

PIECE OF CAKE

Today I'm going to figure out how to kill Alene before she absconds with my husband. I've dithered around long enough pretending I don't know she and Carlton are sleeping together. It's not that I still love the arrogant bastard; I just don't want her to get my half of his money.

Trouble is, I haven't decided how to do it yet. To strangle someone you need strength. I'm five-two, a hundred and ten pounds in a wet T-shirt. Poison scares me, even if I could get some. Guns are too noisy and bloody. Knives, axes and hammers are incredibly messy, never mind the strength issue. Suffocation, drowning? For that the victim must be incapacitated.

Incapacitated ... now there's a thought. You'd think that since Alene is the one stealing my husband, she'd be the petite blonde with the Barbie figure and big blue eyes. But no, that's me, even at forty. Alene is twenty, tall, skinny and plain. What Carlton sees in her is a complete mystery. Her fashion sense begins and ends with the fake gold buttons she wears in her penny loafers instead of pennies.

"Morning, Miz Hamilton. Writing a new mystery novel?"

I jumped. "Oh, hi, Alene. Didn't I make it clear not to disturb me while I'm writing? Please knock next time." Except there won't *be* a next time, bitch.

"Sure, no problem, ma'am. I'll take Tarzan for his walk then, and do the dusting later."

"Fine. And don't forget to put the mutt in his yard afterwards. The landscaper will be here soon and they don't get along."

I don't get along with Tarzan either—never liked animals, period—but Carlton insisted a big house needs a big guard dog, namely a Great Dane. As a puppy he was kind of cute, but when he destroyed my Pradas the deal was off. Why he picked my designer pumps instead of more chewable shoes like Carlton's Bruno Maglis or Alene's penny loafers, only Dog knows. Maybe the three of them have a pact, because it's obvious they adore each other and ignore me.

Eureka! I know what would knock the woman out—that date rape drug, Ecstasy. Bet I could buy it online, but besides being illegal, it could be traced back to me. I'm sure it's sold under the table in bars, if I wanted to go to some sleazy joint in a bad neighborhood. I'd have to go in disguise, but I could still get kidnapped or followed home. Either way, if the bad guys saw our palatial mansion there'd be no stopping them.

Assuming I get the Ecstasy and incapacitate the bitch, what'll I do with her? I could drown her in the lily pond, but how do I get her over there?

Here comes Raul to do the landscaping. He looks like a beefcake model, sashaying along in his white tank top and skin-tight jeans. While Carlton plays CEO in the city, Raul and I have developed quite a friendship. Most of the week I'm busy with shopping and clubs and writing mystery novels, but I keep Fridays open for my journal—and Raul. We've never been intimate, but that's about to change if he knows how to get me some Ecstasy.

"Hello, Raul. What needs working on today?"

"Hi, Zena. I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you." His mischievous smile makes the cutest dimples. "Did you have anything special in mind?"

I racked my brain for something to do with landscaping. "Well ... maybe the reeds in the lily pond need thinning out. Let's take a look."

The lily pond is close to the gazebo and—talk about serendipity—that gave me an idea for how to neatly dispose of Alene. Our gazebo is made of typical white privacy trellis, but it's unusual in having two levels. The top with its open sides gives a bird's-eye view of the estate, while the bottom level is completely enclosed with the trellis except for one door.

My plan for Alene is to have her serve me tea on the top story and I'll invite her to join me, and when she's not looking I'll slip the Ecstasy into her tea. As soon as she's unconscious I'll tip her out the window, twelve feet head first to the ground. If the fall kills her, so much the better. Either way I'll drag her into the lily pond and drown her, and there she'll rot.

The reeds in the pond really are overgrown. Thinning them will make it easier to drag Alene's body into the water. I could ask Raul to help, but involving him would get too complicated.

"Wow, Zena, this is some gazebo. Mind if I check out the view?"

When I joined him on the top deck he edged closer and stood almost touching me, breathing faster. I thought Alene might be watching us from the house so I moved away and he followed me back down to the lower level.

"This part is for catering and storing extra garden furniture. It also has running water, and electricity for night parties," I said, working up to my big question.

It's hard to see through the white trellis, especially when it's sunny, so I opened the door and we walked into the cool shade. A light breeze with a delicate scent of water lilies flowed through the trellis. I felt the heat of Raul's body as his arm snaked around my waist. Spinning me around to face him he pressed his lips hard on mine.

Out of breath, I pushed him away and blurted out, "Can you get me some Ecstasy?"

Close up, his brown eyes were flecked with gold and brimming with lust. "Baby, do you need to ask?"

"I mean those pills."

He stared at me with wide eyes. "What do you need *that* stuff for? It's poison. I'll show you ecstasy like it's meant to be."

"They aren't for me. It's—well, I can't tell you what it's for. I just need enough to knock someone out."

Raul laughed. "This is about one of your mystery novels, right?" He kissed me again, more dangerously.

Next minute I found myself telling him exactly why I needed the Ecstasy.

"Shee-it! You seriously want to ice your housekeeper?" He snickered. "Baby, Ecstasy won't hack it. For a quick knockout you need rufies, or like that. You sure this is for real?"

Grabbing the side pockets of his jeans I pulled him tight against me. "It's for real. Name your price."

"Prove to me you want it."

"Prove to me you have it. Then we'll talk." It took all my willpower to put daylight between us and not give in to ravishment then and there.

A voice came from outside the gazebo. "Miz Hamilton?"

We froze. Damned if it wasn't that sneaky bitch, Alene. I was tempted to pretend Raul and I weren't there, but she came right up to the door. By the time she got it open, he and I were five feet apart.

"What do you want, Alene? It's so hot in here," I said to explain my perspiring brow and the locks of hair escaping from my French twist.

Her beady eyes darted around as if she were searching for evidence of an illicit affair— like the one she was having with my husband. "I'm ready to go grocery shopping for the weekend, ma'am. Is there anything special you need? Will you be entertaining?" Her face was one big smirk.

The adrenalin surging through me seemed to make my brain work faster. "You read my mind, Alene. Raul is helping me move some of this furniture upstairs for a wine and cheese party on Sunday. I'm thinking ten guests. You're better at estimating the food than I am. Come on in and help me figure out what I'll need."

What I'll need to bash your head in, that is. I know a gift horse when I see one— Alene, Raul, the location, all meeting at the same time like pieces of a puzzle. It was meant to be.

"Fine, Miz Hamilton." Alene settled into a low-backed rattan armchair and bent over her notebook, ready to scribble away. I stationed myself behind her, my eyes searching the room for the right weapon. I spotted a stoneware lamp shaped like a vase with a narrow neck perfect for gripping, a base just right for bashing, and a cord handy for strangling.

Raul looked at me like he knew exactly what I was thinking, and we had a little conversation right there with our eyes. I'd start the job, he'd finish it, and we'd both drag Alene into the pond. Her potential for blackmailing both of us was too deadly to let loose.

Silently I picked up the lamp and swung it with all my force at her head. There was a crack like a skull fracturing and she was out cold. Raul wrapped the cord around her neck and pulled it tight, muscles bulging, until she stopped breathing. It was over shockingly fast, and there wasn't a drop of incriminating blood.

Raul took her head and I took her feet, gold-button loafers and all, and we carried her to avoid leaving drag marks. The pond is five feet deep and dark, and you can't see the bottom through the reeds and lily pads. A few yards in, I noticed one of her shoes had fallen off but we didn't see it anywhere.

We held her under water until the air stopped bubbling out of her lungs, and she sank right to the bottom. Raul took several skull-sized rocks from the border of a raised flower bed to weight her body down, because when she starts rotting the gas will try to bring her up.

We were panting from the exertion but instead of feeling tired, we were totally turned on by the murder. In the seclusion of the gazebo we ripped off our muddy clothes and made passionate love. As Raul had promised, it was "ecstasy like it's meant to be." Afterwards we went up to my wing of the house and showered in my private suite.

Now that the housekeeper isn't around to spy on us, we decided the landscaping needs work at least three times a week, and we sealed the deal with a long kiss.

"Raul darling, what are we going to tell Carlton?"

"Anything you want, baby. I'd better get going before he comes home." And off he went, leaving me to get my act together.

I pictured the scene with Carlton. *Q. Zena, where's Alene? A. The last I saw her she was going shopping but she's not back yet.*

Oops! Her notepad is still in the gazebo. I tore off the top sheet, flushed it down the toilet, and put the rest of the pad and the pencil on the kitchen counter. But my fingerprints were on them, and a lack of prints would also be suspicious, so I wrapped them in a plastic bag with Tarzan's poop (which used to be Alene's job, yuck) and stuffed it deep into the big trash bin outside the kitchen.

Q. Zena, why isn't Alene answering the intercom? A. I gave her the afternoon off and she took the bus to meet a friend. That sounds better. Looking for the friend will keep the police busy for months.

Carlton was so upset when Alene didn't turn up to fix supper that he told the police to forget waiting forty-eight hours, just get busy looking for her right away. He has the clout to make them do that.

I didn't dare suggest hiring a replacement just yet, but meanwhile I have to do the housekeeping. This ruined my time with Raul, so he quit and said he's going back to Mexico. On the bright side, the police are hot on the trail of wild geese in trying to locate Alene.

If my husband still misses his little side dish, he doesn't show it, but he can't have forgotten how he got the hots for her and froze me out. Little did any of us realize that my ice cube of jealousy would turn into an iceberg of murder.

Tarzan has been moping around and Carlton took him to the vet, but they found nothing wrong. Treating him to a dog park is out of the question because I can't control him and he doesn't take to strangers.

Carlton thinks he might perk up if we let him have the run of the property during the day, as he'll be contained by the perimeter wall and the driveway gate. I agreed but my stomach churned. Could Tarzan pick up the scent of Alene in her lily-pond grave a month after she got there?

The dog loves his new freedom, but when it's time for his daddy to get home from work he gallops up to the back door, panting and grinning. Carlton likes to feed him personally so they can have bonding time.

This evening Tarzan brought home a little gift which he dropped on the kitchen floor at Carlton's feet. A muddy shoe.

Carlton laughed and thought it was so cute. "Oh my god, where in the world did he get that gross thing? It stinks like rotting flesh." He got some kitchen tongs and gingerly reached out to pick it up.

Tarzan bared his teeth in a growl, and his eyes turned black.

Carlton backed off. "Okay, boy, okay. I love your present. Sorry, it can't stay in the house, pal." He got the dog to leave the shoe by luring him with a treat and shutting him in the housekeeper's suite next to the kitchen.

Grasping the shoe with the tongs, Carlton started to take it outside to the trash. He wrinkled his nose at the stench, then peered at it more closely, focusing on a gleam in the putrid mess. With one cautious finger he enlarged the spot, and his eyebrows shot up as he recognized the fake gold button Alene wore in the penny slot on her loafers.

He stared at me, suspicion and hatred dawning in his eyes.

I stared back with wide-eyed innocence, a dress rehearsal for the way I'll act if I'm wrongly accused of Murder One.

I'll copy other beautiful female killers who got away with homicide by insisting on their innocence and never cracking. I'll find a male lawyer who knows how to play a jury like a fiddle, and I'll play *him* like a fiddle. I'll wear plain hairdos and generic eyeglasses, and cry crocodile tears if the prosecutor gets too mean. My outfits will be demure enough to cover my cleavage, yet tight enough to focus attention on my spectacular breasts.

Getting acquitted will be a piece of cake.

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