

EPIISODE TWO

Vail was a veritable Bavarian village, with crisp mountain vistas as far as the eye could see. Still, Maria took little comfort in the view, given the harrowing few days she'd had. No, not Maria anymore, she reminded herself. Sheridan. She decided to change her name, her looks, everything, and lay low in a new city, in the hopes that she -- and the strange disc -- could disappear into obscurity. As she sat in a cab to the airport, she was scrolling through possible names in her head, but it wasn't until she passed the airport Sheridan hotel that she'd settled on it. She liked it. Sheridan. She thought it was classy.

Definitely classier than the box dye job she'd given herself. Stripping her hair of its natural, night-black hue, she was a redhead now, a shade somewhere between apple and plum, much purpler than she'd ever anticipated. But she liked it, even if there was a little bit of dye around her ears. She liked feeling like a new person, in a new city, with a whole new life.

When she approached the counter at the airport, she had hesitated only for a moment. She'd never been much of a jetsetter, so when the Northwest Agent flashed a pearly smile and asked her where she was going, Maria -- Sheridan -- had blinked, and looked up at the kiosk overhead. The next flight out of town was to Vail, so she'd purchased a ticket then and there, and was on her way.

Not a bad choice, all things considered. And it was late summer, so the Colorado cold hadn't had a chance to set in just yet. She'd never been there before herself, but she'd seen pictures of the Barrow family's skiing trips for years and always thought it looked quaint and cozy. It was even lovelier than expected, bursting with colorful flora in the warm months of summer. She could see herself settling down here, she thought: everything lush and green in summer, and warm and cozy indoors in the winter.

The only problem was that she had about ten dollars to her name, and if she wanted simply to pay her motel bill she needed a job, to say nothing of trying to settle in permanently.

There was a cafe on the edge of town that was, in winter, famous for its drinking chocolate, hot chocolate's thicker cousin. Despite the heat, she'd ordered some with a churro on the side and she felt herself forgetting about the trauma of the last few days as the warm liquid coated her tongue. She was overtaken, consumed by its sweetness, and she thought if she could work anywhere in the world, it would be somewhere that served happiness in a ceramic mug. She waited in line with her empty mug, resisting the urge to trail her fingertip through the remnants of the chocolate, and when it was her turn, she placed the mug in front of the barista and asked for an application.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the barista said, adjusting her black apron, "we're not actually hiring right now."

Sheridan looked around the room, noting how long the customer line was, and how few employees there were to tend to them.

"I can't help but notice that you're, well, a little understaffed," Sheridan pressed, leaning forward somewhat. She could smell chocolate and coffee on the air, and it was almost intoxicating.

"Yeah," the barista confirmed, sweeping away Sheridan's empty mug, "trust me, if it were up to me, I'd definitely hire someone else on. But it isn't up to me, and policy is that we don't hire in the off season. Try again in the fall -- then we'll need some new faces." The barista looked past Sheridan then to the customer standing behind her, and Sheridan knew that there was no use trying to argue her way into a job. Momentarily dejected, Sheridan turned on her heel to head out the way she'd come.

"Excuse me," a woman said, catching her attention. "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation." Sheridan blushed a little, lifting her gaze to look into the woman's face: she was rather nondescript, one of those faces that could get lost in a crowd. But Sheridan thought she had kind eyes. "If you're looking for work," the woman pressed, "I may have something for you."

"Really?" Sheridan asked, perking up. The woman tucked a lock of mousy blond hair behind her ear and reached into her huge, blue handbag, from which she produced a card. It was simple, white cardstock with "The Lodge" and a number printed in black across the front. Nothing more, nothing less. Sheridan turned it over in her hand. "My job is hiring. We're always looking for... good people."

"The Lodge," Sheridan read. "What is it?"

"A glamorous vacation destination," the woman said, and it was then that Sheridan noticed the quality of her clothing. She may have been nothing in particular to look at, but her blue handbag was Hermes, her shoes were Louboutin. She wore a tailored dior suit and was positively dripping in diamonds. "We're always looking for... oh, waitresses, maids, managers, bartenders, and ah... other, more tailored positions."

"Wow," Sheridan mused quietly, tucking the card into her pocket. "Thank you so much."

"My pleasure."

She was given an interview for later that evening, and as soon as she walked up to the elegant Bavarian lodge, she knew she was underdressed. She smoothed her hands self consciously over her grey pencil skirt, wishing she'd worn something a little nicer that day. She hesitated only for a moment, but found herself drawn magnetically toward the warm light of the the lodge.

The lobby boasted vaulted ceilings and an antler chandelier, with two winding staircases covered in thick, red carpeting. At the far end of the room was a pair of wingback chairs in front of a roaring fire, even in the middle of summer. From one of the chairs rose a tall man, a dark silhouette against the orange of the fire. He wore an impeccably tailored three-piece suit with a burgundy pocket square, and his smile was a flash of bright white against the dark of his skin.

“You must be Sheridan,” he said, extended his hand to her. He gave it a warm squeeze. “I’m Hunter. We spoke on the phone?”

“Yes, of course,” She said, smiling up at him. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for seeing me on such short notice.”

“The pleasure is mine,” he said, his fingertips grazing the small of her back. “Please, this way.” He led her across the lobby toward the concierge desk. “So, I’ll get right to it: the position we’re looking to fill isn’t particularly glamorous, but it is necessary to keep things running smoothly. You will essentially be a personal secretary, running errands off site, managing the personal needs of the owners here.”

Sheridan blinked, unable to believe her luck. “That’s perfect, actually,” she commented, walking double-time to keep up with Hunter. “That’s exactly what I was doing in my last position.”

Hunter rounded the concierge desk so that he was standing opposite Sheridan. “How fortuitous,” he said, his voice smooth as velvet. “It sounds like we’re a perfect match.”

She was dazzled by his easy smile, and she giggled nervously, like she’d had one glass of champagne too many and the bubbles were going to her head.

“So, does that mean you’ll take the job?” Hunter pressed, and all she could do was bob her head in a nod. “Fantastic! Oh, there is just one more thing.” She watched him wake up a sleeping computer, type in a few words, scroll, click, swipe, and come back around the front of the concierge desk with a key card, which he handed to her. “Your room.”

“My...?”

“We’ve always had our secretaries live on the property.” She took the key and gripped it; it pulsed with potential. “Room 413.”

Sheridan climbed the stairs to head to her new room and into her new life. On her way up the stairs, she nearly ran straight into a gorgeous, slender woman who narrowed her eyes at Sheridan as she rubbed at her chest. Sheridan could have sworn she saw dried blood on the woman’s exposed collarbone, but her expression made Sheridan scurry quickly away.

Her room wasn't difficult to find, and was a beautiful, luxurious suite with a marble bath, sitting room, and king sized bed. The floors were hardwood, covered in beautiful rug, and a large, picture window boasted perfect views of the surrounding mountains.

She was full of the adrenaline of excitement, and she went exploring, seeking out the little room that every hotel had that included an ice machine and a vending machine. Her plan was to gorge herself on salty snack foods and watch something on the flatscreen and try to forget, just for a moment, what she was running from.

Back in the hall, she could hear a few faint voices drifting in from the hotel bar, and she distractedly pushed her way through an unmarked door, thinking she'd found the ice machine.

But she couldn't have been more wrong.

Inside was a small room with a King Sized bed and two people roiling together thereon, their limbs all akimbo. The man was bent over the woman, his mouth to her neck, and she was moaning with the intensity of her pleasure. And when the man looked up to note her sudden presence, Sheridan was shocked to see that his mouth was dripping with blood.