

Villa 18

"Welcome to Flora Blue Villas! Give me your IDs, please."

"Here you are. There're two of us on the reservation. An adult and a child."

"What about Benji, Mom?"

"Oh, yeah. We also have a dog."

"Did you enter the dog in your online reservation?"

"Yes, of course."

The red-headed, pale receptionist typed in his computer for a minute. I noticed that his long, thin fingers were trembling. New and nervous, perhaps.

"Very well, ma'am. Here is your digital card for villa number 18. It's at least two hundred meters from the forest, so don't worry."

"What? Why should we worry about the forest?"

"Mom?" *What is he talking about? We like nature.*

The receptionist ignored that. He fidgeted in his seat.

"Is it your first vacation in our resort?"

"Yes. By the way, you are not easy to find. We made a wrong turn several times."

"Use this card to unlock the door to your villa, unlock the phone, call the breakfast service, and, most importantly, to turn on the electricity."

"Okay, thank you. I know how to use such cards." Mom looked at me. "Take your backpack, and let's go."

"No, wait! Listen, ma'am. It's vital." He swallowed. "When you're inside the villa, never take your card out of its plugger. Never, okay? After sunset, the light in the living room *must* be on, and under no circumstances should you turn it off."

"What do you mean? We'll sleep in the dark."

"Don't worry about that, of course, you will. Lights are always on only in the living room. It's for your convenience, ma'am. Welcome to Flora Blue Villas! Enjoy your stay!"

"I hope Benji will enjoy it," I said.

"Oh, hello, little girl! Cute doggy. How old are you?"

"T...ten. Benji is still is a puppy."

"Great! Stay close to your mother, and don't get lost, but I'm sure kids don't like the dark. Actually, we highly recommend *not* to go outside after sunset."

"What? But how are we supposed to walk our dog? He needs to go out at ten p.m., you know."

"Right. There is a narrow paved path lit up by reflectors. Stay on that path, and don't step off it after the sunset. Do you understand me, ma'am? Take a flashlight with you and always point it in front of yourself and at the dog. Keep it on a short leash."

Mom dragged me to the side and whispered. "I'm not sure we should stay here, honey. Let's find another place."

"I know, but it's so close to the beach! Maybe we give it a try for just one day?"

"You can cancel your vacation here, ma'am, but we don't give refunds. Sorry, your reservation is fully paid in advance."

A tall skinny woman came into the lobby. "What villa are you in?"

"18."

"I'll accompany you there. Just follow me. So nice to see the new guests." She twisted her lips while trying to act a smile. "You'll still have time to go to the beach and hurry back before the sunset."

She unlocked the villa with her master card and stepped inside. "Welcome! Put your card here, please." She pointed to the plug. "So, it's a living room. Remember about the light. And there you have two bedrooms and a bathroom. Those rooms are closer to the forest, but you have nothing to worry about."

"Mom! My bedroom has no window. Can I get yours instead?" I ran into another bedroom. "Oh, yours is just the same."

"I can't believe this!" Mom was outraged. "Let's call the lobby. How are we supposed to ventilate?"

Mom came back after a minute. "They said it's for safety reasons. All the bedrooms have an air-conditioning system. There is something weird about this place..." She sighed.

That evening, we decided to take Benji out earlier, at 9 p.m. I went out while the sun was still at the equator. He wanted to run on the grass, but I kept him on a short leash, as I was told.

By the time we got back, the reflectors already turned on. *'It's better to sleep without windows, I guess, so all these bright reflectors' lights don't disturb us.'*

I had an uneasy feeling that we're being watched. From inside the forest. *'It's probably just in my head.'* I sped up my pace.

I couldn't fall asleep that night. My palms were sweating. I tried to calm myself down, but my mind wouldn't stop thinking of disturbing thoughts about this place. *'It's really better without the windows. I am safe here.'*

I kept hearing weird noises from the direction of the forest. *'Okay, just continue counting. 1503, 1504, 1505. No! Don't think about it... Don't think about it. I am safe here. 1506, 1507, 1508...'*

After an hour or so, I felt thirsty. My tongue was so dry that it stuck to the top of my mouth. I couldn't find my slippers in the dark and went to the kitchen barefoot.

The kitchen was connected to the living room. It took me a while to adjust to the bright light. I saw Benji, who woke up and ran to me, wagging his furry brown tail.

I grabbed a glass and filled it with tap water. Benji was jumping all around me; he's always so happy and excited.

"No, Benji! No! Calm down! Sit!"

He kept jumping and knocked the glass out of my hands. It fell down on the tiled floor and shattered into tiny pieces.

"What have you done, Benji!" I grabbed a broom and started sweeping the broken glass. "Stay away!" I was cleaning frantically, not minding being barefoot.

I did it by accident. With the broom handle. I waved towards the power plugger and hit the digital card out of it. The light turned off.

"MOM! The light!"

Mom ran in, and we both crawled around desperately, trying to find the card on the floor. Benji was whining. The pieces of glass were still everywhere.

I opened the front door, in the hope that the reflectors will light the room up. Benji sprinted out of the door and ran towards the forest.

"Benji! No! Come back!"

We both flew out of the door, running, shaking, and screaming, trying to find our puppy.

"BENJI!"

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In the morning, the red-headed, pale receptionist dialed the cleaning service.

"Clean the villa 18, please. It's not in use anymore. Put the guests' belongings into the basement, just like from the others."

Zoe P., MYP 0