustrade overlooking the room below. Broad staircases climbed from either end toward the upper floors.

At the far wall stood a fireplace large enough to accommodate a small automobile.

A fire burned within its cavernous stone opening, throwing gold and crimson light across the floor. Above the mantel hung the mounted head of an enormous elk, its spreading antlers casting fantastic shadows across the surrounding stone.

Heavy leather chairs and deep sofas were arranged around low tables. Oriental carpets softened the floor. Brass lamps with amber shades illuminated the room in pools of subdued light, leaving the spaces between them in shadow.

An immense chandelier hung from the central beam, though only a fraction of its bulbs had been lit.

The effect was luxurious, grand, and curiously melancholy.

It was the kind of room that ought to have contained fifty people.

There were four.

An elderly man sat near the fireplace reading a newspaper. A woman in a dark blue dress stood beside one of the long windows, gazing into the mist. Near the reception desk, a heavyset gentleman with silver hair was speaking quietly to a younger man in a brown suit.

Their conversation ceased when the Ryans entered.

Not abruptly.

Not conspicuously.

But enough that Andy noticed.

Pembroke led them toward the desk.

“We’re operating with a reduced staff this season,” he explained. “October is ordinarily rather quiet, and several of our regular employees have already departed.”

“October?” Father Sean said. “I’d understood the hunting season would attract visitors.”

“In previous years, Father, that was certainly the case. But circumstances change.”

He offered no further explanation.

Andy glanced back toward the two men.

The older gentleman had resumed speaking, though his companion continued to watch the newcomers.

At the reception desk, a young woman stood behind an open register.

She'd been examining a sheaf of papers but looked up as they approached.

She was perhaps twenty-five, with dark chestnut hair pinned neatly at the back of her head and intelligent gray eyes that seemed to take in everything without giving much away. Her cream-colored blouse was plain but carefully tailored, and a small silver brooch fastened its collar. She was naturally beautiful, though there was nothing about her appearance that suggested she took particular trouble to be noticed. Her dark hair framed a face of delicate, pleasing proportions, and her eyes were perhaps her most striking feature. Yet the reserve of her expression and the absence of a smile lent her an air of severity. Andy noticed her beauty immediately, though her manner would soon make him considerably less inclined to appreciate it.

"Miss Whitcomb," Pembroke said, "Father Ryan and Mr. Ryan have arrived."

The young woman closed the papers.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. I'm Clara Whitcomb."

Father Sean stepped forward.

"Miss Whitcomb. A pleasure."

Her expression softened slightly.

"Welcome, Father. I hope the journey wasn't too difficult."

"Not at all. My nephew drives with the confidence of a man who expects everyone else to get out of his way."

Clara glanced toward Andy.

"Then I imagine the mountain road was a disappointment."

Father Sean chuckled.

Andy did not.

"Actually, I was more concerned about getting here before dark. The signs aren't particularly helpful."

"I'm sorry you found them inadequate, Mr. Ryan."

"There aren't many of them to find."

"The lodge has been in the same location for forty years."

"Which I suppose makes directions unnecessary."

She met his eyes.

"It hasn't been our experience that guests have difficulty locating it."

Father Sean looked from one to the other.

"Clearly," he said, "we've arrived just in time for a spirited discussion of geography."

Clara lowered her gaze to the register.

"If you'll sign here, please."

Andy accepted the pen.

The register was a heavy leather-bound volume with thick cream-colored pages. He wrote his name beneath his uncle's, automatically glancing at the entries above.

There were several names listed for the preceding three days.

Clara extended her hand.

"I'll take that, Mr. Ryan."

Andy looked up.

"I wasn't finished."

"Were you looking for something?"

"Just curious how many people are staying."

"There are four guests at present."

"Including us?"

"Before your arrival."

"That's a rather small number for a place this size."

"It's the off-season."

"So I've been told."

Clara's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Is there some reason that troubles you?"

"No. Just making conversation."

"Then perhaps we should begin with the weather."

Father Sean coughed discreetly into his hand.

It sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Andy surrendered the pen.

"I take it you're not especially fond of questions, Miss Whitcomb."

"On the contrary. I simply prefer questions that are meant to be answered."

"And mine wasn't?"

"I couldn't say. We've only just met."

For the first time, Andy smiled.

It wasn't an entirely friendly smile.

"Well, then. We have something to look forward to."

Clara's expression did not change.

"Indeed."

Pembroke, who'd been observing the exchange with a slight tightening around the eyes, moved forward.

"Your rooms are prepared. Miss Whitcomb, would you arrange for Mr. Hayes to bring the luggage?"

"Certainly."

She reached beneath the desk for a brass handbell.

Before she could ring it, a sudden sound echoed through the Great Hall.

A door slammed.

Not the front door.

Somewhere beyond the far end of the gallery.

The noise cracked through the vast room with the sharpness of a pistol shot.

Everyone turned.

The elderly man beside the fire lowered his newspaper. The woman at the window looked sharply toward the stairway. Even Pembroke seemed momentarily startled.

Then, from somewhere beyond the gallery, came the muffled sound of raised voices.

A man's voice, angry and insistent.

Another voice, lower, impossible to distinguish.

The argument lasted only a few seconds.

A second door closed.

Silence returned.

Pembroke recovered first.

"My apologies," he said smoothly. "Some of the older doors are inclined to slam when the windows are open. The mountain winds can be quite unpredictable."

Andy looked toward the gallery.

"Apparently."

Clara had gone very still.

Her gaze remained fixed on the upper landing, and for an instant the careful reserve of her expression gave way to something else.

Apprehension.

It vanished when she noticed Andy watching her.

"Mr. Hayes will bring your luggage shortly," she said.

Father Sean thanked her and turned toward the fireplace.

"What a magnificent hall," he observed. "One could almost imagine Henry VIII stepping out of a doorway demanding supper."

Andy followed him.

"More likely a bill collector."

"Much the same thing, I suspect, from the perspective of his victims."

The elderly man beside the fire glanced up and smiled faintly.

Father Sean returned the gesture.

Andy scarcely noticed.

His attention remained on the gallery.

He'd heard arguments in many languages and in more circumstances than he cared to remember. Ordinarily, he took little interest in private quarrels. People had a right to their disagreements, especially in isolated places where escape was difficult.

But the abrupt silence after the raised voices troubled him.

Not because it suggested violence.

It did not.

What troubled him was the reaction of those who'd heard it.

No one had asked what happened.

No one seemed surprised that there had been an argument.

Only that the visitors had overheard it.

A Room with a View

Their rooms occupied the western wing on the second floor, overlooking a wooded slope that disappeared into the mist.

A connecting door stood between them.

The priest noticed the connecting door and smiled.

"Very convenient."

Andy set his suitcase on the luggage stand.

"For what?"

"In case I require your assistance during the night."

"With what?"

"Chess."

"Uncle Sean, if you wake me at two in the morning to play chess, I'm reporting you to the bishop."

"I doubt His Excellency would involve himself in such a trivial matter."

"You underestimate my powers of persuasion."

"On the contrary. I know them rather well."

Father Sean wandered toward the window.

Beyond the glass, the ground dropped steeply into a stand of pines. Through the mist, barely visible, ran the pale ribbon of the road by which they'd arrived.

"There's something extraordinary about this place," he said.

Andy was unpacking his shirts.

"That's one word for it."

"You don't like it?"

"I haven't decided."

"An ominous condition."

"It's isolated. Half the rooms are empty. The staff act as if we're intruding, and somebody upstairs seems determined to start a fight."

Father Sean turned.

"You've been here twenty minutes."

"Twenty-five."

"Then your powers of observation are improving."

Andy placed his shaving kit on the dresser.

"Clara Whitcomb certainly doesn't seem delighted to have us."

"Miss Whitcomb?"

"Unless there's another woman downstairs who looks as though she'd rather be pulling teeth."

Father Sean's eyebrows rose.

"An interesting observation."

"She's rude."

"Is she?"

"You were standing there."

"I was."

"Then you heard her."

"I heard a young woman answering questions."

"She was being difficult."

"Perhaps she thought the same of you."

Andy looked at him.

"Whose side are you on?"

"My dear boy, there are no sides. At least, none that have yet been established to my satisfaction."

"She's the sort who assumes every man is an idiot."

"Perhaps neither of you was particularly eager to make a favorable impression."

Andy gave a reluctant smile.

"You may have a point."

"A rare moment of agreement. We ought to commemorate it."

Andy shut the suitcase with more force than necessary.

Father Sean smiled.

"I rather liked her."

"I'm astonished."

“She has spirit.”

“She has an attitude.”

“Those qualities often resemble one another when viewed from a distance.”

“Then perhaps you should get closer.”

The priest’s smile broadened.

“Perhaps you should,” Father Sean suggested.

Andy laughed.

“I knew you’d find a way to bring the conversation around to my unmarried state.”

“Andrew, I’ve been raising the subject for years. I see no reason to abandon a perfectly respectable tradition.”

“One of these days, Uncle Sean, you’re going to run out of arguments.”

“Then I shall have to rely upon prayer.”

“You already do.”

“Yes, but I may need to become considerably more persistent.”

They laughed together, and Andy returned to unpacking.

Father Sean returned to his room, leaving the connecting door open.

Andy crossed to the window.

The mist had thickened until the forest below resembled a dark sea. Somewhere in the distance, a single bird called, its cry sharp and strangely mournful.

He was about to turn away when movement near the building caught his eye.

A man had emerged from a narrow side entrance below the western wing.

He wore a dark work jacket and carried a small toolbox beneath one arm. He paused under the overhanging roof, glanced toward the courtyard, and then moved along the wall toward the rear of the lodge.

There was nothing extraordinary about his behavior.

A caretaker attending to repairs, perhaps.

Yet the man's movement held Andy's attention.

At the corner of the building, he stopped.

He turned and looked upward.

For a brief instant, Andy had the uncomfortable impression that the stranger was looking directly at his window.

Then the man disappeared around the corner.

Andy waited.

The mist closed over the empty path.

"Uncle Sean?"

"Yes?"

"Did Pembroke say how many people worked here?"

"I don't believe so."

"Just wondering."

A moment later, Father Sean appeared in the doorway, holding a small leather case.

"Andrew, have you seen my spectacles?"

Andy turned.

"They're on your nose."

The priest touched them.

"Ah."

He considered this discovery.

"A disturbing development."

"What's that?"

"I'm beginning to misplace things without actually losing them."

Andy laughed.

“Come on. Let’s see if they’ve got a decent cup of coffee.”

“Splendid idea.”

Father Sean started toward the corridor, then paused.

“By the way, Andrew.”

“Yes?”

“I believe you owe Miss Whitcomb an apology.”

“For what?”

“For whatever it was you did to irritate her.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Then apologize for your innocence. It’ll be excellent practice for marriage.”

“Uncle Sean!”

But the priest had already disappeared into the corridor, his quiet laughter floating back through the open door.

Andy shook his head and followed.

For the moment, he’d forgotten the man outside.

Shadows in the Great Hall

By half past six, the Great Hall had changed character.

The last of the daylight had withdrawn from the tall windows, leaving them black and reflective. The lamps had been turned higher, and the fire burned with a steady, almost ceremonial grandeur. Shadows from the antlers above the mantel stretched across the ceiling like the branches of dead trees.

The room smelled of woodsmoke, old leather, and the faint, expensive scent of polished furniture.

Father Sean had found a chair beside the fireplace and was engaged in conversation with the elderly gentleman who’d been reading the newspaper.

Andy stood near the reception desk, examining a framed photograph of the lodge taken shortly after its construction.

In the photograph, the building stood beneath a cloudless summer sky. Its terraces were crowded with men in straw boaters and women carrying parasols. An early touring automobile occupied the foreground.

The place looked entirely different.

Not merely younger.

Happier.

“That’s from 1909.”

Andy turned.

Clara Whitcomb stood a few feet away holding a leather folder.

He stepped aside.

“Quite a crowd.”

“The lodge was very fashionable in those days.”

“And now?”

“It’s still fashionable, Mr. Ryan.”

“Just less crowded.”

She looked at him.

“Is there anything you require?”

“Information.”

“I’d gathered that.”

Andy smiled despite himself.

“How long have you worked here?”

“Three years.”

“Do you like it?”

"Most of the time."

"Even in the off-season?"

"Especially in the off-season."

He glanced toward the dark windows.

"Doesn't it get lonely?"

"Not particularly."

"Must be pleasant to have the place nearly to yourself."

Clara's eyes narrowed slightly.

"I suppose that depends on the company."

Andy laughed.

"Do you always have the last word?"

"Only when someone insists on giving me the opportunity."

She moved past him toward the desk.

He watched her go.

A woman who disliked strangers, apparently, and had perfected the art of making them aware of it.

There was, he conceded privately, something admirable about such consistency.

At the fireplace, Father Sean raised a hand.

"Andrew! Come meet Mr. Hawthorne."

Andy joined them.

The elderly gentleman rose slowly from his chair.

"Edmund Hawthorne," he said, extending his hand. "Your uncle tells me you served in the war."

"That's right."

"Intelligence, wasn't it?"

Andy glanced at Father Sean.

“I may have mentioned it,” the priest said innocently.

Hawthorne shook his hand with surprising firmness.

“Necessary business, intelligence. Unpleasant business, too, I imagine.”

“At times.”

“And now?”

“Government work. Mostly in New York.”

“Aren’t we all working for the government these days?” Hawthorne replied, though his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Andy studied him.

The man was in his late sixties, tall but slightly stooped, with neatly parted silver hair and a finely tailored tweed jacket. His face bore the elaborate network of lines common to men who’d spent many years worrying about money or about the people who possessed it.

He wore a heavy gold signet ring.

“Are you here for the hunting?” Hawthorne asked.

“No. Just a holiday.”

“Wise choice. There hasn’t been much worth hunting in these woods for years.”

Father Sean gestured toward the mounted elk.

“I should imagine the local wildlife has learned from the experience.”

Hawthorne gave a dry chuckle.

“Some creatures learn, Father. Others never do.”

He said it lightly, yet the words seemed to carry an irritation that had nothing to do with wildlife.

From the far side of the room came the sound of footsteps.

The heavyset gentleman Andy had noticed earlier crossed toward the staircase, his expression dark. The younger man in the brown suit followed several paces behind.

Hawthorne watched them.

His fingers tightened almost imperceptibly on the arm of his chair.

Father Sean noticed.

Andy noticed Father Sean noticing.

A moment later, the older gentleman excused himself.

“Dinner at seven, I believe. A pleasure meeting you both.”

He walked away without looking toward the staircase again.

Father Sean settled back into his chair.

“A most interesting fellow.”

“Did he say what he does?”

“Insurance.”

“Insurance?”

“Or investments. The distinction became somewhat unclear during his explanation.”

Andy sat opposite him.

“You don’t seem convinced.”

“On the contrary, I’m perfectly convinced that Mr. Hawthorne possesses considerable experience in explaining things.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s lying.”

“Certainly not. Sometimes people explain things excessively because they’re telling the truth and fear they won’t be believed.”

“And sometimes?”

“Because they’ve discovered that the easiest way to conceal one fact is to bury it beneath ten others.”

Andy stared at his uncle.

“For a retired professor, you’ve a remarkably suspicious mind.”

Father Sean looked offended.

“Suspicion is an unattractive habit. I prefer curiosity.”

“There’s a difference?”

“An enormous one. Suspicion begins by assuming something is wrong. Curiosity begins by wondering whether one has understood it correctly.”

Andy considered that.

“Perhaps you should’ve joined the Bureau.”

“And spend my life among men who believe every locked door conceals a criminal? No, thank you.”

“Some do.”

“Indeed. But most conceal a cupboard.”

They sat together in comfortable silence.

Across the room, Clara was speaking to Pembroke in low tones. The manager’s face remained composed, but he seemed displeased. At one point he glanced toward the gallery, then shook his head.

Clara said something more.

Pembroke’s expression hardened.

Their conversation ended abruptly.

A little later, the woman who’d been standing beside the window crossed the Great Hall.

She wore a dark blue dress with a modest collar and a small cameo fastened at her throat. Her hair, streaked with gray, was arranged in a neat coil, and she moved with the quiet assurance of someone accustomed to passing unnoticed.

As she approached reception, Clara bent to retrieve a folder that had slipped beneath the desk.

Several loose papers scattered across the floor.

The woman stopped.

“Here, my dear. Let me help you.”

"Oh, please don't trouble yourself, Mrs. Vale."

"It's no trouble."

She knelt carefully and gathered two of the papers.

Clara smiled.

"Thank you."

Mrs. Vale handed them over.

"You look tired. Have you had anything to eat?"

"Not yet. I'll get something after dinner."

"Then see that you do. There's no virtue in making yourself ill on behalf of other people."

Clara gave a little laugh.

"I'll try to remember that."

"Do."

The woman touched Clara's sleeve lightly, then withdrew her hand.

It was a simple exchange, unremarkable amid the ordinary courtesies of hotel life.

Yet Andy noticed that Clara's manner had softened.

The sharp young woman who'd been determined to defeat him in conversation seemed entirely at ease with Mrs. Vale.

He watched the older woman move away toward the fireplace.

Father Sean followed his gaze.

"A pleasant lady."

"Seems so."

"Mrs. Vale, I believe. We were introduced briefly."

"Do you know her?"

"Not at all."

"She seems fond of Clara."

Father Sean smiled.

"There is something rather natural about the way Mrs. Vale and Miss Whitcomb speak to one another," Father Sean observed.

"Perhaps they've known each other longer than we realize," Andy replied.

Andy smiled.

"Unlike certain guests she's been obliged to entertain."

"Ah, well. First impressions aren't always our finest achievements."

"Speaking from experience?"

"A lifetime of it, my boy."

Andy leaned back.

"Clara Whitcomb doesn't seem especially interested in making friends."

"Perhaps she doesn't find it necessary to make them with everyone she meets."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, Andrew, that friendship is a gift, not an obligation."

Andy shook his head.

"You're determined to defend her."

"Not at all. I'm simply wondering whether your first impression is the only one you're prepared to entertain."

The priest looked toward the fire.

"I've found that the second impression of a person is often more interesting than the first." Andy smiled.

"Sounds like a lecture."

"Then consider it a very short one."

A faint sound came from the far side of the hall.

A door opened.

Charles Pembroke emerged from the private corridor, followed by a broad-shouldered man in a worn work jacket.

The man carried a small metal toolbox and wore the tired expression of someone whose evening had already involved too many inconveniences.

Pembroke was speaking quietly.

“I want the latch attended to before the guests retire, Hayes.”

“I’ve looked at it twice already.”

“Then look at it a third time.”

“Wood’s swollen. It needs more than tightening a screw.”

“Do what you can.”

Hayes shifted his toolbox.

“I will. But don’t blame me if the thing sticks again.”

Pembroke noticed the Ryans and fell silent.

The caretaker glanced toward them, then disappeared through a service doorway beside the staircase.

Father Sean watched him go.

“A practical man.”

“How can you tell?” Andy asked.

“He seems to have discovered that buildings don’t improve simply because their owners wish them to.”

Andy laughed.

Then his eyes returned to the service doorway.

He’d seen the same man outside his bedroom window.

Apparently Hayes had been making his rounds.

That explained the toolbox, at least.

He turned back to the fire.

For a while, neither man spoke.

The enormous logs shifted upon their bed of coals. Sparks rose through the chimney, and the great shadows overhead moved with them.

Beyond the windows, the mist pressed against the glass.

Father Sean looked thoughtfully around the room.

“Strange,” he murmured.

“What’s that?”

“People come to places like this to escape their troubles.”

“And?”

“And somehow they always remember to pack them.”

Andy leaned back.

“You’re not about to tell me there’s something sinister going on here, are you?”

“Certainly not. We’ve only just arrived.”

“Good.”

“I’ve no intention of imagining a mystery where none exists.”

“Excellent.”

“Besides, we’re on holiday.”

“That,” Andy said, “is the first sensible thing you’ve said all afternoon.”

Father Sean smiled serenely.

“Then let’s hope, my boy, that we have a very dull week.”

Beyond the tall windows, the mist pressed against the glass.

Upstairs, somewhere beyond the deserted gallery, a floorboard creaked.

Neither man heard it.

Nor did they see the faint movement of a figure passing behind the balustrade, pausing for a moment in the darkness above the Great Hall.

The figure remained there until the two Ryans rose and went toward the dining room.

Then it withdrew into the shadows.

And Antler Hollow Lodge, which had stood for decades watching the changing seasons pass across the mountains, settled quietly around its newest guests.

As though it had been expecting them.