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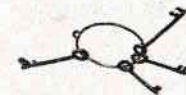
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# THE ESCAPE GAME



MARISSA MEYER & TAMARA MOSS

HOT  
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BOOKS

**LBRIS**

We know  
books

# THE ESCAPE GAME

SEASON FOUR FINALE

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**A Bloody Good Time Was Had by All**

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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 ass you are."

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

"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," Fitzy 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.

Fitzy 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 Fitzy 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." Fitzy 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

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?*"

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.

**SIX MONTHS LATER . . .**

**Audition Video: Carter Kelly****THE ESCAPE GAME**

SEASON FIVE

**The girl sits as still as a mannequin, her hands clutched in her lap.** To her right: an old-school chalkboard covered in mathematical equations and pi written out to far too many digits. To her left: bookshelves displaying pyramids of textbooks; a pastel-colored Rubik's Cube; a large stuffed snail; and a gallery of framed prints showing the center of a sunflower, a nautilus seashell, a pineapple. Everything is illuminated by fairy lights.

The girl herself has brown skin, tight curly black hair, and a constellation of freckles across her full cheeks.

"Hello, producers, casting directors, and anyone else watching. In case you don't recognize me . . ." Her hands tremble as she holds up a pair of glasses with large round frames. "Maybe this helps? If not—then I bet this will." She snaps her fingers, and her image dissolves in a waterfall of neon-green numerals.

The girl has disappeared. In her place is a cartoon version of herself. The cartoon is poised, in a plaid minidress and thigh-high boots—a far cry from the girl's *Scooby Doo* T-shirt. Her curls are now fire-engine red, and the thick round glasses are perched on the end of her nose.

"I'm Kick It Carter," says the avatar. "The highest-ranking Solve Specialist on the Domain."

She holds a palm flat, and a graphic is superimposed above it, showing a scrolling social media feed with videos of Carter's avatar exuberantly explaining various puzzles and codes, opening complicated locks, interviewing past contestants. The effects look professional.

"I joined the Clue Masters as an intern in the third season and

have built a platform with hundreds of thousands of followers. I'm super excited to give them a sneak peek behind the scenes of *The Escape Game*. But that's not why you should pick me as a season five contestant. You should pick me because I live for puzzles and logic and problem-solving. I'm captain of the chess club, I took my school to our state's math competition last year, and in my spare time I am also an amateur photographer. My passion?" The cartoon gestures, and photos appear around her. Sunflowers. Seashells. Pineapples. "The Fibonacci sequence! Isn't it beautiful?"

She winks. "Millions of likes and comments don't lie. Together, we're going to make *Escape Game* history. Ciao!"

The cartoon pretends to pull down a blind, and her image is replaced with the real Carter Kelly again, still anxious. "So that's my audition video. Um. Thanks for watching!"

*Producer notes:*

*Too bad we can't get the cartoon instead of the girl*

*Overachiever, goody-two-shoes vibe . . . pair with a rule breaker for drama?*

*Math whiz. Check with V—how much math involved this season?*

*Built-in fan base doesn't hurt*

*Alert costuming department—makeover needed*

## Carter

"Which makes this one a three . . . and seven here, and eight . . . five . . . two, and done!" Carter hit the stop button on her phone's timer. Her momentary elation fizzled. "Three minutes and fifty-four seconds? Pathetic." She ripped out the page from her sudoku book, crumpled it up, and tossed it at the trash can in the corner of the classroom. It bounced off the edge, skittering across the carpet.

The bell rang as Mrs. Melnyk walked in. She'd had no qualms letting Carter eat lunch in her classroom this semester, and if she suspected that the request had more to do with Carter's dismal social life than her need for peace and quiet while she studied for the next math competition, she didn't let on.

Carter checked her emails again. Still nothing.

As her classmates took their seats, she wondered for the millionth time which of them were *Escape Game* fans. Which of them had accounts on the Domain, the most comprehensive fan-run website about the show. Which of them followed *her*.

Kick It Carter. Highest-Ranking Solve Specialist. It was an honor that filled her with giddy pride. It was also an honor that meant absolutely nothing in real life. No one here knew who she was.

But if she got chosen for the show . . .

She knew it was an enormous risk, announcing her identity publicly. Her parents had looked at her like she'd lost her Fibonacci-loving mind when she'd told them about the audition. Her father's bewildered words had plagued her ever since. *You don't even like getting your school photos taken.*

Which was true.

But they couldn't understand how much she wanted this. No—

needed this. It wasn't about fame or money. It was about finding her people. Not faceless usernames, but real friends.

Kick It Carter was popular and self-assured. Beautiful and confident, thanks to the cartoon avatar her app-developer father and fashionista mother had helped her build. A hero to awkward, math-loving girls everywhere. But there would be no hiding behind her alter ego on set. It would be Carter and the cameras and the Game Master's puzzles . . . and her team. People who were as obsessed with puzzles and escape rooms as she was. People who admired her for her brain, not her clever online quips. People who *got it*.

The idea was as foreign as it was tantalizing. She'd brainstormed more than a hundred potential team names. She had plans to order team T-shirts as soon as she knew their sizes. She would finally be included in one of those group chats that evidently every teen in the world was in except for her.

Once she got on the show, Carter would never have to hide her true self again.

Before class could start, she dared to check her emails. One last time.

Her heart launched into her throat.

Re: Carter Kelly Audition

Dear Miss Kelly,

We are thrilled to extend an invitation for you to be a contestant in season five of *The Escape Game* . . .

## Audition Video: Beck Matheson

### THE ESCAPE GAME

SEASON FIVE

**The boy has a swoop of thick brown hair beneath a cowboy hat,** lips so red he might have been sucking on a cherry lollipop, and an angelic smile. He also appears to be standing in a Wild West saloon.

"Howdy. The name's Beck, and I'd like to welcome you to the Sweetbrier Saloon. Also known as . . . my parents' gardening shed." He bats at a kerosene lamp hanging from the ceiling. Shadows dance across the wood walls. "Last year, I converted this place into my sixth escape room. And yes, the theme is *heavily* inspired by the Sweetbrier Treasure. I'm obsessed with that stuff. The moment I heard about this season's prize—!" He mimes his head exploding. "But I can't be the only one who feels that way, so what makes me stand out from the crowd? One word: lasers. As in, laser focus."

He picks up a deck of playing cards and starts to shuffle. "This room took me five weeks to create. I scoured flea markets and craft stores for the props. The stag antlers over there came from an estate sale. The whiskey kegs and liquor bottles are mostly from thrift stores." He starts doing tricks—fanning the cards in a line down his arm, then flipping them over in a mesmerizing wave. "This old cash register is a kid's toy, painted to look authentic. Even these cards are handmade." He fans the cards out and flips them toward the camera, revealing aces and spades, hearts and clubs. "Hint: there's a clue hidden in the face cards, but you'll have to play the game to find out what it is."

He slings himself onto a barstool. "I've had a lot of hobbies. Coding. Mechanics. Pinball competitions. Alpacas . . . Long story. But escape rooms have been my passion for years. Playing them *and* creating them. It's one thing to solve puzzles, it's another to

mastermind them yourself. Now, I'm not saying I'm gunning for the Game Master's job, but I like to think that I'll be able to hold my own in this competition. So, Louis Augustus Russell?" He hops off the stool and pulls a pistol from a holster at his side, aiming it at the camera. "I challenge you to a duel!"

The gun *clicks* anticlimactically. Beck grins. "It's also possible that I have way too much time on my hands. So . . . call me? Though I also accept communications via telegraph and pony express."

He laughs at his own joke, and the video ends.

*Producer notes:*

*Inside knowledge of escape rooms, good for media interviews*

*Did he say alpacas??*

*Obsession with Sweetbrier—he'll be motivated*

*Loving the doe-eyed look, the optimism. We're going to eat this kid alive.*

There was an ongoing debate in the world of forensic science over how much information could be gleaned from the patterns in blood spatter. But in the case of the medieval-torture-chamber-themed escape room Beck had recently started creating in his parents' garage, the blood spatter was going to be a *literal* message. If the "prisoners" were paying attention, they would see that the splotches of crimson blood on the concrete floor matched the alphabet code that would be written beneath the wall shackles.

Designing escape rooms was the rare hobby that held Beck's attention because it was actually a hundred hobbies mixed into one. Here, he was an engineer, an archaeologist, a scholar, a mathematician, an artist, an electrician, a cryptographer, a historian, and a storyteller all in one.

Here, he was a Game Master.

And like the great Game Masters before him—Louis Augustus Russell, Victor Cunningham, Jasper Barrett—he knew the importance of getting the details just so. It was painstaking work. Mixing the paint to be the right shade of red, the right consistency, the right sheen when it dried. Styling it in a way that would appear random at first . . . but not after careful examination.

His laptop was set up on the bench, playing through old *Escape Game* episodes while he worked. He'd been watching the series on repeat ever since he got chosen as an upcoming contestant. He was back to season four, episode two—the speakeasy room, one of his favorites.

He paused his painting to look up as Sierra Angelos fumed about