

The Last Guests

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The tires crunched over the gravel as Chase's car pulled into the driveway of a small house nestled between tall pines. The stillness of a lake was peeking out behind the trees. The drive had taken hours, but Riley didn't mind—she and Chase had barely spent any time together lately. Between her nursing classes and Chase's long shifts, this four-day trip was exactly what they needed. It seemed like an adorable little town, harmless, the kind of place where nothing ever happened—or so Riley thought.

Riley was confused when Chase rang the doorbell of the Airbnb rather than typing into a keypad of some sort. Before she had the chance to question the gesture, the door creaked open, and a tiny, older woman appeared, smiling widely.

"Welcome," she said. Her voice was smooth but had a strange, lingering sweetness that made Riley's skin prickle. "You must be my guests." Riley smiled back but shot Chase a questioning look. So much for some alone time.

"My name is Wilhelmina, and this is my home," the host said. "Here is the kitchen and just around the corner is your room."

"Thank you," Chase replied.

"If you need anything at all, my room is just across the hall," Wilhelmina said, her hand lingering on Chase's shoulder for a moment too long.

Riley and Chase dropped their bags down beside the king size bed.

"What's with the company?" Riley asked.

"My wallet made the call."

Riley didn't say anything. It was nice that Chase was paying for this entire getaway for the two of them.

"C'mon, let's go eat!" Chase suggested.

The town was quiet, save for the occasional laughter spilling from patios and barking dogs somewhere in the distance.

"We're going to that place." Chase pointed across the street. "They've got twelve craft beers on tap, and live music," he added with a grin.

Inside, warm yellow light cast a cozy glow over wooden tables and exposed brick walls. A lone guitarist played on a small stage in the corner. Riley and Chase found a table nearby.

They were approached by a cheery waitress in a black t-shirt and black jeans, “Welcome to the Stonewater Pub, my name is Jessica, and I’ll be taking care of you this evening. What can I get ya?”

“I’ll have the flight of local beers and a pound of honey garlic chicken wings,” Chase said. Riley ordered a cider and the harvest salad.

Jessica was back with their food just as Riley was injecting herself with insulin before eating.

“Here ya are,” she said placing the food down in front of them. Jessica lingered for a moment, studying them. “You know, I recognize just about everyone in this town, and I can always tell when folks are not from around here. How long will you be visiting us?”

Riley laughed softly. “Guess we stand out, huh?”

“Just a little,” Jessica teased.

Chase smiled. “We’re here for a few days. Staying at an Airbnb on the corner of the lake.”

“I know the one, lovely little spot.” Jessica said. “Quiet out there.”

Riley smiled. “That’s what we’re hoping for. Tomorrow is all about fishing, and the day after we’ll be hiking from sunrise to sunset.”

“Sounds perfect,” Jessica said. “Enjoy!”

It was easy to get lost in the atmosphere of the little pub. One drink turned into two, then three. The tension Riley had carried from school, the drive, and from the strange host all began to melt away.

The next morning, Riley awoke to the smell of bacon and eggs wafting through the air.

“Breakfast is ready!” Wilhelmina shouted through the door.

“Why is she making us breakfast?” Riley whispered to Chase with a look of confusion.

“I don’t know, let’s just try to enjoy our stay and not worry about it.”

Today was fishing day. Riley wasn’t into fishing, but she wouldn’t turn down the opportunity to spend time in nature. They stayed lakeside until the sun began dipping behind the horizon.

Back at the Airbnb, Wilhelmina was sitting on a dusty pink corduroy recliner watching TV. Riley and Chase quickly tucked into the bedroom to avoid another interaction. Riley grabbed a diet Pepsi from the mini fridge in the room.

“That’s weird,” she said.

“What?” Chase asked.

“One of my insulin bottles is missing. I brought three and there are only two in here.”

“You probably accidentally left one behind.”

Riley stared into the fridge. As a Type 1 diabetic since age seven, she always packed three insulin bottles, just in case. Perhaps with the chaos before the trip she’d forgotten one. She couldn’t remember if she’d unpacked two or three when they arrived.

The next morning, sunlight filtered through the curtains, waking Riley. It was hiking day. Like yesterday, Wilhelmina was preparing breakfast in the kitchen when Riley stepped out of the bedroom.

“I hope you like sourdough with cream cheese,” Wilhelmina said. “And fruit!” That didn’t sound appetizing to Riley, but she smiled anyway.

“I hope you two enjoy your day today,” Wilhelmina said standing uncomfortably close.

The hiking trail was beautiful. The air was fresh, and the skies were clear.

They passed by an older couple who struck up a conversation. Must be a small-town thing.

“Where are the two of you staying?” asked the gentleman.

“At the Airbnb by the lake,” Chase replied.

“Ah yes,” the man answered. “We know Wilhelmina well. Her husband used to be the mayor. Lovely gentleman. He was very adored.”

“Was?” Riley asked.

“Sadly, he went missing last year. The police never found his body,” the man said, exchanging a glance with his wife. “Anyway, enjoy your stay!”

Riley shuddered. What a strange town.

Riley felt relieved to return to the Airbnb that evening and find it empty.

“I wonder where Wilhelmina is,” Chase said.

“Who cares,” Riley answered.

“Wilhelmina did say that she was planning on making us dinner tonight.”

Ignoring Chase, Riley started exploring the Airbnb. It was rustic but modern. It looked like it had been recently redone. There were little trinkets and pictures of who Riley suspected were Wilhelmina’s family. She stopped at a frame with a picture of Wilhelmina and a man, likely her husband.

Riley noticed a small door and wiggled the knob. It slowly clicked open. Inside, the room was dusty and dark until Riley pulled on a string hanging from a ceiling light. Books were illuminated in the dim yellow glow.

"I found a little library!" Riley called to Chase. She walked through the room tracing her fingers along the spines of the books when her foot caught on something heavy. She stumbled forward, crashing hard onto the floor.

Startled, she looked back to see what had tripped her.

Her face was inches away from two lifeless eyes staring directly back at her.

Riley screamed and threw herself backward, using her feet and hands to propel herself away. Chase ran to the doorway.

Wilhelmina laid motionless on the floor.

"Call 911!" Riley screamed from the corner, struggling to get to her feet. There was a message written on Wilhelmina's forehead in green ink. It read:

This is for him.

Riley and Chase sat huddled beside each other on the curb of the street after giving their statements to the police. She could hear the police chatter in the distance.

"Why don't we get you some food?" Chase suggested. They both hadn't eaten in hours.

When Riley didn't answer, Chase grabbed her hand and guided her towards the only restaurant he knew of, the Stonewater Pub.

Jessica, the waitress, was there, her hair pulled back and her smile bright as ever.

"Hey, you two," she greeted. "I heard the news."

When neither Riley nor Chase responded, Jessica continued.

"I'm glad you're all right. That woman—Wilhelmina—she gave everyone the creeps."

Riley tensed.

Shortly after ordering, Riley wandered down a dim hallway looking for the restroom. She pushed open a door that led into a small staff locker room instead.

Inside, a few locker doors hung open. Riley began backing out of the room when something caught her eye—a small clear vial poking out of an open bag. Her blood ran cold.

It was her insulin.

Her name, R. Whitaker, clearly on the label.

Her breath hitched. Inside the locker was a photo of Jessica, smiling broadly, her arms around the man from the Airbnb picture. Jessica hadn't just known Wilhelmina's husband, she'd loved him.

The sound of a door creaking down the hall snapped her out of it and she hurried out.

When she returned to the table, Jessica was there, setting down their plates. "Everything okay?" she asked, smiling sweetly.

Riley nodded. "Yeah. Just took a wrong turn."

"Easy mistake to make."

As Jessica walked away, Riley noticed faint green ink on her fingertips, the same colour as the message written on Wilhelmina's forehead.

This town had its secrets after all.