



Who Killed

TALIA JAMES



By: Gracey Bento



Music plays so loud it can be heard miles away. The windows are cracked just enough to let a cool breeze blow into the people packed room. The gossip and chatter of hundreds of people and the chinks of wine glasses within the room fight against the roaring music. Everyone here has one goal, and that is to witness billionaire Talia James get herself yet another billion dollars. No one is really sure why they came to watch; it seems like it'd be quite boring. Maybe it was to try and find out how she does it. Or maybe to say they've seen the richest girl alive in person, and if they're lucky, shake her hand. The huge ballroom closes its doors, no longer admitting people in. The bobbing heads of the caterers and their plates of hors d'oeuvres weave through the thick crowd. When the music stops, and all heads turn towards the young woman who walks out onto the stage, red velvet curtains giving her a stately background.

Talia James has beautiful dark brown hair that's been slightly curled. It falls neatly at the end of her chest, as does the gold necklace she wears around her neck. She'd wearing a tight red dress showing her lean figure, tall black heels accentuating her height.. None of those features held a candle to her eyes, so bright a blue they may as well be glowing. There's no mistaking the brilliant blue eyes of Talia James. Sparkling in the spotlight that's been shown on her, her vibrant blue eyes scan the crowd, seeming to be searching for someone. She looks desperate; a strange look for someone who is about to get a lifetime's supply of money... again. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen," she starts uncertainty, her eyes still darting around the room. Nobody seems to notice; they're too transfixed on her glimmering eyes to notice anything off.

"I'd like to start by thanking..." She trails off and gives the room one last glance. She takes a deep breath in before continuing once again. "I'd like to thank my parents, who sadly passed away a year ago, for everything they did for me through the early stages of my journey." She pauses for applause. Surrounded by all of these adoring people, Talia had never felt more alone.

Talia looks straight ahead at an imaginary dot on the opposite side of the room and plasters on her best award winning smile. No matter how fake, no one would dare question Talia James. No one. Talia pushes on to continue her speech, thanking everyone else who supposedly helped her on her path to riches. The crowd cheers after every name. *If they only knew*, thought Talia. When she finishes, an older gentleman comes up onto the stage with her. Together they hold a giant check with Talia's name on it. There is a symphony of press cameras snapping pictures for tomorrow's headlines, and reporters swarming the stage trying in vain to get a quote from Talia. Her mind is on other things.

Suddenly, there is a loud crack, and the lights flicker. Everything falls silent, and the people stare at Talia in shocked horror. On the left side of Talia's red dress, a darkness spreads as a thick liquid begins to soak through. Talia James drops dead on the stage of the silent ballroom, not a word from her mouth. Everyone here had one goal, to witness billionaire Talia James get herself yet another billion dollars. Everyone, except for one. Suspect list: Friend, businessman, brother, husband, sister, maid, rival, and a small girl no older than nine.

Who killed Talia James?

The Friend

Callie L. Williams stared as her best friend was shot. Like everyone else, she didn't have a verbal reaction, but the tears fell just the same. Lots of them, too many to count. When chaos broke out, she still stood there, frozen against the rising panic.

Her best friend was dead.

There was nothing to be done about it.

"Call the doctor!" someone screamed, but Callie knew it was no use. Talia was already dead. Callie stroked her own long blonde hair as Talia used to do to her when Callie got nervous. Even though she knew it wasn't Talia doing it, it was comforting nonetheless.

Callie stood there, frozen in time, too shocked to even move. She'd warned Talia not to do this big deal in public. But Talia had always wanted to be in the spotlight. Once she had it, she wouldn't even think about giving it up. And now, she's died in the spotlight. *Fitting I suppose*, Callie thought, struck by the cold irony.

Callie watched as the panicked masses were ushered from the ballroom. People, afraid for their lives, worked against the security teams who were attempting to keep order among the chaos. Slowly order was restored as the police arrived. Callie was eventually pulled from the ballroom and led to a small room where seven other people sat, wringing their hands. Callie recognized a few of them, but walked speechlessly over to the eighth chair in the corner of the room. She sat next to a little girl in a small white dress with a rainbow lollipop in her hand. Her red hair was curled into big bouncy curls that reached just below her shoulders.

The girl probably didn't have a care in the world.

For a moment, Callie envied her. She envied her so much, that the jealousy threatened to overwhelm her, tears welling in her eyes.

But she didn't let it.

Talia would want her to stay strong.

Talia was always the put-together one. She'd known what she wanted to do even before she reached middle school. She knew how to hide emotions from the world, and to sweet talk anyone into anything, she even knew what Callie would be when she grew up. It was like she had a crystal ball, or she was a crystal ball. She could be queen of the world.

While Talia was all that, Callie was all... hold on, imagine a huge ballroom where there are people dancing and laughing. Now look in the corner at the one speck of dust that the servants forgot to clean off. Cut the dust in half. And half again. One more time. Now see the proton in the center of it? That's Callie. A nobody. Unimportant.

But what Callie didn't know, is that protons are in everything. Without Callie, Talia wouldn't have been anything.

Callie didn't understand how much Talia relied on her. And now, she never would.

"Callie Williams? Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" someone called walking through one of the two doors in the room. She recognized him as the man who'd pulled her in

here. Probably a curious detective that only cared about the boost his career would get he cracked such a high profile murder case. *Murder*, that thought made Callie cry for real this time.

Stay strong, she heard Talia's voice echo in her head. It sounded so real that Callie questioned if her best friend was really dead after all. She even looked over to her left, half-expecting to make eye contact with Talia. Instead, she found only an uncaring metal wall.

"Yeah," Callie sobbed, "Ask me whatever." And with that, the man gestured for her to follow him into a smaller interrogation room through a door to her left.

When they got in, Callie wondered why she was here. What could she possibly have to offer? She was just Talia's friend; surprised in the ballroom like everyone else. And certainly not a suspect, right? But if the detective wanted some questions answered, then she thought cooperating was the least she could do to, even if it was pointless.

"So where were you when Talia was shot?" the man asked. Callie choked down a sob and thought about the question. Where *was* she when Talia was shot? She honestly had no clue. Was she off with her boyfriend drinking wine? Was she trying to shove her way to the front of the room? When trying to recall, all Callie could come up with was a big blank.

"I don't remember," she admitted. The detective raised a suspicious eyebrow, curious as to why she wouldn't know something like that. He made some marks on his clipboard and moved onto the next question.

"What was your relationship with Talia?" he asked. Callie knew how to answer that one without hesitation.

"Talia was my best friend. We met in fifth grade and ever since, we've been inseparable. If anyone were to so much as harm a hair on her head, I would have killed them; and she would have done the same for me. People used to say that we were two peas in a pod. But we weren't. She was the sun, and I was the moon. Complete opposites and yet, completely the same." Callie looked down and realized that she'd clenched her fists. Talking about Talia was killing her.

"While that's nice and all, you being her best friend is what makes you a suspect" Callie gasped. *How could anyone say such a thing?*

"Of course, there are other suspects out there as well..." But Callie wasn't listening to another word he said. All she could hear were his words repeated over and over in her head. *Being her best friend is what makes you a suspect.*

Irritation replaced cooperation. In her frustration Callie forgot about the figure she'd seen close to the stage. This man and his hurtful accusation were the only villains on her mind now. He doesn't care about the twenty-ish years of friendship. All he cared about was that he solved the case and got the recognition.

You can't solve a case if you don't have a heart, and this man had no heart.

There was no way that Callie L. Williams would answer to a man without a heart.

The Businessman

Shoulda, coulda, woulda. That's been the theme to Eric's life since he was a little boy. All the missed opportunities, all the soccer games he could've won, all the things he said he'd do if only this or if only that.

So when Talia James reached out to Eric Jave, he didn't hesitate to strike a deal with her. *This* wouldn't be one of those missed opportunities.

Except he decided to make it public.

He figured that as soon as he made it known to the public, then Talia would have no choice other than to go through with the deal. Then, no matter what bad luck came his way, Eric would still have Talia helping him. Talia's company made whatever you asked for, to sum it up. You asked, and they made it *perfectly*. Wanted something in the store, but a different color, Talia would make an exact replica but with a different glaze. Nobody knows what her business started as, but whatever it was, it evolved greatly.

The only thing that Eric Jave forgot to add into his bad luck calculations, was the possibility of a murderer.

Eric and Talia met in Italy, where Eric lived. She was just a little girl then - the age of ten. Her father wanted to take a tour of Europe because he'd won some kind of contest. While they stopped in Italy, little Talia, not wanting to partake in the wine tasting, wandered off and somehow ended up in the doorway of Eric Jave.

Lucky for Talia though, Eric had just moved from America, so he didn't have any kind of Italian accent and even fewer Italian friends. He welcomed the strange and unexpected friendship with the little girl.

Talia had then stayed and made Eric run around playing tag with her. She was such an energetic girl with big dreams.

"I want to touch the stars!" She squealed while she jumped from couch to couch in Eric's living room. Eric was around thirty years old then. At that moment, Talia missed the sofa by a foot and fell on her bottom. She burst into tears, saying she bruised her butt.

"I'll never touch them! They are too high!" It'd taken Eric a few minutes to realize that the little girl was still talking about touching the stars.

"Oh, Princess Ariel," (that was what she'd told him her name was at the time, and he didn't have the patience to argue with her), "You will touch the stars! The more you try, the closer you get." With that, Eric got up on his sofa. He spread out his arms and jumped to the other one. "See? Someday you will reach them."

"Someday," she echoed, her eyes staring up at him with adoration.

Eventually, Talia's parents came and picked her up from his house, and she promised to stay in touch. She called him for school projects, she did a report on him for her sixth grade friend report, she included him in everything that she could, like she was right there with him.

Until she didn't.

Around high school, Talia stopped calling Eric. She didn't have a need to, and he was slowly forgotten.

Then, only a week ago, Talia called him to get back in touch. Immediately, Eric seized the opportunity to make a deal with her. After all, thanks to his encouragement, the girl had touched the stars, and he wanted his share of them.

So it was agreed they would meet in America to hammer out the details of the business agreement. It sounded easy in his head. Almost too easy.

An hour after Talia was shot, Eric found himself in an interrogation room. He's the second person to be questioned.

"Hello Mr. Jave," the detective said. His head was bent over a piece of paper, and he was scribbling a few things down. Eric didn't get it. He hadn't said anything. Maybe it was just his name that the detective needed to write down.

"Hello..."

"Just call me detective."

"Ok."

The detective cleared his throat ready to start asking his questions. "Where were you when Talia James was shot?" Everyone in the entire world knew that answer. Eric Jave was standing by the side of the stage waiting for his cue. He was supposed to walk up the stairs and make the deal. There were some papers to sign, and then they would shake hands. That was all there was to it.

Eric told the detective so.

"Ok. And what was your relationship to Talia besides the deal?" the detective asked.

"When she was in Italy as a young child, she ran into me when she was lost. She stayed for a while and played whatever it was that little kids played at my house." Eric smiled a bit at the memory.

"So you kidnapped a little girl?"

"No!" Eric was horrified at what assumptions were made. Why would he kidnap a little girl? "We just met by accident. I kept her safe. I became a friend of the family, sort of an honorary uncle. Kidnapper! Ridiculous! The detective wrote a few more things down on his paper.

"Well, that's it for today. I have all the answers I need."

That's it? That's all? Just two small questions? Eric was sure that couldn't be right. *What kind of detective was this anyway?* Despite Eric's eagerness to answer more questions, something about the detective's look convinced him the interview was indeed over. He eventually gathered himself and left if for no other reason than to end the awkward silence that was creeping into the room.

The Brother

Noah Kingsley wasn't supposed to be at the party. His Aunt and Uncle had said that he was too young. But what they really meant was that they didn't want to be bothered to bring him. Noah understood that he wasn't exactly a pleasure to be around. The fourteen-year-old boy had been struggling to adjust to life with his aunt and uncle. He made sure to share his misery with everyone around him..

Noah had been battling Leukemia for a few years now, only recently being pronounced cancer free. When he actually got to go to school, the kids teased him for his bald head and not being able to understand what everyone was talking about during class - he missed too much.

Talia had been the only person he thought he could trust. She always helped him overcome his problems and get rid of the bullies that chased him everyday everywhere. She, unlike her twin Vanessa, actually cared for him. She cared much more for him than even his parents did. Talia was the sun in the darkness. But then she left.

Noah was left to face his battles alone with his oblivious parents. Then, a year ago, their parents passed away after a traumatic car crash on the way back home from a party. Noah's dad had probably been drinking and then decided to drive home.. This left Noah in the care of his aunt and uncle. Noah didn't like to think about being abandoned by Talia, He didn't want to be reminded about how Vanessa hated him because his illness kept her from getting the attention she felt she deserved. And he most certainly didn't want to dwell on the fact that his parents were dead. He didn't like to think of the things that his aunt and uncle said about him behind his back, or that he was struggling to complete sixth grade at the age of fourteen. So he acted out and created new chaos to eclipse the misery, wishing there was some way he wouldn't have to think at all.

The night of the party, as soon as his Aunt and Uncle had left gone to sleep, Noah had climbed out the small window in his room onto the roof to avoid the babysitter. *Who gets a babysitter for a fourteen-year-old?* He'd then jumped from there, landing sharply on his ankle. But that didn't matter to him. He was going to the party, but he didn't have any intention of making trouble tonight. He just needed to see his sister..

The roads weren't all that busy, so Noah was able to jog there pretty easily even with his throbbing ankle. The hotel banquet center was only two miles away from his Aunt and Uncle's house. Despite jogging as fast as he could, Noah was still late to arrive.

By the time he got in, Talia was already on the stage. Her eyes were darting around the room searching. For him. He knew that she was searching for him.

"I'm scared," Talia admitted. Now Noah was scared too. Talia had never been frightened of anything.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice uncertain, everything about him seeming smaller than it already was. Talia put her arm around him, and Noah felt his strength return.

“I don’t want to get up on the stage. I know that a deal this big could be dangerous. Not everyone wants this to happen. But I have to do it.” Noah wondered why she had to do it, but he never asked. Instead, he said the first reassuring thing that came to his mind.

“I’ll be there for you.”

“You will?” Talia asked, well aware that he wasn’t allowed to go to her party.

“Yes,” Noah said. “When you get up onto the stage, if you are scared, just look for me. I will be there.”

“No matter what?” Now it was Talia’s turn to sound small.

“No matter what.”

But Talia’s eyes never did meet his. It was close. She was looking in his general direction, but not seeing him. He wasn’t very tall. Frustrated, he jumped up, hoping to catch her eye, but it wasn’t enough.

Then came the bang. The blood followed. Noah ran to her. He pushed and squeezed his way past the frantic guests. By the time he’d gotten to the stage, Talia’s friend Callie was already there, standing motionless just a few feet away, where she had been standing to watch the presentation. Noah immediately wondered why Talia’s husband, Adrian, hadn’t beat them both there. He should have been nearby, not that making his way through the crowd would have been much of a problem given he had the build of a football player.

“Callie!” Noah shouted to get her attention. She looked from Talia to him. She looked confused by his presence..

“Noah. You shouldn’t be here.” That wasn’t what he’d wanted to hear. He wanted to know what had just happened. Better yet, he wanted to be told that it hadn’t really happened at all.

He stayed by his sister’s side until someone tugged him away. He ended up in a room sitting next to a girl with a swollen cheek. Her hair was a mop of bouncy red curls and she wore a white dress - which made her red hair stand out even more. Her eyes were a chocolate brown, and her skin was pale. Except for the swollen part on her cheek, that was bright red and bruised in some spots. The girl looked to be about nine or ten; she was a few years younger than him.

Noah didn’t know what had happened to that girl, but he automatically wanted to reach out and hold her hand. He wanted to whisper that everything would be ok. Like Talia would’ve done for him.

“Why are you staring?” he asked the girl hoping to cover up the fact that *he* was also staring. Quickly, he came to the conclusion that she was looking at his bald head. However, she said she liked the color of his eyes, that was all. Noah couldn’t help it, he burst out laughing. He was aware that the surge of joy and gratefulness that he felt towards this girl was inappropriate given the recent loss of his sister, but he didn’t have strength left to reign in his emotions.. Besides, he thought maybe it would do him good to laugh a little.

He exchanged small talk with the girl for a while, before the detective pulled him into a different room to ask him some questions.

“Do you know anything about your sister’s murder?” Was the first thing Noah was asked. *Of course I didn’t. If I did, then the murderer would surely be dead as well. If i find out who killed my sister, I’ll track them down, kill them, and then bring them back to life just so that I can kill them again.* Noah thought through his fantasy a little more. The first time through, he’d shoot the person. Second time through, he’d hang them. Noah considered telling the detective his plan, but instead went with, “If I knew who shot her I wouldn’t be wasting my time here talking to you, that’s for sure.”

“Ok, but has anything else unusual been happening?” *Yes. Something was up with Talia’s husband, he thought.* But that’s not how he answered he gave this strange detective either. As was his way, Noah reacted to this difficult situation the way he did most difficult situations, by being difficult.

“I’m not supposed to talk to strangers.”

The Husband

Adrian James should be sad. His wife had just been murdered. He should be on his hands and knees begging the Lord to bring her back.

Except he wasn't. Instead he was on his way out of the chaos ridden room to the hotel bar where he could celebrate. He said that he was celebrating Talia's life of course. He would never have someone as special as Talia in his life ever again. She was one in a million.

Ha ha! *Was*.

It was nice to use that word. They would have been getting a divorce anyways pretty soon and now he wouldn't have to look like the bad guy. What idiot would divorce The Talia James? She was larger than life and cast a larger than life shadow. Besides, if he didn't, she probably would have Talia didn't like him anymore. She was always on his case about this or that. Lately most of their arguments revolved around her degenerate brother who kept coming by the house, disrupting their lives. Talia said that he was too rude to Noah, but there was only so much of that kid he could handle. The pity card only got him so far, and Noah's antics had used up the last of Adrian's patience.

"Would you rather Noah or me?" he had asked her. Talia didn't even hesitate to say her brother's name. She then stalked out of the house and slammed the door on him.

Of course, Adrian was sad. Someone had died and he ached for those who loved her. But he didn't love her. Not anymore. Not since she'd slammed that door in his face. All he'd said this time was that her whiny brother should just try and grow some hair if he was tired of getting picked on. Of course he knew that with the chemo, Noah couldn't "grow some hair" yet The words sounded more funny in his head than they sounded when they came out of his mouth. They always did.

What things did he and Talia disagree on? Well, there was the color of the grass, partly sunny versus partly cloudy,, the type of house they should have, the style of car they should drive, what welcome mat is just right. The list continues. Except for the one thing they did agree on - that they don't agree on anything.

As he sipped his drink he decided he would play the part. He made plans to go to Talia's funeral and pay his respects. He'd bring red flowers, the color of the dress she'd been wearing when she died. He'd then put an envelope with her name on it beside the flowers and say it was too personal for anyone else to read. But you can bet there'd be nothing in it, except maybe a, "I wish you'd chosen me."

Sometimes, Adrian wondered if things could have gone differently between him and Talia if he hadn't asked her to choose between himself and her brother. He knew how much she loved her brother, so that question wasn't fair.

There was a time when he would have done anything for her. ANYTHING. But the girl didn't want that. Noooo, she just wanted to see her baby brother live through cancer. But who cares if he lives! At least he'll be out of his misery!

Other guests at the hotel bar were starting to talk about the shooting. Some were looking in his direction and pointing. Adrian didn't want to hear any of it. He slipped out the back exit and found his car. He wasn't sure where he was going but certainly it was better to experience his relief somewhere more private.

His phone rang. Adrian fumbled and dropped it on the car floor. Needing to slow down to find it he missed the green light. He swore and bent down reaching for his phone.

"Hello?" he said, trying to keep his cool.

"Hello, Adrian." He knew the voice.

"So we're on a first name basis now, are we?" There was a chuckle on the other side of the line. Then a pause. Adrian wondered if the person was still there.

"I'm sorry about your wife." Adrian gulped. He knew he'd be hearing a lot of that soon.

"Yeah..." He didn't know what to say. "What do you want?"

"Interrogation. Don't make me send someone after you. Come back to the hotel."

"Oh." The light switched from the glowing red back to green. but Adrian didn't move his car. He hung up the phone and listened to the chorus of car horns that surrounded him. When he had his anger under control, he took a sharp turn and started to drive back to the banquet hall.

He wasn't excited to be interrogated by that detective again. His mom had accused him of killing his father a few years ago. He'd spent more than his fair share of time with that detective back then. In the end, his mom had been guilty and was locked away. Boo hoo. Both of his parents got what they deserved as far as he was concerned.

It was only a five minute drive, so he was there sooner than he wanted. He took an empty seat next to Talia's sister, Vanessa, and on the other side of him sat his maid who shot death arrows out of her eyes at him. She knew that Talia didn't like him anymore. In fact she'd pulled him aside before only a week or two ago.

"You are making her miserable. Why don't you just leave her?" She'd asked. *I don't know Arabella, I don't know.*

Adrian was the fourth person called into questioning. But he knew that he wouldn't be guilty. He didn't kill Talia, so what did he have to worry about? Nothing at all.

Right?

Right.

Apparently, he had a *lot* to worry about. When Adrian arrived, the detective was grumpy and ready for another cup of coffee. Clearly, the people before him hadn't cracked. That meant that Adrian was going to get it hard. And if not him, then Vanessa.

He asked the normal questions. Who are you, where were you, do you know anything. But when he came to the last question, Adrian was reluctant to answer.

"What was your relationship with Talia like before she died?" How was he supposed to answer that? If he answered honestly, then he would be the prime suspect and the detective

would put him through the wringer... again.. Now, Adrian knew that he may not be a good person, but he certainly wasn't a murderer.

"Well... she was my wife." The detective nodded and jotted something down.

"Go on." he prodded.

"Well, you know how that goes."

The detective sighed. "You know that's not what I meant." Adrian did know. The detective wanted to know if the relationship between him and Talia was strained at all.

"Well, Talia was making plans to divorce me. And, well, I was making plans to let her go." he said, choosing his words carefully. But it was too late. The detective was already curious about his "plans to let her go". But Adrian bolted out the door before any questions could be asked.

"Hey!" The detective ran after him a short while before abandoning the chase and returning to the makeshift interrogation room..

It didn't matter. He knew Adrian James would be back soon. Very, very soon.

The Sister

Vanessa Trenton didn't miss her sister. In fact, she didn't even hear about her sister's death until someone called her at home and said she was needed for questioning.

Her relationship with her sister was strained beyond repair. There was nothing in the entire world that could have made Vanessa love Talia or Talia love Vanessa.

Well, except Talia's death. Or at least, that should've worked.

Vanessa should feel something. If not love and sadness, then guilt. She should be thinking back to the words that were exchanged between the two of them years back. Thinking of the scar she'd given Talia. But she wasn't. Instead she was numb. All these years of wishing Talia was dead, and now she was. But Vanessa didn't feel a single thing. In fact, she's already made plans on the day of Talia's funeral. Whenever it was going to be, it would be her mall day - a little retail therapy to soothe a grieving heart.

Vanessa's blonde hair blew behind her as she walked out to the taxi. Apparently this ridiculous interrogation was something that couldn't be missed, despite all the protests that Vanessa made. Before she'd left, she made sure to put in her brown colored contacts as she'd done everyday since she found out they existed. Even though she has worn them since she was a teenager nobody knew about them. Of course, there had been people, but they were dead. Like her parents and her husband. Her eyes were blue like Talia's but not nearly as brilliant, Vanessa would rather have her own unique brown than be a second-best blue to her sister. Second-best was a feeling that didn't sit well with Vanessa Trenton.

Vanessa layed a wide shawl on the taxi seat before climbing in and telling the driver where to go. Soon, she had arrived. She asked the driver to take her around to the back to avoid a media van that was parked outside the main entrance. *Just like Talia, everything was always a spectacle - even her death.* Vanessa climbed out and told the driver to be back in an hour. She thought this would go quickly. She had nothing to hide; she wasn't guilty, at least not of this.

As the taxi sped away, Vanessa was forced to walk past a dumpster to get inside the building. She took a wide path around, yet careful not to go too close to the dusty cars parked on the other side of the entrance. She entered the building and exhaled, inspecting her clothing carefully. Vanessa had a big case of mysophobia, and thought she may die if she got dirty. Walking with determination, she found the room she had been summoned to.

The room had eight chairs in it. Vanessa took the seat right next to a person she recognized as Talia's husband. They were supposed to have had their two year anniversary in just a couple days. Not that Vanessa knew something like that. Not that she added that date to her calendar. Not that she looked at their pictures on the internet.

Vanessa tugged her sunglasses back down, not wanting people to see the way her eyes darted around the room. These were some of the people that were most important to Talia. And some of least important. She was among the latter.

Four people were questioned before her, and then it was her turn. “Vanessa Kingsley?” A voice called. Vanessa didn’t acknowledge. “You are Vanessa Kingsley, are you not?” She glared at the person from behind her sunglasses.

“No, I am not. Indeed, my first name is Vanessa, but my last name is Trenton. It was changed years ago.” Vanessa hadn’t wanted to share the same name as her sister. Of course, that was before she knew of Talia’s engagement only a year after the change.

And with her name cleared up, Vanessa stood with her protective shawl around her and walked with her head high into the room where she took a seat in the chair that was obviously meant to be for the detective.

When he walked in after her, he told her she was in the wrong chair. She smiled her most flirty smile. “Are you sure? I think I like this one better.” Then she stuck out her lower lip and batted her eyelashes. Vanessa didn’t know why she was making it such a big deal that she sat in the questioner seat. But her stubbornness was getting the better of her and she wasn’t going to move from her spot. Power came in all forms and Vanessa knew to take it when she could. She removed her shawl from her shoulders, letting it drape over the back of the chair then leaned back, crossing both her arms and her legs matter-of-factly.

The detective sighed and took the chair that was supposed to be hers. He looked worn beyond his years and he was only halfway through the interrogations.

“I have a few questions to ask you,” he started. Vanessa mimicked him, but something about his glare shut her mouth. “You and Talia never got along, right?”

“Well,” Vanessa started. She’d practised this speech millions of times before. “We haven’t talked in a while, but that’s just because we’ve both been very, very busy. There’s nothing wrong with that, is there? I couldn’t go to her event because I wasn’t feeling myself. I may have had a bit too much fun at a party of my own the night before and found myself a tad hungover,” she said as if she was telling a secret. This is usually what she told anyone who wondered why she wasn’t at Talia’s this or Talia’s that. The detective nodded, looking a bit proud to have “pried” this secret from her.

Vanessa waved her hands around her head a bit to make fun of her supposed drunkenness and show how embarrassed it would be for people to know about it.. That is, if it were true. But there was no party the night before. She just didn’t want to see yet another reminder that Talia’s life was more exciting than hers. That she was often trapped in her home, a prisoner of her own irrational phobia.

The detective jotted some things down on his clipboard and nodded. “But why then, do you never acknowledge that she is your twin?” For Vanessa, the entire world seemed to stop. She thought she’d hidden most of the evidence that she and Talia were twins. That was the one thing the two girls agreed on: life would be better if they weren’t twins. “It took a lot of digging,” the

detective continued, “but nobody except for the hospital that you were born in knew that Talia had a twin sister.” So that’s what she was now? Talia’s twin sister? It was bad enough being in her family, and now her secret would be out. That was why she didn’t want anyone to know. If they did, then that’s all she’d be to them.

“I just didn’t...,” she started.

“And why do you wear contacts to hide the true color of your eyes?” he questioned.

Vanessa wondered if she was being watched. *I can’t have anything without it also being Talia’s.* Nobody would ever know the real reason for Vanessa’s weird habits.

The rest of her interrogation was classified.

The Maid

Talia James always treated her employees with respect. But her maid, Arabella Main, was different. Arabella was a few years younger than Talia James. Just four years ago Arabella was a frightened teen running around the streets of New York, when Talia offered the girl a home.

At first, Arabella was hesitant. Both her parents were immigrants. Her father had worked in a factory and her mom worked as a cleaning lady when they moved to the United States. Her mother had always told her to get a good job and not be a servant to anyone like she had. And here Talia was offering a job as her maid. It was exactly what her mother had told her not to do, but with her parents gone and no other options on the table it was more than Arabella even thought to hope for..

She took the job, leaving her makeshift home behind and began exploring the world with Talia. Talia treated her more like a friend than anyone ever had, and for that, she was thankful. There was nothing that could reverse the joy she felt when she thought about her rescuer.

Except Talia's death.

Arabella was there at the celebration hidden behind the curtain. She had a headset on and was feeding Talia her speech. When suddenly, silence replaced the sound of Talia's voice in her ear. She peaked out from behind the curtain to see what was wrong.

And standing frozen on stage was Talia. There seemed to be nothing wrong when looking from the backside of her. Then Talia collapsed to the ground and the room erupted into chaos. Arabella ran out on to the stage to Talia. Her eyes were still wide open, but there was no pulse. She knew what this meant.

"Call the doctor!" She screamed, still holding on to every bit of hope she could grasp. Chaos reigned everywhere in the room.

Arabella looked out across crowd. A dark figure moving with purpose caught her eye. They stopped at the exit, looked back briefly and then disappeared out the door.

"Call the doctor!" Arabella choked out again. But it came out as a sob. "Please!" she cried. When the ambulance finally came to collect the already dead Talia, then Arabella cried. She cried and she cried some more. She let everything out. Talia had been so good to her. She'd picked her up off the street, and been so kind. Had she told Talia how grateful she was? It didn't matter.

"Duìbùqǐ," she mumbled in the language of her parents. *I'm sorry.*

Everything after that was in slow motion for Arabella. She was hauled into a room with seven others. The detective seemed convinced that the murderer was among them. Arabella didn't understand. Why anyone suspect her of murder? Or Talia's sibling? Or even the small girl in the white dress? No, something was definitely wrong here.

Arabella was fifth into the interrogation room. It was smaller than the room she'd just come from, having only a table with a chair on either side in the center of the room. There was a small desk lamp and an envelope on the table.

“And you are...?” a deep voice asked. Arabella was jerked away from her thoughts and dragged back down to the earth.

“I’m Arabella Main, sir,” she answered politely. Something about this man seemed off to her, but Arabella couldn’t grasp what it is. Was it the casual way he acted, like this was no big deal? Or maybe how his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes? She wasn’t sure. There were many things off about him.

“Ok, Arabella,” he paused and looked down at his clipboard for a moment and made a few marks on the paper. Arabella sat up a little taller in her chair, trying to see what was on the clipboard. Before the detective moved the clipboard out of her view, Arabella caught a blank page despite the marks that he seemed to be making on it.

Why the heck would the detective pretend to write stuff on his clipboard? Why not just leave it blank in the first place? Arabella had no clue.

“What were you doing while Talia was giving her speech?” he asked. Although Arabella really didn’t consider what Talia did on the stage a speech, she decided to tell the detective anyway.

“I was behind the curtain reading Talia’s speech to her so that she knew what to say.” Arabella started.

“And why would she need that?”

“Because you can’t memorize an entire speech in a day.” A day is how long Talia had known about her deal. That was barely enough time to *write* a speech, let alone memorize it. Normally Talia had enough charm in her little finger to wing a speech like that, but for some reason she was uncharacteristically nervous and wanted absolutely every word to be planned and delivered exactly as written. The detective still seemed skeptical.

“No, no. I know—excuse me, *knew*,” Arabella winced, “Miss Talia James, and she always liked to be prepared.”

The detective finished his notes. “I have all the information that I want from you now. You can leave.”

Arabella didn’t leave right away though. She just stood up, questions started flooding her mind and not enough answers to match. The detective acted as if he was so much better than Arabella, like she had nothing to offer. But Arabella wasn’t his maid. She was Talia’s. This man hadn’t earned her respect and he certainly wasn’t going to get it for free. Arabella would leave when she was good and ready. Besides, Arabella knew something that the detective didn’t.

Arabella Main knew who killed Talia James.

But will she let the secret loose?

The Rival

“When life gives you lemons...,” his assistant started.

“Make lemonade...,” John Clark added, nodding for his other assistant to finish.

“But not too much or you may choke.” They all burst out laughing. *Talia had made too much lemonade. Nobody should ever be that successful at life*, John thought. *Well, nobody except me.* John left his assistant in the conference center hallway and entered the small room. He took one of the open seats as instructed and waited quietly, alone with his thoughts.

Something about Talia James had always made John Clark hate her. Maybe it was the way she looked like she was floating. Or how she wasn't a brat even though she was the richest person in the world. But it was probably that she was his fiercest business rival. AND NOBODY EVEN KNEW WHAT SHE MADE!

That's the thing with Talia. People would buy her products even if they didn't know what they were. She did *something*. But what John Clark didn't understand was how your job can be a mystery, and you can still have more money than everyone.

John's guess was that Talia made everything. She'd use her charm to sweet talk people into buying whatever they wanted, and then she'd go and make it. She didn't have a store, or a warehouse. She just had her small team of twenty people. herself, and maybe some sort of crazy high tech 3D printer that could make whatever?

How can that possibly be enough to make an entire business?

John Clark could obsess over this for days. Months even. But there were better things to do right now. You see, when someone rich dies unexpectedly, they don't always have a will written out. *Everyone will assume her brother Noah will get all her money, but you never know. Noah was only fourteen. Which means he should be easy to manipulate.* What John Clark didn't know yet was that Talia did have a will, and yes, her brother will get half of her money. But a quarter of it goes to charity, a fraction of what's leftover goes to him, her Aunt and Uncle, and a small fifty dollars goes to her sister, Vanessa.

For a reason that John Clark will never know, Talia willed some of her money to him, her rival. Never in his wildest dreams would John have thought to will a single cent of *his* money to her.

Now that Talia was dead, John was actually sad. There was no more back and forth fighting over the stock market, no more, “buy mine because it's better.” It was just him now.

Maybe there had been more to like about her than hate, he was just now realizing. Which sucked for him, because it was certainly too late now to be like, “Hey Talia, I know we are supposed to hate each other, but do you think we can be friends now?” He remembered something that he hadn't thought of in a while - The Eighth Grade Geography Bee. He'd worked so hard to get into nationals. *So hard.* Like staying up until midnight every day hard. But when he got there, a small brown haired girl with bright blue eyes from Washington beat him by a single point.

John was just now realizing that he'd been "hating" Talia for longer than he thought. He would have liked to congratulate her now.

As one might expect, John Clark was brought in for interrogation. Of course he would, he's her rival, or at least as close as anyone got to the perfection of Talia James.

John had already seen a girl named Callie leave the makeshift interrogation room with her eyes puffy and red, desperately trying to hold back tears. She must have been close to Talia. If the detective was hard on her, John couldn't imagine what was coming his way. Thank goodness the detective didn't know John was sitting here thinking about possible business advantages of Talia's death and wondering where all of her money was going to go. *Maybe I should have brought my lawyer.*

"John Clark." He stood up and walked into the room where the voice called from. Inside was a detective scribbling some notes on a piece of paper. "Do you mind if I ask a few questions?" John was suddenly filled with rage towards the detective.

"I bet you didn't ask permission from that poor girl who came out crying," he said.

"Actually, I did." The detective's voice was icy. For a moment, they both stared at each other. Then John broke the eye contact and looked up at the wall unsure of where else to look.

"Ok," he said simply. There was an awkward silence.

"So what were you doing when Talia was shot?" Shot? John didn't think that Talia had been shot. He knew that there wasn't a bullet hole in the back of her chest. So that meant that whoever did it was near Talia at the time.

"I was in the crowd like everyone else. I was trying desperately to close a deal with some clients. But they didn't want to. Probably something about it being Talia's party, not mine. That must be why they didn't buy from me." John Clark realized that he'd been babbling nonsense. He had a habit of doing so.

"Ok so you weren't near Talia when she was murdered? Were you in the room at the time? If so, where?" John had to think about this one. Where exactly was he standing?

"I think that I was standing right in the center of the room. Why does where I was standing matter to you?" John Clark had some questions of his own. None though, seemed to be getting answered. He guessed that was how it works when you're not the one in the questioner's seat.

"It matters to me because I want to solve this case," the detective told him. Once again, John Clark had nothing to say but a simple ok. What else could he have said?

"Is that all for now, sir?" John said politely. He just wanted to go home and sleep. Home sounded much better to him than sitting in the room with this detective. John Clark was starting to feel uneasy, in fact, you could even say that John Clark was a bit scared. As he should be. Someone just killed Talia James. If their goal was to kill someone rich, then he was most certainly next. John started to wonder which people would be called in for interrogation if he were murdered. The list of people he'd burned in business deals alone suggested they would

need a bigger room than the one they had for Talia's suspects. John banished the thought. Thinking like that would get him nowhere. John had to pick up the pieces that Talia left him.

"Yes, that's it. Thank you," the detective said, his voice flat. When the detective left, to call the next witness, John gathered his coat in one hand and hurried out the door, eager to escape his prison.

On his way out, John Clark saw three people talking in hushed voices. One was the detective, another was Talia's husband, and the third looked so similar to Talia that John thought it could have been her twin, if she'd had one.

The Girl

Serenity is the state of being calm, peaceful, and untroubled. And that is exactly what the little nine year old girl was. Calm, peaceful, and untroubled. She didn't seem to care when the billionaire was shot. Nor did she want to care. Why should she? Serenity Smith didn't know that lady, so why should she care when the lady crumbled to the ground?

Serenity joined the chaos, running and searching for her father. Yes, he would know what to do. But her Pa was nowhere to be found.

Serenity's dad was a high profile detective. All she knew, was that her dad was at this party because of an anonymous tip that someone was going to kill Talia James. And, like always, her Pa was right.

And, like always, her Pa would find the killer and be the hero.

Serenity, despite being young, knew all about money. How to get, how to spend it, and how to save it. Someday, Serenity was going to be rich and she couldn't care less how that money came upon her. That was the way she was taught.

Eventually, Serenity stopped running, knowing that it was useless. Her pa would come for her. He always did. So there she stood in the center of the big room, watching people run and scream as if it were the end of the world.

Why are you all running? She thought, *Just because the lady was dead doesn't mean you run. It means that she'd dead. What difference does it make to you?*

Serenity was confused as to why everyone was scared. People would say that it was because someone in the place had a gun. Then she would say, that if the person with the gun wanted them dead, wouldn't they already be dead?

That was the other thing she knew about: Murderers.

She knew all about them. She knew that the murderer was always the person you least expect. Or someone you think is too obvious, so you think someone else, and instead it ends up being that person you thought was obvious. It's the people like the husband, or the best friend, or sometimes even, the little girl in the background with a lollipop.

Through all the chaos, Serenity was finally able to make out the brim of her father's detective hat. She raced through the crowds of people and ducked under legs, anxious to be at the relative safety of her father's side amongst the stampede.

No, she reminded herself, *don't look for safety in others*. A common family quote. When you need help, it's too late. So as she got closer and closer to her father, she started to slow. She wiped all the emotion off her face and the tiny bead of sweat that had formed from the running. Somehow, Serenity convinced herself that all was well with the world.

Or at least until she actually saw her dad. He had brought her along on a murderer hunt before. Serenity had done everything she was supposed to do, but tonight he looked different, If she had been old enough to understand the word, Serenity would have said he looked resolved.

“You were supposed to stay by the stage,” he scolded, slapping her face so hard that she thought she no longer had one; just a stinging piece of swollen flesh where her face should be. Her dad looked like he was having one of his ideas. Serenity knew not to make a fuss or she would get it at home for sure. He hauled her out into the hallway. Next thing she knew, she was sitting in a line of chairs, licking her lollipop. “No emotions. No help. No complaining. Just sit there,” was what her dad told her to do, so that was what she did. It wasn’t fun, but fun wasn’t something Serenity had come to expect living with such a hard man. Soon enough, more people filled the chairs. On one side of her, there was a girl still in her party outfit. Her hair was plain and blonde, her eyes were a bright green. She barely looked at Serenity, but she could tell that the girl knew she was there. Had she done something to offend her? Serenity was a bit confused.

On her other side sat a boy only a few years older than her. He had tears in his eyes, and Serenity could tell that he was trying to hold it back. *Maybe his family follows the same rules as mine*, she thought, *no emotions*.

She stared at the bald boy for a moment and watched the way that his eyes sparkled with the tears, magnifying the bright green color of his eyes.

The boy looked over at her and she realized that she’d been staring. “Sorry,” she said sheepishly. The boy waved her apology away.

“I know, I’m missing hair. I had Leukemia,” he said. Serenity shook her head.

“No, that wasn’t it,” she explained, “Your eyes are really green.” The boy looked at her for a moment, and then burst out laughing. She didn’t know why, but Serenity liked seeing the older boy laugh. When the boy looked back to her, he seemed filled to the brim with questions.

“So what’s your name?” he asked.

“Serenity Smith.”

“And what happened to your face?”

Serenity started to form an answer in her head. *No help*, that’s what her father had said. She was about to say something about running into a streetlight, when her father saved her.

“Noah Kingsley, I need to ask you a few questions.” The boy- Noah- smiled at her and left without another word. Years later, Serenity still wondered what became of the boy with the green eyes. The one who did not cry. But for now, she did not mind seeing him go. He was curious, and curious people did not help the nine year old’s cause.

Serenity sighed and fell back into her emotionless state. Just as she was supposed to be.

One by one, her father called everyone into the questioning room, Serenity being last. When she walked in, her father handed her some ice for her swollen face. “Don’t answer anymore questions from people,” was all the explanation he gave.

Serenity watched as he walked back and forth along the sides of the room, wearing a hole in the hard floor. Her head went left, then right, following his movements. It was a good ten minutes before he finally sat down to talk to her.

“Serenity, do you wish I wasn’t your father?” Serenity’s breath caught in her throat. How could she answer that question. If she answered yes, her father would beat her. If she answered no, then her father would think that she didn’t mind it at all.

She was old enough to know they weren’t like other families. But at least they were a family. Still, she couldn’t keep pretending she didn’t care about anything.

Serenity changed her mind. She did care that the lady was dead. Because, after all, when someone is dead, the money must go somewhere. And if that somewhere happened to be her hand, then she could escape for real.. This time, it wouldn’t just be to places in her head.

The Journalist

The hush startled the poised journalist . She was all set up to snap a photo when blood started spilling out of Talia James. So instead of getting the detailed up close picture of Talia James’ deal, she got a gruesome picture of the most famous lady on the earth dying of a bullet wound. Or at least a bullet wound is what she’s been told.

A bullet wound was not the way anyone imagined Talia James leaving this world. They imagined her doing something daring, or dying heroically. Something like skydiving into an ocean, or trying to escape a war zone. Something amazing like that. Something with a story. A story that the journalist , Julia, could tell.

A bullet wound does not make an exciting story at all.

Maybe, Julia thought, the bullet didn’t quite go through the heart. Or maybe it wasn’t a bullet at all. The possibilities started spinning through Julia’s head. Was there anyway to spin this into something usable?.

Immediately, Julia went to her notepad and told TJ (the staff photographer who traveled by her side) to take some pictures of the dead body on the stage. This story would be the feature story on the front of every newspaper world wide. She had to make it good. This kind of high profile story could win an award if she could spice it up enough.

	<h1>News</h1>		
<p>\$5 off a free salad at your local Grocery store! Limited offer only!</p> <hr/> <p>People disappearing? Recently, kids, adults, and the elderly have been slowly disappeari</p>	<p>TALIA JAMES- DEAD!</p> <p>Everyone had gathered in the grand ballroom, ready to witness history. Billionaire Talia James was set to make a huge deal with engineering company Jave Engineering. Head of the company, Mr. Eric Jave, had offered Talia a billion dollars in exchange for an exclusive trade agreement.</p> <p>Talia James’ business practices are some of the world’s best kept secrets. Rumor has it, Eric Jave uncovered some of those secret’s and offered to strike a deal with her, merging the interests of their two companies. Talia agreed, setting the stage for the billion dollars deal everyone came out to witness</p> <p>Things went haywire pretty fast. Only a few minutes into Talia’s speech, there was a bang. Her dress started to soak</p>	<p>Strange things running around town</p> <p>Have you noticed the chickens running around town? Rumor is that a weird scientist has invented something that can turn animals into chickens (Only dogs have been tested). We must stop this world catastrophe at once! Luckily, a girl named Janice is on the</p>	

ng in an american town. While that is happening, the population of trees has exploded. The question is why?

Robbery at local bank!

A band of petty street thieves have managed to rob the most secure bank in town? How did they do it? Well, that's the trick isn't it? They haven't left a single clue as to how or why. If you see any strange behavior, please alert the police.

through with dark red blood. Only seconds later, Talia fell over dead.

Now, the mystery is, why wasn't the supposed bullet hole in her back? There clearly was one in the front, and people report the sound of a gun ringing across the room. But what happened to the bullet? Did it not go all the way through? Was it a bullet at all?

I had the chance to pull the detective on this case aside for a moment.

Q: What was used to kill Talia James?

A: "Honestly, we're unsure at this time. Talia has a puncture wound, however as of yet no bullet has been found. It's possible it wasn't a bullet at all. We haven't ruled out some other types of projectile weapons or even a poison dart of some kind."

Q: Then why all the blood.

A: "I've already said that I am unsure. It could really be a great number of things. If the person was really close, then she could've been stabbed, but that would mean the person did it without the entire crowd seeing them. "

Q: Is there anything about this case that you can tell us?

A: "Yeah. Talia James is dead."

Q: Anything else?

A: "No. We will hold a questioning very soon. I will then reveal who the murderer is as soon as the interrogation is over. Hopefully, soon."

Q: Who are the suspects?

A: "I won't comment on that, the investigation is ongoing."

Q: How are you going to be able to crack the case?

A: "I'm a detective, it's what I'm trained to do. I will listen to all the stories, and piece them together. They say one wrong thing, and I will know it was them."

The detective walked off to his interrogation before we could get anything else out of him. We will have more details after as they are made available.

From an anonymous source, we've been told that the suspects are Callie L. Williams (her friend), Eric Jave, Vanessa

case for this catastrophic event.

25% all coloring pages at the Arts and Crafts store. Plus, by one get one free scissors of any shape or size! Expires: 9/14/2001

Weather in Clara:

in the town of Clara, it is still raining without an end in site. This will be a record for number of days in a row that rain has been falling!



Article published by: News Co. Main article written by: Julia Tin

	<p>or Noah Kingsley (Talía's siblings), Talía's husband (Adrian James), Talía's maid, John Clark, and a little girl named Serenity Smith.</p>	
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The question remains: Who killed Talía James?

The Murderer

The suspects of the murder of Talia James sit lined up in the room in order of how well they knew her. Her best friend first, and the journalist last. The nine people sit in silence, still in the clothes they wore to the party. Their eyes look tired and worn from the late night interrogation.

But now it is time.

Who killed Talia James?

And why?

The detective walks up to the front of the room and steps up to read what he's wrote down. His shirt is nicely pressed and there's a plain blue tie paired crisply with his gray suit coat, showing no sign of his long night. He opens the briefcase he brought up with him, setting it down on the podium.

Everyone in the room and those watching through the live television broadcast, watch him as he shuffles through piles and piles of papers. No one dares to breath in, the tension is so high.

The detective clears his throat and begins. "I'd like to start by saying what a shame it is that miss Talia James had to leave this life so unexpectedly, but I assure you she is doing fine in the next one. If anyone could afford a penthouse in heaven, I was Talia James. I mean, have you seen the money she made here?" The crowd chuckles, but one glare from the witness Callie L. Williams, and the laughter dies in their throats.

The detective clears his throat, ready to begin. "With much sadness, I have reviewed the evidence and determined who killed Talia James." He stalls, drawing in the crowd with a dramatic pause. "The person who will be charged with the murder of Talia James is my very own daughter. Serenity Smith." A collective gasp ran around the room. The detective's own daughter had committed the murder. But something seems off as he lists the pieces of evidence to the crowd.

As the police walk up to arrest the emotionless little girl, Arabella Main stood up from her seat. "Wait!" she calls. The entire crowd turns towards her and the police stop mid handcuff. "The little girl Serenity Smith is innocent!"

Everything went quiet except for the detective's quiet chuckles. "Then who do you suggest is guilty, girl? Are you saying that I failed at doing my job?" Little did the detective know, Arabella is about to suggest much more than just that.

"I'm not suggesting that you failed at doing your job, I'm suggesting that you *didn't do it at all*. The person who murdered Talia James was..." She pauses, her eyes widening. "Not one person at all, but a group of people. It was a team effort." Arabella's heart begins to beat as she realizes the scope of the accusation she is about to make and the danger that it could put her in.

“The people who murdered Talia James are her sister, Vanessa Trenton, her husband, Adrian James, and the detective himself.” Nobody says anything. After all, it was only a maid suggesting that. Her employer had just died, leaving her jobless. It had been a long night.

“And what, young lady, makes you say that?” The detective chuckles nervously. You can barely hear the slight change in his voice as he asks. But it’s there.

“First off, you didn’t write anything down on your clipboard, though you pretended to.” Arabella states, starting off a long list. “Also, it’s common knowledge that Vanessa hated Talia. That brings me to my first witness. Talia’s brother, Noah Kingsley.”

The crowd watches with a new sense of excitement at the drama as Noah walks up to the podium, nudging the detective slightly out of the way.

“Before Talia and Vanessa moved away from the house, I always heard Vanessa saying things like ‘some day I’ll kill the brat’ or other threats. I understand that in some families, things like that are said. However, do they ever really mean it? Vanessa very much did mean it. My parents even forced her to go to a counselor for some time.” Noah said, his voice ringing with truth. The detectives face paled, but Noah wasn’t done.

“Talia only ever broke one bone. Do you know how? It’s because Vanessa pushed her out of a tree while she was sleeping. You’d think that twins would actually care about each other’s well being, let alone the others health.” This time, it was Vanessa that reacted, standing up from her chair and looking out at the crowd.

“You believe him? Do you believe this twelve year old-”

“I’m fourteen now.”

“-boy and a jobless maid over an experienced detective?” she called out, her voice echoing across the silent room.. “Well, do you!?” Nobody answered.

“He isn’t my only witness.” Arabella says. She calls up Eric Jave.

Eric Jave takes the stand. “Arabella is correct in her accusations to a point, but there is more going on here.” Eric talks about how he knew Talia and how he saw Vanessa and Adrian talking. They were talking in hushed voices in the pitch black of night. John Clark was able to back him up. “I asked Arabella to keep an eye on Vanessa and Adrian. The thing that makes me wonder most,” Eric finishes, his face a puzzle of confusion, he turns to look at Vanessa. “Why did you never tell me about your step sister?”

Vanessa looks around the room and then stands in a fluid motion. “Talia is dead. I don’t know what you’re talking about. You and I are hardly acquaintances. You are Talia’s friend not mine. And I don’t have anymore siblings.” Her eyes narrow at Eric, but he doesn’t stop.

Eric turns to the crowd, everyone hanging on his every word. “Yes, Talia and Vanessa did have a clearly strained relationship. Except, they had one thing in common: an extreme hatred for their step sister, Lilith.

“When Talia’s mom was seventeen- well before she’d met her husband- she had Lilith. For about ten years, it had only been Lilith and her mom. However, then Talia’s mom got married and had Talia and Vanessa. Ever since she was ten, Lilith had been overcome with

jealousy. In fact, so much so that she planned an assassination attempt on Talia. Vanessa got word of this when Lilith asked for her help, thinking the twins strained relationship was beyond repair.

“Vanessa however, would never have killed her twin. In fact, their relationship was actually not far off from a normal sister-sister relationship. In panic, Vanessa hopped on a plane and made it to Talia only a day before Talia’s big deal. Promptly, Vanessa made them switch places, without telling Talia why. Talia never would have agreed if she knew Vanessa could’ve been killed.

“However, Vanessa did have a plan. She worked with Adrian, unaware of the issues he and Talia were having. He was supposed to stop Lilith. But he didn’t. He let her shoot and make her escape. He thought that if Talia was killed, then he would have a chance with Vanessa. ‘I married the wrong twin’ I’d overheard him once when he was several drinks to the wind. Adrian didn’t know they had switched places this morning and he actually let Vanessa be killed instead of Talia.” As he spoke, cops started circling Adrian. He moved back uneasily in his chair, clutching it and refusing to move.

“And the detective?” Someone from the audience called. Eric just smiled. Instead of him answering, Arabella does, her voice having returned after her shocking realizations. She had only been one person off.

“That one’s easy. He was bribed by Adrian Knowing his daughter would be tried as a juvenile, he framed her for the murder, while he probably set up a nice trust fund for her to receive when she would be released at age eighteen - compliments of Adrian James.”

Talia, still disguised as Vanessa, looks at Eric. “How did you know?” she says, her voice strained from the memory of her sister. The prickly “Vanessa” demeanor she had been faking to save her life, vanishing by the second. Someone had clearly wanted her dead and she couldn’t risk letting down the disguise until the truth was exposed.

“Easy. Vanessa herself told me. She came to me when she heard you were in danger and I began doing some investigating on my own.” Then Eric smiles. “Oh, and your contacts fell out. There’s no mistaking the brilliant blue eyes of Talia James.”