

## DEAD EVEN SNEAK PEEK



**Romantic Suspense** – Print and E-Book

**Truth Seekers Series** – MAY/2020

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**When she discovers her worst nightmare...**

When Maya Glass—the Veritas Center’s toxicology/controlled substances expert—goes to check on her scientist friend after a cryptic phone message, Maya stumbles upon her worst nightmare. A deadly toxin has been released, her friend’s assistant has died in his secluded island lab, and her friend is missing. Worse yet, Maya is exposed to the deadly botulism toxin and she needs help. Fast. Problem is, the only person she can think of with the right contacts is her former love, FBI Agent Hunter Lane.

**Will she let him help her or go it alone?**

Maya sets out on a hunt to find her friend and Hunter warns the feisty and tantalizing Maya to back down.

But when it becomes clear that he needs Maya to locate her missing friend and find the killer, Hunter knows they must work together to stop the killing spree before the killer gets even and ends Maya’s life.

### Chapter One

*Warning! Death Ahead. Land At Your Own Risk.*

The boat pitched under Maya Glass’s feet, and she grabbed the railing. She rolled her eyes at the sign.

*Death ahead. Seriously?*

Her friend Fletch’s idea of a joke. Not hers for sure. A fellow scientist, Dr. Fletcher Gilliam, had positioned numerous signs warning of death on the beaches of his private island in the Willamette River near Portland, Oregon. No one found it funny except him. Just the kind of

geeky and eccentric thing the near hermit was always doing.

The boat captain, a fellow with a heavy belly draping over khaki pants and wearing a nautical cap, stepped from his cabin and marched toward her in the August sunshine beating down on the boat. He'd idled the motor, now a steady hum, and without the breeze, perspiration beaded up on her forehead. She was starting to get cranky.

The captain swayed with the river's movement, his frown deepening. "I'm not landing there, Dr. Glass," he shouted to be heard over the thrum of the boat's idling motor. "Not with those signs. No way."

Maya waved his words away. "It's just my friend's idea of a joke. He likes his solitude, and he had a problem with boaters who ignored his *private property* signs. They invade the place to picnic on his beach and explore the island. He put those up to curtail the problem."

The captain planted a hand on the railing next to her and lifted a bushy eyebrow as he faced the single-story concrete building that resembled a bunker. "What does this Fletcher guy do on his island? I mean, that building looks like a business, not a home."

Fletcher researched toxins and viruses for the government and private companies, but there was no way she'd tell the captain that. "He's a scientist."

The captain pursed his lips and eyed her. "A scientist who studies what?"

She shrugged lightly. "He's always changing his focus. But there's nothing to worry about."

"Right, nothing," He stared over her shoulder at the building.

"Hey." She forced out a smile. "Do you think I'd be visiting him if there was a problem?"

"No." He gave a heavy sigh. "I suppose not. But still, I don't think the crew will go for

it.”

Maya wanted to sigh like he’d just done. Let it go on and on. Why hadn’t she chosen to rent a boat instead of renting a boat *and* crew? Because she was a landlubber and knew nothing about boating, that’s why. She’d likely have killed herself if she’d tried to get to the island on her own. She’d visited Fletch many times before, but the boat tour company she’d always used had gone out of business, and she’d had to find a new one.

Now she was stuck explaining everything to this wary captain. “Have you ever heard of the Veritas Center?”

He swiped a handkerchief over his bald head. “Yeah, I think so. They’re on the west side. Do DNA testing, right?”

She nodded. “And process forensics for law enforcement. I’m the toxicology and controlled substances expert and a partner there. So you can trust me when I tell you it’s safe to land the boat and wait for me at the dock.”

He bit his lip and looked back at one of his crew members. “I don’t know.”

“What if you dropped me at the dock and then came back out here to anchor where you can see me when I’m ready to leave? Would your crew agree to that?”

“Let me ask them.” He spun, his rubber-soled shoes squeaking on the deck.

She wasn’t one to accept failure, and she wouldn’t today. Not with the cryptic voicemail Fletch had left three days ago. She got out her phone and listened to it again.

“Maya. It’s Fletch. You won’t believe what they’re planning to do. I don’t even believe it, and I need someone to confirm. Someone who knows how to keep their mouth shut and has top-notch scientific skills. That’s you. Get here as quickly as you can. Please. It’s important. Hurry.”

The message ended, the silence feeling ominous to her.

She could easily imagine him in his lab, his curly red head bent over his lab table, his face covered in a scraggly beard because he wouldn't take the time to shower much less shave. His latest research in front of him. Maybe his assistant, Carson Delvalle, next to him or at another table. Likely another table, as Fletch really did need his space. Fletch's deep brown eyes would be narrowed behind thick glasses, pondering whatever problem he was working on.

That was typical Fletch. Leaving a message wasn't. They'd been friends for years, and she would've come running, but she was out of town testifying in court. She'd called him back. Multiple times. Got his voicemail and left messages, which he hadn't returned. If it was anyone else, she'd worry, but Fletch was scatterbrained and often ignored calls. He probably didn't even need her anymore and thought that, by not calling her back, she would figure that out. But she wouldn't take any chances, just in case.

The captain marched back to her. "We'll do it. Drop you off, I mean. But anything hinky happens, and we're out of here and you find your own way home."

She smiled, though worry formed in the pit of her stomach. After Fletch's phone call, maybe she should consider something hinky was going on.

Didn't matter. She was here to help her friend, and she wasn't leaving until she knew he was all right. She pulled her shoulders back and came to her full five-foot-nine-inch height. "Let's go ahead and dock."

He gave a sharp nod and returned to the controls. The motor roared to life, and he piloted the boat to the long wooden dock. A young deckhand swung a rope into the air and captured a post on the dock to pull them in. He lowered a short gangplank and stood back, looking at her like she had the plague or something equally as deadly.

She resisted saying something sarcastic. He was uneasy, and she needed him to get back to the mainland.

“Go ahead, Doctor,” the captain said. “No one’s going to join you on that dock.”

She picked up her backpack and shouldered it, taking her time moving down the dock where the odor of rotting fish rose up to assault her nose. She felt like she was walking the plank or being exiled, not going to visit a friend.

“You are so going to pay for this, Fletch,” she muttered as she stepped onto the buoyant dock. She turned and waved at the captain, but he’d already returned to his cabin, and the deckhand was busy setting them free.

Listening to the revving motor on the boat fleeing to a safe distance, she strode down the dock. She glanced back to see that the boat was already a blip in the river, but the captain was true to his word, and the deckhand was tossing the anchor overboard.

She stepped onto firm ground, grateful to be on land since she often suffered from motion sickness. Today had been a good day, and her stomach was barely upset, but now that she was off the boat with a cool breeze, the sweltering temperatures wrapped around her like an unwanted blanket. She swiped a hand over her forehead and took the winding stone path toward the single-story building. Fletch was devoted to his work but had severe anxiety disorders that kept him confined to his own space. The very reason he’d had his own lab constructed with living quarters at the back of the building.

Weeds and perennials co-mingled along the path, but the weeds were winning and the path narrowing. Fletch needed to get someone out here to do his yard work, but landscape people had similar issues with the signs. Not to mention the difficult task of hauling their equipment in a boat. Maybe she could help Fletch out there. As the managing partner of the Veritas Center, she had a vast array of contacts with service businesses. Surely, she could get a landscape company

to come out here. *If* Fletch would allow it.

She reached the door, pressed the bell, and looked up at the security camera so he could get a good look at her face and buzz her in. She waited, a soft breeze playing over the grasses that swayed in a feathery dance, but no one answered the bell.

“Seriously, Fletch,” she muttered and pressed the button again.

She started counting. One, one thousand. Two, one thousand. Three, one thousand. At sixty, she jerked on the door handle. It came open under her touch. Shocked, she stood there for a moment. Nick, the Veritas electronics expert, had supervised the installation of top-of-the-line security just a few months ago. This door sure shouldn’t be unlocked.

Feeling more unsettled, she stepped into the small foyer with a single chair and small table. The building felt cool after being in the bright sunshine. Silence greeted her.

“Fletch,” she yelled. “Carson? Are either of you here?”

Her voice reverberating down the long hallway was the only sound. Fletch could easily be so wrapped up in his work that he didn’t hear her. If the door hadn’t been unlocked, she wouldn’t be worried.

But she was worried. Very.

She reached into her purse for her gun. She’d carried for years and shot with Grady all the time in their small firing range behind their building, so she was very comfortable handling guns.

She eased down the hall and peeked in the window of the small lab with one stainless steel table and cabinets ringing the room. Fletch’s assistant used this lab when Fletch wanted to be alone.

A microscope sat on the table, slides lying next to it, but no one occupied the stool. She continued farther down the hall to the next window, which overlooked Fletch's lab. He'd covered the window with white paper. Normal state of affairs. He didn't want onlookers. He designed the building, and when she'd asked him why he'd installed a window, he said it was expected. Then, the moment he occupied the lab, he covered it with paper, unnecessary as he rarely let any visitors into the lab.

Shaking her head at the memory, she reached for his door. Just like the front door, it was unlocked.

This was his kingdom. His life's work. And he'd left it unsecured. Even more disconcerting. Especially since the lab had to meet the Bio-Safety Level 4 laboratory standards, which were the strictest standard for labs working with toxins. And that meant the lab must have a locked door with limited and controlled access. Not an open door where anyone could walk in.

She poked her head inside, his office door standing open too. She didn't see him.

"Fletch," she called out, hoping he just hadn't heard her before.

No reply. Getting really worried now, she hurried down the hall, checking rooms. Small kitchenette. Bathroom. Storage closet. Still no sign of Fletch.

She raced to his apartment, the door ajar. "Fletch. Fletch. Where are you?"

The tiny one-bedroom was devoid of any personal décor and held very little furniture. She made a quick assessment of the place but found no sign of Fletch. The sink was filled with dirty dishes. A cereal bowl with milk congealed in Cheerios sat on the table. A half-filled cup of coffee sat next to it. She checked the pot. It was cold.

So, was this coffee from early this morning or days ago? What was going on?

She hurried to the bedroom. Found his bedding rumpled, but no one in the room or the

bathroom. She looked in his medicine cabinet and found his toothbrush, toothpaste, and deodorant. His closet looked normal. A mess but normal. His small suitcase, which he used when he came to the city for the night, sat on the floor.

He hadn't packed a bag, but he wasn't here. He could've gone to the city, but she doubted that. In that case, he wouldn't have asked her to visit him and help out.

"His boat," she said, the thought popping into her brain. She ran down the hallway and outside. She wound through the tall grasses again to get to the boathouse. Water lapped at the building, and a soft breeze rolled in from the river, but it was still hot and muggy. She brushed her hand over her forehead and tugged on the door. Locked. She shifted to look through a dirty window. His speedboat wasn't on the rack. Did he leave the island in his boat? Leave Carson behind? She couldn't imagine him doing so.

A mosquito bit her leg, and she slapped at it. Panic starting to form, she moved out of the deep grass to the path. If he'd left the island on his own, why hadn't he locked up behind himself?

Maybe he'd left her a note.

She turned and raced back down the path and inside the building. She entered Fletch's lab, a large room with six stainless steel tables in the center and white cabinets circling the perimeter. On the countertops sat state-of-the-art science equipment. She was struck again by how quiet it was. Only the fans from the special air filtration system installed to comply with federal regulations hummed.

She glanced into his office, her heart pounding like a conga drum, and found his desk the usual jumbled mess of papers. She searched for a note but didn't find one. Hoping to see what he was working on, she turned back to the lab.



The tables were covered with a very fine clay-colored powder.

*Odd.*

She stepped in deeper and moved around the office wall. Her foot bumped something soft. She stuttered to a stop. Looked down. Gasp. “No. Oh. No.”

A body lay crumpled on the floor. Male. Back to her.

Her heart sank, and she forced herself to take in the details. Lab coat. Jeans. A thick head of hair. Not the right color for Fletch. And too chubby. Fit Carson’s build.

She rushed around his body to kneel beside him. Away from the air filtration system, the stench of death rose up to greet her.

She clamped her hand over her mouth and nose.

“Carson,” she mumbled around her hand. “Carson. Are you okay?”

She turned him over, and bile rose in her throat. His face bloated and purple. His lips blue.

He was dead.

Still, she pressed her fingers on his neck. No pulse. Cold skin.

*Dead.* Honestly and truly dead, and had been for some time. If not for the strong ventilation system, she would’ve smelled the decay when she’d first entered the lab.

Now, the smell was thick and cloying. She wanted to hurl. To run. But she forced herself to take a good look at him. No knife or gunshot wound. Not even a bruise on his face.

What had he died from?

A vial lay next to his hand. She leaned closer to read the label.

*Botulinum.*

*No. Oh no. It can't be.* She jerked back.

Botulinum, or botulism, was deadly. Very deadly. Scientists agreed that it was the most toxic substance known to man.

Was this what Fletch had wanted to tell her about? The reason for the powder on the tables?

She scrambled back from Carson and looked around. The rat cages were silent, the animals all dead.

Had Fletch found a way to make the toxin airborne? She still had her hand clasped over her mouth and jerked it free. Had she inhaled some of the poison?

She looked at her knees. Fine powder covered her jeans.

If she had been exposed, and if she didn't get access to the antitoxin, she could have only days to live.

She tried to remember everything she knew about botulism. Inhalation led to paralysis, starting with the eyes and working down the body. Obviously fatal. She'd once read that scientists estimated that one single teaspoon of the toxin was enough to kill over a billion people. And she might have been exposed to it.

She wanted to run screaming from the building, but she couldn't. Not when her clothing could be contaminated. She might have already carried some of it out of the building on her feet when she'd gone to the boat house.

*Oh, dear, God, please no. Please don't let this be airborne. Don't let me have breathed it in. Or ingested it when I touched my face.*

Tears wetted her eyes, and her mind clouded over. What should she do?

“Think, Maya, think.”

Where was Fletch? Maybe he’d tried to go for help. Or maybe he was dead somewhere on the island.

*No. No.* He would have called the health department and arranged to get the CDC to the lab, along with the antitoxin.

She dug out her phone and tears started to fall. She didn’t have the health department’s number, but she did have a contact who could get them there faster than she could.

She dialed Hunter, a person she never thought she’d ask for help again.

“Special Agent Hunter Lane.” His smooth baritone voice raised her angst, and her tears turned into sobs.

“Hunter,” she managed to get out through the panic. “I need you. I need you now.”

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