

**Ms Mia**  
*and*  
**Murder**  
*at the*  
**Desert Sunrise**  
**Resort**



Jennifer Branch

Ms. Mia and Murder at the Desert Sunrise Resort  
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## A Grand Opening

Mia Spinel gave a last buff to an already gleaming display case. The Desert Sunrise Resort ballroom's vast parquet floor was now filled with displays of brilliantly lit exhibits. Each carefully placed treasure held a neat label, showing the historical context. A clearly marked path, outlined in multiple tape colors, would guide viewers through the exhibits.

"Everything looks good," Mia summed up. "I think we're done with the set up."

The two people next to her breathed out heartfelt sighs of relief, grateful for Mia's final sign off of their efforts.

She continued, "Of course, we will have to clean up after the film crew finishes."

Susan Johnson, the hotel event manager, let an audible groan escape. Her face reddened in embarrassment as she mumbled, "Of course we will."

Mia completely agreed with Susan's sentiments. The last few days had been exhausting. Each exhibit contained ancient and irreplaceable artifacts, not something to trust to casual hands. Every piece was moved with excruciating care. While some of the work had been done by museum staff, most of it had been meticulously accomplished by the three of them, with the most valuable pieces finally set in place today.

As she looked around the large hotel ballroom filled with fascinating exhibits about ancient Arizona, Mia thought the past few days had been worth all the time and effort. It looked amazing.

The centerpiece—and the whole reason for the exhibit—lay majestically in its display case at the far end of the ballroom. Visitors would slowly work their way to the culminating artifact.

Earlier this year, while excavating for a new observatory on the hotel grounds, the crew uncovered an ancient bone flute. Their construction team immediately contacted the local museum and the hotel owners. As they learned more about the flute, everyone realized how unique this flute really was.

Ancestral Pueblo wooden reed flutes had been found in Arizona, dating back well over one thousand years. They were beautiful examples of historic craftsmanship, but hardly unique. Until recently, the oldest bone flute found in North America was the L'Anse Amour Flute, found all the way across the continent in Labrador, and about seven thousand years old. Now, according to carbon dating, they had

discovered a bone flute unimaginably older, at least seventeen thousand years old.

Mia thought it amazing that a small item like the flute could rewrite history for the region and possibly the entire continent.

"We're so very lucky the construction crew knew enough to call in experts when they saw the flute," she told the museum director. "Imagine what could have happened if they were looking the other way, or too concerned about their schedule to stop work."

"Yes, it's frightening how fast a piece of human history might have been lost without their quick actions." Dr. Richard Cummings ran his hand over his close cropped grey hair. "Not every construction crew would pause a job for an artifact." His face grew solemn and he puffed out his round cheeks. "It's difficult to gauge how many antiquities have been lost to modern progress."

"Far too many," Mia agreed.

The hotel observatory was now under construction in a slightly altered location, still perfect for future hotel guests viewing the many stars of the Arizona night sky. This exhibit was the crowning jewel the hotel needed to publicize the Desert Sunrise Resort's soft reopening under the new Spinel Hotels ownership.

Naturally, the Spinel family decided to donate the ancient flute to the local museum. They firmly believed an important historical find should be displayed for all to see, not locked away in a private collector's hoard. However, Mia was determined to get maximum publicity for their newest hotel in the donation process.

Holding the exhibit anywhere but actually at the hotel was not going to get them that much needed publicity. She'd been very clear that the museum donation depended on this exhibit being hosted at this hotel, and she had gotten what she'd wanted. The museum had too.

The displays surrounding them held a combination of choice museum artifacts as well as some fossils and artifacts donated to an auction. Funds would go toward displaying the important new find in its own museum wing.

Richard, the museum director, pushed his sliding glasses back on his nose and said, "It's a lot of work for a temporary exhibit, not even at the museum. I hope it's worth it." He peered doubtfully around the room, smoothing his grizzled hair again. "I hope people bother to come out here."

"I hope I've done enough promotion of the exhibit. I'm not sure we're reaching all potential visitors," Susan worried. "Maybe we should buy some more advertising? Maybe on some of the local news stations? Or add to the social media campaign?"

Her pen tapped down her omnipresent clipboard, checking the same things off for the fifth time, Mia noticed. The wavering checkmarks overlapped in a frantic scramble, causing Mia to wonder whether her events director was up to the job.

"It will be a wonderful fundraising event for the museum's new wing," Mia reassured them. "I personally contacted the local news, and they will be sending a crew out early tomorrow morning to highlight the event. And, Susan, you're promoting on social media already

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and the museum is as well. Don't worry, plenty of people will attend. We have quite a few guest reservations for the auction night alone."

"They'll probably hide the news segment in the middle of the night," Susan said dourly. She tapped her clipboard, glaring at her list.

"Oh, I don't think they'll do that with Kyle Lee making a special Exploration Channel program all about the finding of the bone flute. It airs Friday night after he does the final filming at the exhibit tomorrow." Mia smoothed her perpetually ash blond hair with pride. It had been quite a coup getting the popular archeologist to headline a documentary about the important new find.

The museum expert wrinkled his nose. "I can't think what the public sees in him. He's never conducted an independent dig." His long, wide nose twitched again in disgust, sending his glasses on their slow journey downward. "He's never even been published in a science journal." That was clearly the absolute bottom of the barrel as far as Dr. Richard Cummings was concerned.

"The public loves him," Mia told him firmly. "Whether he's published is not our concern."

"Oh, he's published," Richard sneered. "Popular books." Appealing to the public was clearly anathema.

"One was a bestseller and the rest weren't far behind," Mia stated. "He'll get people in the door at the hotel and into your new museum wing after we donate the flute. That is all that matters," she said with finality. "There will be a huge crowd walking through these doors in three days, and Kyle Lee will help get them here." She

continued tartly, "And those people will pay for your new museum wing."

Richard looked mutinous, but he wisely kept his mouth shut. Mia could see him thinking that the Spinels' flute wasn't donated quite yet.

"I hope we've allowed enough parking. And crowd control," Susan effortlessly moved to a new worry. "With the hotel's soft reopening we really don't have everything organized yet. There's so much construction going on still." She pursed her lips, smearing her lipstick.

Mia noticed, besides its inexperienced application, the orange color clashed horribly with Susan's skin tone. She inwardly sighed and repeated, "It will be fine." She smiled at them reassuringly. "Now, would you two lovely people like to join me for dinner at Mesquite tonight?" As Richard visibly hesitated she added, "The Wallaces will be there."

All hesitation fled. "I'll be there." Susan nodded agreement, also.

"Eight o'clock," Mia told him, inwardly smiling. The Wallaces were huge museum donors. There was no way the museum director—or the hotel event organizer—would miss a chance for a dinner with them, no matter how tired they were. She wondered how Richard would react to the news Kyle Lee would be there as well. She decided to let that be a surprise. Why have him upset beforehand?

Giving one last look around the exhibit room, Mia locked the door. Frowning slightly at the antiquated security keypad, she resolved to have another little chat

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with the hotel manager. Nodding to the young concierge, Atsa, who gave her a cheerful smile as she continued to help a guest, she knocked briefly on the manager's door and opened it.

Don Lagarto straightened up in his chair, blinking slowly in evident confusion. He was so fat he appeared rooted to his chair, like an overgrown cushion. His oily skin glistened in the dim light, and he rubbed his eyes, resembling a massive baby.

Mia chose to ignore his obvious nap. "I just finished the exhibit installation. The extra security system I ordered has not been installed yet."

"Yes, yes," he agreed. He made no further explanation.

She waited a moment in silence, then asked directly, "Can you tell me why the security system hasn't been installed yet? You told me they were installing it today. You told my son it was last week. When exactly is the security system scheduled for installation?"

He shrugged his thick shoulders, sending jellylike ripples across his mountainous fat, "They wanted too much money. I told them no."

"They wanted too much money?" Mia repeated after him, very slowly.

He shrugged again. "Too much. I told them to go cheat someone else," he concluded with smug pride.

Mia waited a moment, then carefully said, "We have millions of dollars in fossils and other artifacts in the exhibit hall right now. Millions. We are responsible for those artifacts while they're in our hotel. Our insurance insisted on the new security." She glared, "And

you tell me they wanted too much money to install the security I'd agreed on?"

He lazily held out his hands to calm her. "Hey, relax, Mia. No one wants to steal some old broken pottery and rocks. Nothing to worry about." His puffy eyelids drooped a little.

"Give me the quote," Mia said through clenched teeth. She held out a commanding hand.

Don started scrabbling around on his desk in a disorganized pile of papers and fast food wrappers. Mia watched in horror as he overturned a coffee cup onto everything, blotted it slightly with his tie and continued distributing the spill around his desk. She realized she didn't want to touch anything from his desk.

"Never mind," she told him.

He stopped immediately, blinking lazily in the dust motes he'd stirred up.

"What security do you have on the resort team?"

"We have Chester and the guys under him," he said after he'd thought a minute. He told her, "Of course we hire extras for big events. But that hasn't happened in a while. Nothing much happens around here. Quiet hotel, no need for extra security."

"Mr. Lagarto, will you please get it through your head that this exhibit is a huge event for the hotel. There will be many more such events happening. The hotel is under new ownership. The Desert Sunrise Resort is now a Spinel Property, and everything that happens here reflects on Spinel Hotels," Mia said coldly. "A theft at this exhibit, especially when we do not have the agreed

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on security system, would cost us millions, as well as be terrible publicity, instead of a grand reopening."

"No one's going to steal rocks. Not around here. The desert is full of them—that sounds like a big city problem. Don't worry about it." He shifted in his chair uncomfortably. His eyes caught hers briefly before they flickered away.

"Someone will steal anything if other people will pay for it," Mia kept her voice very calm, despite an intense desire to yell at the manager. "As I have told you repeatedly, for an exhibit this important, we must have the best security. That is why I am here, at the last minute, to make sure the exhibit and your security are ready." She took a deep breath. "It's clearly not."

"No one's going to steal a bunch of rocks," he repeated his mantra.

"Mr. Lagarto, you will immediately call in all available security for tonight. That means everyone on the security team and anyone else you can get. Hire a local security company for the next two weeks to supplement your resort team, as I previously requested. You will station them in and around the exhibit hall. I want at least five security guards guarding that room by this evening." She looked down at him, and he squirmed in his chair. "Will you do that immediately?"

"Yeah, I'll do it when I have a chance," he said, not meeting her eyes. "Of course, I'm not going to be responsible for the extra cost to the hotel for guarding rocks."

Mia talked over his excuses. "I will call back the security company and pay whatever exorbitant cost they

charge us after you," she looked hard at him, "canceled my order. Hopefully they can install it before the Preview Party on Friday night."

"That's not my fault," he blustered. "I've been manager here forever. I know what we need and what people are just trying to scam us on. I'm not paying extra for security we don't need."

She just stared at him.

He blinked slowly and looked away. "Our security is fine," he told her.

"Call all the security you can get." When he still looked mutinous, Mia repeated, "Call them immediately. That's an order." She left, shutting the door very softly behind her.

She waited to call Mark, her stepson and CEO of Spinel Hotels, until she reached her cottage. "Mark, your instincts were absolutely right on the manager here. He is worthless."

A soft chuckle, "Would an 'I told you so' be in order?"

"Absolutely," Mia gracefully collapsed into a soft chair, looking out the window. "The man is a fool. He actually cancelled the new security system, after telling me yesterday they were installing it today."

"He what?" She heard his chair come down with a thump. "We don't have security on the museum exhibits? Do you know how much money those exhibits are worth? What do you mean, no security system?"

"No security worth anything. All those valuable fossils on display, and I could probably pick the lock with

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a hairpin," she stated flatly. "I've made arrangements for guards tonight."

"Good," with a note of relief.

"With the manager."

A flat silence.

"I wondered if someone at the main office could call the security company and make sure that's set up as soon as possible?" She explained, "I would do it myself, but I have dinner plans tonight. And somehow I doubt Mr. Lagarto will get around to it with his busy nap schedule. If they have security guards available, they should send them as well. I'm not confident in Mr. Lagarto setting that up either."

"No problem," Mark agreed. "And I'll be arranging for Mr. Lagarto's replacement asap as well. He didn't seem ideal, but the hotel numbers are very good, quite a solid profit margin, considering the condition it was in. I was trying to leave as many of the old management in place as possible to smooth the transition, however," he trailed off.

"He's certainly not up to Spinel standards," Mia sniffed.

"Anything interesting for dinner plans?" Mark asked.

"Not really. Some big museum donors, the museum director and our event planner. Oh, and Kyle Lee, the expert archeologist doing the program on the fossil. It will give me an opportunity to check out the Mesquite Restaurant. From everything I've heard, it's fabulous."

"You haven't eaten there yet?" Mark asked in mild surprise. "That doesn't sound like you."

"No, I've been too busy to appreciate the dining experience. They brought me a lovely dinner last night, but I've been working the entire time."

"I didn't realize things were that bad. I thought you'd just be polishing a few rough edges," Mark sounded concerned.

"The exhibit was more of a mess than you thought. But don't worry, I have it all straightened out and looking fantastic. It will be an asset to our renovated hotel and a perfect reopening."

"I never doubted you'd make the exhibit a success," Mark chuckled. "But it's a huge problem having no security system in place for an exhibit that valuable. I've been concerned since our people spotted those online posts from a thief trying to presell the bone flute and other fossils, before he even stole them." His voice rose in anger, "From us. At our hotel. It could cost us millions. And you're telling me there's no security?"

"I know, Mark. That's why I'm here," Mia reassured her stepson.

There was a brief silence. "Speaking of rough edges, how is Sam doing?" Her nephew was doing a gap year working at the hotel, starting at the bottom and hopefully working his way up. There was nothing like real world experience to find out what type of job you were most suited for.

"Sam joined me for dinner in my cottage last night. He seems to really be enjoying the work experience," Mia told Mark. "He's made it up to waiter,

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so far," she said with pride. "I'm looking forward to hearing him play tonight. He said he'd be at Mesquite."

Mark chuckled, "I'd wait until you hear it first. Remember Christmas."

"I'm sure he'll be fine." Sam played guitar in the hotel restaurants in the evenings to make a little extra money.

Mia stood up as she put down her phone, gazing around the room. The small adobe casita felt cool and calm in the golden evening, with warm ochre walls and a wood beamed ceiling. Woven rugs splashed bright reds and oranges on the otherwise serene peace of the room. A small rounded fireplace, a kiva made of clay, sat ready to be lit in the evening chill. She looked forward to curling up with a good book in front of a roaring fire after the exhibit was launched.

Tall French doors looked toward the high desert. The distant mountains were fading to rich purple, with bright green cacti dotting the rust red of the desert.

Pouring herself a sparkling glass of champagne from the temptingly icy bottle sitting ready, Mia pushed open the door into the beautiful view from her small patio. A comfortable chair and table waited. She sat sipping the crisp bite of the dry champagne and watching the purples of the mountains streaking with sunset orange, the mountain range gradually enveloped by the deep blues of dusk.

Tiny stars flickered into lights in the velvet dark sky. She sighed in contentment. The night sky in Arizona was lovely beyond belief, tiny dots of stars sparkling to infinity.

A little reluctantly, she left the starlit night and went inside to change for dinner. Soft, warm lighting gave a welcoming glow to the small cottage's interior. A peacefully cozy atmosphere enveloped her, and she smiled in anticipation as she got ready for her little dinner party.

Mia dressed in a soft blush pink that would coordinate well with the warm ochres of the dining room. A sheer silk scarf in deep undulating reds wrapped her neck, adding a dash of rich color. She smiled at herself in the mirror as she added the final touch of sparkling pink spinel earrings (given by her husband on their tenth anniversary in Venice, Italy) and dark rose pink lipstick. It was going to be a wonderful night.

The crisp night air felt pleasant during the short walk to the main hotel from her cottage. The cottages lined the outskirts of the main hotel grounds, since most guests who desired a cottage also wanted privacy. Paths were well lit, but a little more glaring than she liked since the bright light veiled the soft beauty of the night and hid the stars. However, she knew the local rattlesnake population was numerous and decidedly did not confine their activities to daytime. Mia had absolutely no desire to encounter a snake on her way to dinner.

The winding path led through some of the citrus grove the hotel cultivated for their restaurant. She breathed in the honey sweet fragrance of the citrus blossoms lying heavy in the night air.

The Desert Sunrise Resort was the first Spinel hotel in the desert. The Spinels' hotel chain had hotels on the ocean, perched in rainforests and nestled on the

side of mountains, even a few luxurious small establishments in cities. The almost flat plain of the desert abruptly ending in the high mountains felt very different from their other hotel landscapes, Mia thought. This mountain range wasn't particularly large for the area, but its vast bulk overshadowed the hotel and grounds. There was something awe inspiring about looking directly up into the mountains.

The low hotel sprawled over several acres, blending into the scrub of the desert with ochre adobe walls. A few splashes of bright greens, like the citrus grove, restaurant garden and swimming pools' landscaping made an oasis in the warm desert sand. Mia appreciated how the hotel complemented its environment so perfectly.

The Spinels' renovations were still ongoing in the outbuildings, but mostly finished in the main buildings. They had modernized the amenities and repaired structural defects, but kept the essential character of the hotel. This was Mia's first trip to the hotel, and she absolutely loved it.

Flickering oil lamps in wrought iron holders lit the main hotel entrance, transporting you back to a more leisurely era. Intricately carved wooden doors opened on to the cool desert night. A fire cheerfully danced in the rounded fireplace, with a few couples grouped around the flames. Massive hewn beams held up the high ceiling, with a balcony edging a second level in the rafters. When Mia looked up, she saw groups chatting at the edge of the high wooden rails, looking down to observe and

gossip about newcomers. She smiled up at them and planned some quiet time in that optimal vantage point.

Dinner tonight was a treat she'd been anticipating. The three star hotel restaurant, Mesquite, was one of the major reasons the Spinelns had bought the property. The resort was a little off the beaten track, but the amazing restaurant drew people from all over the area for a spectacular dinner. The less than ideal hotel upkeep did not always convince them to spend the night, but she thought that could easily be changed with their renovations.

And a change of manager. Don Lagarto was clearly not responsible for the success of the restaurant. He was much too fat to fully appreciate food. She looked forward to meeting the head chef who had created the premier restaurant.

Mia had only waited a few minutes when she saw Estela Wallace hypnotically swaying across the lobby. Her huge brown eyes and full red lips were overshadowed by her curving figure. Every male eye immediately tracked her as soon as she entered, her small voluptuous frame carefully guarded by her protective husband. Women's eyes followed her path sourly, realizing they had been neatly eclipsed.

Hands outstretched, Estela enthusiastically embraced Mia, with a loud kiss on each cheek. "Mia, darling, thank you so much for inviting us tonight. I can not wait for your lovely party Friday! And John is so excited to see the flute!" She stage whispered, "He still hopes you will sell it to him, but I tell him you never will." Her ruby lips curved in laughter.

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John Wallace shook hands briefly, while his vibrant young wife chattered on. "Mia," he acknowledged, then motioned a waiter for a drink.

Mia liked the Wallaces. They had been extremely easy to work with in both the details of the fossils they had loaned for the exhibit, and several they had donated to the charity auction. The only small difficulty was John Wallace desperately wanted the bone flute for his own collection. The sums he'd offered for it so far had been extremely tempting to anyone who didn't view it as a national treasure.

John Wallace seemed pure vintage Texas oil man, with a big silver belt buckle and elaborately worked but well broken in cowboy boots. He held a bourbon in his big hand, as usual, but it never seemed to affect him much. Over his lifetime, he'd amassed the largest private collection in the world of Southwestern fossils and historic artifacts.

Estela Wallace was a much more exotic creature, attracting male eyes wherever she went. Her large eyes slanted mysteriously, helped along with expertly applied winged eyeliner. Her reddened full lips were an invitation to male eyes and her lush figure a perfect hourglass with curves in all the right places. She was very much younger than her very rich and obviously smitten husband. Most people made the obvious assumption. Mia wasn't so sure.

Estela looked up through her long lashes at her husband, who neatly tucked her under one arm. He bluntly asked, "How about a sneak preview of the exhibit, Mia?"

"Now, John, you know I can't do that."

"I'd make it worth your while. You know that."

"Now, John, if I let you in, everyone else will want to come too. We just finished organizing it today."

"Anything good?"

"The pieces you lent are, of course. And I know the museum appreciates your very generous silent auction donations."

"Yeah, but is there anything I might want in that silent auction?"

Mia considered, "I think there might be a few pieces that will pique your interest." She hedged, "I'm not certain of everything you have in your collection already, of course, but there are a few quite special ones."

"Good enough odds for me. What do you think, honey?"

Estela looked up through darkened lashes and smiled at him, "I think you will be sure to find something. You always do, especially for a good cause as well."

"True enough."

"And tomorrow you will go riding with me. I want to see where the flute was found and if there is anything else there." She smiled at Mia, "The whole story is like something out of a movie, an adventure." She smiled in a slow beautiful curve. "Treasure hunting."

"I don't think you'll find anything else, but you're welcome to try," Mia told her.

Estela pouted slightly in disappointment then shrugged elaborately, "Still, one never knows."

"No, anything might happen. That's the fun of it," Mia laughed. "It's a beautiful trail ride, I'm told. You

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might take a picnic lunch with you. I'm told Mesquite packs an excellent one."

"Good. If I have food, then John will come too," Estela stated.

"Honey, I'd follow you anywhere." John grinned at her like he meant every word, a man looking at the woman he loved.

"I would too, Estela darling," a professionally smooth voice cut in and a handsome man leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek, lips lingering a beat too long. "It's been far too long. How's your father?"

Mia saw Estela stiffen slightly, visibly forcing herself to keep a social smile. "Kyle, how unexpected. I didn't know you were coming tonight."

Kyle smiled archly at her. "I know you didn't, darling. What a lovely surprise for you, isn't it?"

John grunted, "Kyle." He took a gulp of his bourbon, draining the glass and handed it off to a waiter. "Another."

"John," Kyle parried, then smiled winningly at Mia, "You're looking lovely, Mia darling."

Mia nodded, "Hello, Kyle." She wondered what the well known archeologist had done to annoy the Wallaces. "Are you ready for the program finale?"

"I finish filming tomorrow," he said impressively. "You can come see the filming as my very special guest." Kyle's smile showed every single one of his pearly white teeth. He was dressed impeccably in a pale tropic weight suit with a carefully knotted striped tie and crisp white shirt. He looked like a sleek, elegant cat dressed up for the evening.

"That sounds interesting," Mia thought she would drop by the filming to make sure everything was going smoothly.

Susan Johnson and Richard Campbell came in together, clearly still discussing the exhibit details. Spotting the others, they joined the little group.

Susan had evidently dressed in the dark with a black top and navy slacks that didn't match as well as she'd probably thought they did. Mia thought the combination looked like a bruise. Her hair was scraped back from her forehead and confined with a dollar store rhinestone clip already sliding down her hair. She smiled dutifully at everyone then hunched her shoulders to avoid conversation, ducking her head down, like a retreating turtle.

Mia sighed inwardly at the lack of confidence and sense of style. And the girl probably thought she was being dressy with the cheap sparkles, which no one could pull off without confidence. Youth wasted so much time in that awkward stage.

Estela barely flickered her long lashes at Susan, seeing no competition from that quarter.

Richard, wearing a poorly tailored funeral suit, bagged at the knees and bulged elsewhere. He purposefully held his hand out to John, "John, a pleasure to see you and your lovely wife." He smiled briefly at Estela, unmoved by her allure, then purposefully turned back to John. "Susan and I were just going over some of the last minute details for the exhibit."

Glancing at Mia, he said optimistically, "I had a little idea about the exhibit. I think we might move the

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main exhibit over to the North side of the room. Create a little more anticipation." He rubbed soft fingers together, excited about the change.

Mia sighed to herself. Richard's little ideas were one of the reasons the past days had seemed interminable. She kept her voice even, "Richard, that would change the entire traffic flow of the room. We need to leave it how it is. It's going to be difficult enough to get it ready on time after they finish filming."

Kyle broke in, "What about moving the bone flute to the other side of the room, next to the windows? The sunlight streaming down on it would make great footage."

John said shortly, "Sun exposure would fade the coloration."

Kyle looked like he might argue, but Richard broke in, "John's right, Kyle. Sunlight is the last thing we need on that artifact."

Mia said more cheerfully than she felt, "So that's settled. We'll just keep the exhibit exactly as it is."

Richard set his pudgy jaw defiantly, but said nothing.

Susan looked like she missed crossing that item off her clipboard.

"And welcome the crowds. Everyone will love it," Estella ably seconded Mia. "Now, let's go see what amazing creations your chef has made for us tonight." With the complete assurance of the belle of the ball, she walked toward the restaurant doors, admiring glances following.

The headwaiter quickly opened the big doors, discretely telling her, "Ms. Mia, I have a quiet table ready for your party on the far side of the room." He led her to a table situated in a corner with a clear view of the long, low room. For the first time, Mia wondered how old the main building actually was. Was her modern resort built around an ancient ranch or something even older?

As she passed the guitarist softly strumming in the corner, he gave her a huge wink and briefly played a fanfare. She firmly shook her head at him, and he grinned back unrepentantly. Sam, her nephew, was the dinner musician tonight, as promised.

"Thank you, Tahoma," Mia said. The headwaiter himself had brought Sam's and her late dinner to her cottage last night, and they'd chatted for a few minutes. They had very similar ideas on what made meals great.

Without asking her, he'd readied a chilled bottle of champagne of her favorite vintage. "Champagne?"

Everyone settled into their chairs, smiling at the bubbly glasses. John swirled the refill of his bourbon, glowering into the amber liquid. The light gleamed on the face of his leather strapped Breitling Navitimer. He'd sat as far away from Kyle Lee as possible, pulling out a chair for his wife to sit beside him.

The low ceiling was intricately carved and painted, making their corner of the large room seem intimate. Sam played soft guitar music, a soothing background to conversation. Heavy oak tables with rust linen tablecloths held flickering candle lights, and gas lit torches hung on the walls, creating an intimate oasis of light around each table.

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Kyle raised his glass, smoothly preempting the first toast, "To the upcoming exhibit and my program."

They all sipped to the shared goal and the mood relaxed. "Now, what do you have for us tonight, Tahoma?"

"Tonight, we have bison steaks grown on the ranch next to the hotel, accompanied by a spicy smoky aioli, new potatoes and fire roasted peppers sourced from the hotel garden. Chef Chooli makes fabulous stone ground corn tortillas." He smiled benevolently at the group, "I would suggest some smoked trout dip and tortillas as a starter."

"That sounds delicious," Mia agreed.

"We also have fresh caught trout from the mountains, with spicy pepper salsa."

Estela ordered bison steak, "Mmm, wonderful."

Mia followed her lead. It was nice to be at the hotel long enough to try everything. Going to a fabulous restaurant only one time made choices much more difficult. She knew she would be back for that trout.

Richard returned doggedly to his attack on Kyle. "Now Kyle, if you'd gotten your Ph.D, like me, you'd realize sunlight is almost the most harmful thing in a museum to a delicate artifact. The last thing we want is the flute breaking down in sunlight." His cheeks puffed in prideful disdain.

Kyle showed every sharp white tooth as he replied. "Naturally I realize that, Richard. In my last best selling book — you may have noticed it made the New York Times' bestsellers list — I made that exact point. I simply did not realize the windows would be open

during the exhibit. A few brief moments for filming would make no difference." He turned to Mia, "Aren't the windows rather a security risk?"

John put in, "We haven't gone into your security in detail, Mia. What do you have?"

Absolutely nothing at all, Mia thought sourly to herself, but said reassuringly, "I have a guard team, both hotel and extra security, overseeing the exhibit tonight. They should install the final exhibit security tomorrow, after Kyle's filming in the morning." She smiled at Kyle, "We didn't want to have the security system filmed or be in the way of filming." That made a plausible explanation, she thought.

John nodded with a slight frown, turning his glass on the table thoughtfully, watching the water ring enlarge on the rust colored linen.

"Tomorrow, after filming?" Kyle frowned. "That doesn't give much time to install it. And what if we need retakes?" He took a long drink of his iced tea.

"Aren't you just saying a few words about the flute and other artifacts?" Richard asked. "Besides putting on your makeup, don't you have about ten minutes in front of the camera, at the most? It's not like you have to actually write anything yourself—your writer did that already. And you've already filmed the rest of it, right? Should be quick, even if you mess up some." He took a sip of deep red wine, snickering into his glass.

Before Kyle could answer, Mia said, "The film crew has the exhibit hall to themselves for the entire morning. That should be ample time." She smiled at Kyle, "I know all kinds of things must come up during

filming. We all want an engaging documentary that brings people to the exhibit."

Estela nodded in rapid agreement. "We want everyone to know about it. The more people know, the more people come." She looked around the table brightly, smoothing her rich dark hair into place, her ruby red dress making her brown eyes impossibly luminous in the candlelight. "The more people come, the more people spend money and the museum is happy." She smiled at Richard, "Then, he stops asking us for money for his new wing, because it is already funded."

Richard smiled back sourly at her.

"Now, tomorrow, I ride out to the dig site. We have such experts here, tell me a little more about it." Her eyes danced with the lure of buried treasures not yet uncovered.

Richard cleared his throat importantly, but Kyle slipped in first. "The archeologists finished working there a few weeks ago, when we filmed the site. None of their other finds have been spectacular. Mostly pottery shards, some seeds, which we carbon dated to confirm the flute's age." Kyle swirled the champagne in his glass, watching the bubbles fizz and pop between his long fingers.

Mia had actually been relieved when they found no other important discoveries. Too many interesting finds, and the government would start dictating how the hotel's property was used. Allowing the university to dig was a compromise that had thankfully ended well for all.

Personally, she rather enjoyed the pottery shards. The little fragments offered glimpses into the everyday

life of a long ago people. People who made meals and stored bountiful harvests, just as people did today.

"Maybe we'll spot something ourselves, honey," John said, with a dreamy tone in his voice. He quickly nodded to Mia, "Naturally, anything we find we'll report to you."

"Yes, you report all your finds to the proper authorities, don't you, John?" Kyle laughed softly under his breath, tossing back his champagne glass. "Of course you do." He motioned a waiter for more iced tea.

John's lips pulled back from his teeth, but it was not in a smile. His hand gripped his glass harder. Mia saw Estela pat his hand under the table, calming him down.

With a flourish, Tahoma set down appetizing tastings of smoked fish, steaming tortillas and charred pepper salsa at their places. Mia took a bite of the tortilla and smoked trout. It was amazing, the smokiness of the fish just enough to enhance the flavor, the tortilla with its rich depth of corn, the spicy warmth of the peppers. She smiled at Tahoma in approval. He went away beaming.

"I do hope the security will be finished by Friday morning. We want the preview party to go well, not have workmen all over the place while we're setting up."

Susan fussed, tearing up her tortilla into her salsa.

"There's just so much to do before the party. And after that, so many people going through the exhibit." Her hair straggled down in untidy clumps.

"I'm sure they'll finish everything they need to do," Mia reassured her.

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"It would just be so awkward if a bunch of security people are wandering around while we're setting up the event," Susan balled up her napkin, then smoothed it out. "Everything needs to go perfectly."

Mia wondered how many events Susan could possibly have managed if she expected everything to go perfectly. The whole point of an event manager was to prepare for all of the things that could, and probably would, go wrong, so that the guests never even knew about them. "I'm sure it will be fine," she told Susan again.

"I've actually had a fire in the bathroom at one exhibit opening I spoke at. Smoke poured into the exhibit hall. Everyone was coughing like crazy and the sprinklers went off. We had to evacuate in the rain." Kyle's contribution was hardly designed to help calm Susan. She dropped her napkin and awkwardly leaned under the table to retrieve it.

Kyle continued, his dark eyes gleeful, "And at another one, the centerpiece of the exhibit was stolen on opening night. Swiped from under all of our noses." He looked around the table with a smirk on his face, seemingly delighted with the expression on Susan's face. John stared back at him stonily.

Richard said, his disapproval clear, "It's not like you've had anything to do with the exhibit organization here, Kyle. You're just filming it." He pushed his glasses up, peering at Kyle through them, "I've never had that kind of problem at any of my exhibits. They sound extremely poorly run. Did you organize those?"

The conversation was awkward, to say the least, with all three men actively sniping at each other. Slogging determinedly through the conversation, Mia finally saw their feast coming. Steaming trays filled with delicious food were always a welcome distraction. The table calmed as everyone ate the star chef's meal and listened to the soft guitar strumming. She sipped the aged Tempranillo Tahoma had paired the main course with, and felt herself relaxing into the evening.

Looking around the long room, Mia noticed a family with two well behaved children, both boys. It was unusual to see children in a main dining room in the evening, reminding Mia of taking her boys to the family hotels and out to dinner during vacations. They were the only family group in the room. She smiled at the children's appreciation of the food—it disappeared at a rate she hadn't seen since her own boys were small.

Mia noticed even though the room didn't feel crowded, there were no empty tables, always a sight that warmed the owner's heart. The restaurant seemed very well run.

Tahoma, clearly an excellent headwaiter, had thoughtfully seated couples in the most romantic, intimate niches, leaving the less private central area to larger parties. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves.

A wiry man reached high above his head, miming what must be today's rock climb. His equally athletic companion smiled good-naturedly at him, clearly remembering a shorter distance than he did. Mia noticed one young couple with shiny new wedding rings

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clinking glasses and gazing lovingly into each other's eyes.

Many of the other guests were older women, some relaxing alone, and a few groups having spa weekends. A mother and daughter laughed at a shared joke, faces glowing from their spa treatment and the evening.

A thin man dined alone in a niche, a huge book propped up against the table's heavy iron candlestick, risking a fire with each page turn. Mia noticed a waiter hovering attentively by with a large water carafe. She squinted a little, the book's cover showed a hovering spacecraft and proclaimed itself to know the secrets behind UFO's. She smiled a little at the reader's intense expression, notebook and pen at the ready. A true believer, then.

A woman tripped, nimbly caught by Tacoma. She hurried to meet another woman waiting impatiently at a window table, frowning at the menu. The woman dismissed the other's fervent apologies for her tardiness with an impatient wave, hampered slightly by several strings of her turquoise beads clattering against the table. The tardy guest perched on the edge of her chair, clearly unsure what and when to order. Flitting through her menu, she hesitated at choosing anything, instead looking around the room in curiosity. Her host finally snapped her menu shut with a frustrated look, imperiously motioning the waiter over to order for both diners. She clearly hadn't found what she was looking for in the menu, but was determined they would get it.

Mia wondered what the woman could possibly want that wasn't on the menu. She always considered the opportunity to try local specialties one of the best parts of travel. You never knew what wonderful new dish you might enjoy, if you were open to new possibilities.

The food was absolutely delicious, the bison steak perfect in texture, the aioli just hinting of exotic spices and the Tempranillo wine deep in rich notes of leather, blackberry and tobacco. The table was quiet in appreciation. They peacefully discussed the hotel plans, including the new observatory, and some of the more interesting upcoming workshops Susan had scheduled.

Dessert was classic flan done right, with a honey orange sauce "from the hotel orange groves," Tahoma told them with pride. Delicious.

As soon as he finished his dessert and drained his iced tea, Kyle looked around the table with a satisfied smile. "Mia, you were an absolute darling to invite me to dinner. I've enjoyed it immensely but," his full lips made a mock pout of distress, "I need to hit the hay. Filming tomorrow, you know. I have to get my beauty sleep."

"I completely understand. It was good to see you, Kyle," Mia said.

"Richard, John," he nodded shortly at the men. He came around to Estela and held out his hand, kissing her delicate fingers when she tried to politely shake hands, "my lovely Estela."

John's chair made a slight scraping sound on the tile floor.

With seeming reluctance, Kyle let Estela's hand go and said, "Goodbye, all." He blew another air kiss at

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Estela, who was looking down at her dessert plate, studiously ignoring him. He didn't waste one of his brilliant smiles on Susan. Women turned to watch him stride away with his air of complete assurance. Mia smiled as she noticed both women at the table by the window, turn completely around to watch Kyle's confident figure leave.

"And good riddance," John muttered. Richard clearly agreed, scooping up another bite of flan with gusto.

The atmosphere around the table relaxed after Kyle left. Good food and good wine always had that effect, Mia thought with a smile. Even Susan calmed down her worrying some, though she still looked a little lost without her clipboard.

The family with young boys had appropriately left early, but Mia noticed the newlyweds lingering at their table, holding hands and gazing at each other as they sipped their wine. The woman with the turquoise beads—and an equally hampering, voluminous handwoven skirt—stayed deep in conversation to her companion while almost bolting her delicious meal. Gesturing around the dining room officiously, she almost caught her floating bell sleeves on fire several times in her sweeping gestures. The other woman toyed with her food uneaten, while earnestly listening and cautiously offering encouragement to the informative talker. With happy smiles, the mother and daughter leaned back in their chairs, sipping their wine and swapping old stories.

As the evening relaxed, John smiled and admitted to Mia, "I still have to admit I'd love that little

flute for my collection. It would be the crown jewel of the whole lot."

Richard made an inarticulate sound.

"Now, Richard," John reassured the curator, "I'm just saying I wish I could buy it for my collection. The local museum is the next best thing to owning it myself, since the Spinels think it should be in a public collection. I'm spending a lot of money on that museum wing so it's housed properly. I'm just not sure it's going to be properly appreciated there."

"A public collection is the only possible place for a discovery of this importance," Richard told him pedantically, made bolder by the wine.

"So you say," John was clearly not convinced. "I've never been a fan of showing our most important finds to the unappreciative masses."

"That's, that's absurd," Richard was almost speechless at John's opinion. "Important finds like this can't possibly be left in private hands. Think of the research that needs to be done." His round brown cheeks deflated, leaving his mouth open in shock.

"I know of a few important finds that mysteriously went missing or were simply sold off from museums after the donation fanfare wore down. Museums are businesses, like anything else. Don't pretend they don't sell off assets to the highest bidders when their balance sheet looks bad," John said, putting his glass down with a thump. "Very few museums even show most of their collection to the public. They just hide donations away from everyone, and say it's for research. Who knows what salable artifacts are actually

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stored in the basement vaults no one is allowed in?" he added with a sly grin. "Quite a few inventories have come up short of what museum donors thought were there."

Richard was definitely incoherent now. "My museum would never, never..."

John guffawed, "Just pulling your chain, Richard. You should see the look on your face." He took a long drink of bourbon. "I'm sure you'll take care of it." His smile became wickedly wide, like a wolf sighting prey. "And if you don't want the flute anymore, you know where you'll find your highest bidder."

Richard's glasses were sliding down his nose and his pudgy fingers balled up the tablecloth. He clearly didn't know what to say to one of his biggest museum donors insulting museums.

Mia cut in, "I'm sure the flute will be in good hands with you, Richard." She smiled sweetly at him, "And I know our donor contract won't allow the museum to sell it." She turned to John, "So don't worry, it's safe."

"For now," John growled under his breath.

Mia continued, "And you'll realize how many people appreciate the bone flute when you see the crowds coming next weekend."

Estela tapped her husband's hand and said lightly, "I know everyone will love to see it. Such a wonderful exhibit. And it will raise enough money so the museum will show it beautifully to everyone, as it should be."

"They'd better," John said sourly. He pushed back his chair. "Well, honey, I'm ready to turn in. Thanks for dinner, Mia."

"It was a delicious dinner," Estela said appreciatively. "We will see you soon, Mia."

"I'm sure we will all meet in the next few days." Mia stood up. "I'm going to turn in as well." She smiled at Richard and Susan, "It has been a busy few days."

As she passed Sam, he played the first few bars of a lullaby, smoothly transitioning to a Bach sonata. He was still completely alert at the late hour, straight brown hair standing in all directions. His clever fingers moved in their complex dance over his guitar with complete ease.

Mia captured Susan's arm purposefully, steering her toward the restaurant doors. The poor girl was on the verge of a panic attack, and the exhibit hadn't even started yet. When they were out of the restaurant, Mia quietly told her, "Susan, dear, you need to get some rest tonight. The exhibit will go well, I'm sure of it. You need to stop work and get a good night's sleep so you're fresh for tomorrow. Go home and sleep. There's nothing more you can do tonight."

Susan pushed the sparkly clip back in her hair, creating snarls. "I was just going to take care of one or two little things..."

"No," Mia ordered her. "You are going to get a good night's rest. No more work tonight." With a slight frown, she looked the young woman up and down appraisingly. "Tomorrow, wear all black."

"All black? Why?" Susan asked curiously.

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"Black is a good neutral color for business," Mia told her. "It doesn't distract people. You need to wear all black when you're working. You'll look much more professional, like wearing a uniform without that formality." It was also difficult to have all black not match.

Susan looked slightly mulish, but clearly didn't have enough of a backbone to argue. "Okay," she agreed with a poorly hidden yawn.

"Go get some sleep now, dear," Mia told her kindly. Susan had the potential to be an excellent event planner with time and a little guidance, Mia thought as she watched her slumped figure retreating. What Susan really needed was a mentor to teach her how to be an event organizer for a hotel. She wasn't ready to be running the show, even though she was the one in charge. That made for an awkward situation, since it wasn't Susan's fault she'd been promoted before she was quite ready, so she was learning on the job. Mia's impression was Mr. Lagarto would have hired the first person who applied, so he wouldn't have to conduct more tiresome interviews.

Mia looked around the cavernous lobby. Without guests filling the room, every sound echoed off the high wooden ceiling and unglazed terracotta Saltillo tiled floors. Only the night concierge, James, remained, nodding at her in greeting, before turning back to whatever he was doing on his computer. She delicately hid a yawn, heading toward her cottage and her bed.

To Mia's surprise, as she approached the doors, Richard waited to intercept her, his stubby legs dangling

on the deep leather sofa. Struggling out of the sofa with a grimace, he hailed her, "Mia, I'm so glad I've caught you."

She paused and looked at him, trying not to show her irritation. "Yes, Richard? Can it wait until morning?"

"It will just take a minute. I just wanted to make sure you knew about something rather important." He pushed his glasses up owlshly and ushered her to a chair. His brown eyes looked directly into hers, imploring her to listen.

Mia perched on the edge of her chair, hoping this wasn't another of Richard's one more little things that would end up taking all night.

He pushed his glasses up again and said, "Look, I know I was a bit of a jerk to Kyle tonight, but that fraud doesn't have any business talking about archeology."

"Richard, I know that you don't like Kyle. We're not relying on his academic credibility, but his popularity. We want as many people as possible coming to the exhibit," Mia told him with asperity.

"That's what I'm saying," he told her, puffing out his cheeks for emphasis. "Kyle was caught a few years back with a fossil he'd smuggled. Absolutely perfect example of an *Australopithecus africanus*, over three million years old." His slightly smug gaze was steady on hers.

"Kyle was caught?" Mia hadn't heard anything about this. She wasn't sure she believed it either with the sniping the two men had done tonight.

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"Yes. The production company hushed it up, but my museum was involved since we'd sponsored the dig, so I heard about it at the time." He reassured her, "The important finds would have stayed in the country, of course." His eyes briefly slid away, then returned. "Kyle stole the fossil from the cave site while he was filming it."

"Why wasn't he prosecuted?" This certainly had not come up with anyone Mia had asked about Kyle. Difficult to work with, yes, that had come up, but absolutely nothing about thefts.

Richard's eyes slid sideways. "Well, it was actually found inside a camera bag, so he claimed it was his cameraman. And his cameraman claimed he knew nothing about it."

"So there's no proof Kyle was actually the thief?" Mia asked with decision.

Richard shrugged. "He was up to his ears in gambling debt at the time, most of which had been miraculously paid off in record time. I mean, he had tough looking men showing up at the digs he filmed, looking for him. Several smaller finds had gone missing during his documentaries and word had spread. After he was caught in South Africa, all the mysterious disappearances of small valuable objects at his documentaries stopped abruptly." He shrugged, admitting, "Nothing has ever been conclusively proven against him, but I heard through the grapevine, Kyle's back in debt to some not so nice guys again."

Mia said impartially, "He has written some bestsellers. That can make quite a lot of money."

"Not enough for that kind of gambling,"

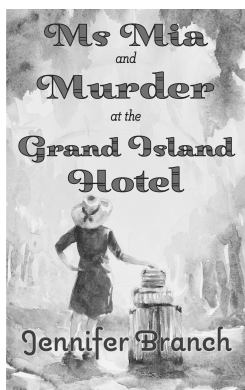
Richard snorted inelegantly, soft curving belly jiggling with laughter and brown cheeks curving in a sardonic grin. "No, my guess is that Kyle only got caught stealing once, but it had happened a lot more than that. He's still working with the same cameraman too. I can't think why the man stays with Kyle, but he does. Maybe he's in on it too."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Mia lifted a delicate eyebrow.

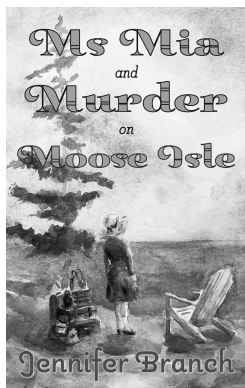
Richard looked at her, disbelief showing through his slipping glasses. "Kyle's going to have full access to the bone flute tomorrow. And tonight you told him there's no security on it until after his show films."



## Ms. Mia Murder Mysteries

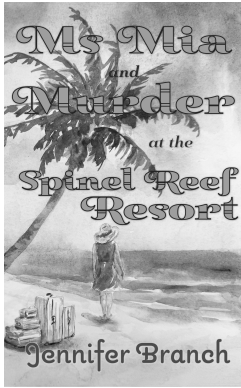


A luxurious private island paradise, with palm trees and white sand beaches, sets the stage for this classic cozy mystery.

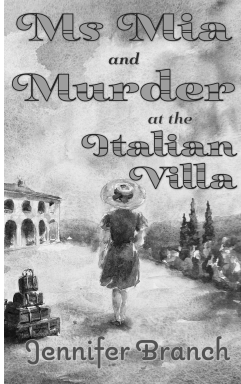


A Gilded Age mansion on a secluded Maine island, perched on rocky cliffs overlooking the ocean, sets the scene for a classic cozy whodunit.

## Chapter Two



In a sun-drenched tropical paradise, Ms. Mia chases a vanishing corpse and a cunning killer in this delightful cozy murder mystery.



An Italian villa vacation turns deadly—Ms. Mia unmasks a cunning poisoner in this lighthearted cozy murder mystery.

## About the Author



Jennifer Branch weaves cozy mysteries with the vibrant flair of her watercolor paintings, inspired by her renowned ability to capture joyful scenes from the Georgia coast, Maine, Venice, and beyond. Her debut, *Ms. Mia and Murder at the Grand Island Hotel*, sweeps readers to a Georgia Sea Islands paradise. It's followed by *Ms. Mia and Murder on Moose Isle*, set on a secluded Maine island, and the upcoming *Ms. Mia and Murder at the Desert Sunrise Resort*, which unfolds in a Southwest desert oasis.

As a modern landscape painter, Jennifer infuses her stories with vivid settings, inspired by her artist's eye. When not writing or painting, she roams Georgia's salt marshes, coastal shores, and beyond with her husband, Roger, sons, Edwin and Owen, and dogs, Scout and Sam, finding inspiration in her travels.

Visit [JenniferBranch.com](http://JenniferBranch.com) to join her for more Ms. Mia adventures, books, and art!