

DEATH AT THE VILLA TARCONTI

AN SAT VOCABULARY NOVELETTE



By
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VOCABBETT
BIG WORDS MADE SIMPLE.

DEATH AT THE VILLA TARCONTI:
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INTRODUCTION TO VOCABBETT

Think about the words you know.

For the most part, you didn't learn them through expensive tutors or study guides so thick you could beat someone over the head with them.

No, you learned these words by incidentally encountering them a bajillion times — often in story form.

At its core, that is the heart of Vocabbett: the (scientifically-backed) premise that one of the easiest ways to improve your vocabulary is to simply encounter big words more often, preferably in story form.

The problem is — facing a mountain of material to learn for the SAT and ACT — we change the rules on your brain, favoring brute force memorization strategies over the stories your brain knows and loves.

The result? Your brain usually fights back, making you bored, frustrated, or distracted.

With Vocabbett, my goal is for none of that to happen.

That's why I feed your brain the stories it was de-

signed to consume, each one **packed with words** to help you come test day.

This book contains more than 80 designated vocabulary words.

For your convenience, definitions of lesser-known words are at the bottom of each page, as well as a glossary at the back of the book.

Last thing — because you're unlikely to see a word once and remember it for life, Vocabbett resources are meant to be consumed in bulk.

If you enjoy this one, check out the others at vocabbett.com/shop!

CONTENT WARNING

This story is a “cozy” mystery.

There is no graphic violence, but it is still a murder mystery, and there is some explicit language.

Consider yourself warned.

CHAPTER ONE



A small part of me wasn't at all saddened by Norm's death. He'd been a lecherous old man, and I'd only known the guy a few days. When he heard I was from Texas, his only reaction was to look me up and down, then ask if I'd ever been a cheerleader for the Cowboys.

"You've got the figure for it," he winked.

Gross.

Naturally, I kept these emotions to myself. I was alone in a foreign country, and the last thing I needed was for people to think I was some sort of sociopath.

And yet the circumstances of his death...well, I wouldn't wish them on anyone. Not even Norm.

I shivered, adjusting the scarf I'd draped over my shoulders.

Enough of this melancholia. I was seated on an im-

Lecherous - Creepy; showing excessive desire

Sociopath - Someone without a conscience

Melancholia - Gloom; sadness

possibly comfortable, cream-colored couch, my feet discreetly propped atop a wooden coffee table, and a merry fire crackled in the stone fireplace to my left.

Outside the aging windows before me, the rolling hills of Tuscany stretched for miles. The only other edifice in sight was another aging villa, perched on one of the hills in the distance. It was early October — not too hot, not too cold — and the air was crisp and fresh.

Who could imagine that such unspeakable violence could occur somewhere so beautiful?

I snorted, immediately realizing what a foolish thought that was. The Romans were some of the most bloodthirsty people in history. These hills had seen plenty of violence, from ancient times through the Renaissance, the Italian independence movement through two world wars.

“Does something amuse you?” a sardonic voice to my right asked.

The speaker was a man slightly older than I, late twenties probably, with tousled brown hair that had started to turn golden in the Italian sun.

His dress was country casual — khakis and a white shirt opened at the collar, sleeves rolled to his elbows. I knew from our previous exchanges — all equally acrimonious — that he was British, and his name was Jack.

“Not at all,” I replied. “Just...something in my throat.”

I returned my attention to the leather-bound note-

Discreetly - Not in an obvious way; unobtrusively

Edifice - A building (usually large and imposing)

Sardonic - Grimly mocking or cynical

Acrimonious - Angry; sharp

book in my lap. It wasn't as practical as my laptop, but it matched the surroundings better. I hadn't written a word in an hour, though I was supposed to be penning a bestselling novel.

That's why we were here, by the way. It was a writing retreat, and I'd scrimped and saved for years to attend, saving dollar by dollar as a teaching assistant during the school year, waiting tables during the summer, even babysitting at night.

The trip still wiped out my paltry savings account, but I was here. In *Italy*. A land in which I have no ancestral roots, but that I've dreamed of since childhood.

"I'm going for a walk," I announced, though Jack and I were the only ones in the room. "Do you need anything?"

He stretched, shirt tightening across his admirable musculature. "I'll join you, if I may. None of us should be alone right now."

I narrowed my eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, Lucy. Surely you've reasoned it out."

Jack closed his notebook, leaving a fountain pen in the crease, and rose to join me at the doorway.

I was certain he'd stopped speaking at that enigmatic point intentionally, hoping to provoke me into wild speculation about heaven knows what.

"*Au contraire*," I remarked flatly. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Jack lowered his voice. "A knife in the ribs doesn't happen on accident. Norm was murdered, obviously."

Paltry - Small or meager

Enigmatic - Mysterious; Difficult to understand

Speculation - Thinking; forming theories without firm evidence

"So the police, and everyone else, immediately concluded," I noted.

"But by whom, is the essential question?" Jack continued. "The police haven't yet caught the killer."

"It could've been anyone," I said with a sweeping hand. "A junkie — they have them in Italy too. A thief. Who knows?"

"On the grounds of the Villa Tarconti? Yes, I know what the police said — it was far from the house, at night. Anyone could've snuck in. But do you truly believe that?" His eyes bore directly into mine, absent of all the banter and sarcasm I'd already come to associate with him.

"What are you saying, Jack?" Once again I pulled my scarf closer.

"I am saying, my dear girl, that there is a killer in our midst."

CHAPTER TWO



"You can't be serious," I said. "How many million people live in this country, and you think the bad guy is on the retreat?"

"Let's not be sexist, now," Jack remarked in the same old mocking tone. "The killer could just as easily be a woman."

I rolled my eyes. "It's a figure of speech."

"I have a few theories," Jack continued briskly, "all of which eliminate the two of us from suspicion, which is why I'm confiding in you."

"How kind of you not to suspect me of murder," I said sweetly.

"That, and I'd hate to see you come to harm." He took a step closer to me, then paused as a creak in the hallway heralded an approaching visitor. "Let's keep this between us, for now," he murmured.

Any passerby could interpret that statement a number of ways, I realized.

Damn the man. Landing an Italian boyfriend wasn't high on my list of priorities, but the prospect would be impossible if everyone assumed I was seeing Jack, and he kept murmuring sweet nothings like that.

"I'll walk by myself, thanks. If I happen to encounter the murderer, I'll be sure to let you know at dinner."

I slid neatly past him, trotting down the white, stone stairs and into the Italian countryside. I didn't know if he was watching or not. I didn't quite care.

* * *

A murderer in our writer's group, I scoffed, kicking a rock in the gravel path. *This guy.*

Whom did he suspect, I wondered? The gap year couple from Argentina, who alternated between sneaking off to make out under the cypress trees, and shooting each other resentful looks over our daily writing lessons?

No, Isabella and Fernando might have a volatile relationship, but they were harmless enough. I couldn't figure out what they were *doing* here, exactly — Isabella seemed to have only a passing interest in literature, and Fernando none at all, but why should that be a barrier when you've got buckets of money? They probably saw our retreat as a clever way to stay in an Italian castle before meeting their friends in Greece.

Hmmm. Mrs. Hobbes, the elderly spinster who was fond of poking people with her knitting needles when

Scoffed - Said in a derisive or mocking way

Volatile - Liable to change unpredictably, often for the worse

she felt they weren't paying close enough attention? That's probably why Fernando was shooting Isabella dirty looks in our meetings, incidentally...

There were ten of us. How could Jack have possibly considered each of the suspects and determined who was still under suspicion?

Ratiocination, and the fact that I was walking downhill, quickened my step. If I were to take Jack's wild claim seriously, who would I *actually* consider a suspect?

Sexism notwithstanding, I couldn't really see Isabella, Mrs. Hobbes, or the three Australian women (who came on the trip together, and had known each other for years) plunging a knife into Norm's ribs.

No, if the murderer was in our group, it was one of the men.

Not Fernando, obviously. I'd never even seen him speak with Norm. He avoided speaking with anyone but Isabella, as far as I could tell.

Ricardo was a different story. An Italian in his early 50's, he was the embodiment of an upper-class European male — perpetually tan, trim, wearing collared shirts with one too many buttons undone and shoes without socks.

Roughly the same age as Norm, the two had quickly forged an uneasy alliance in the forced intimacy of

Incidentally - Used when someone has something more to say on a subject

Ratiocination - Logical thinking

Embodiment - An idea or quality in bodily form

Perpetually - Never-ending; always

Forged - Created

our retreat.

But after dinner the third night, something transpired that caused an explosive argument. They were in the garden, and I could hear them shouting at each other in two different languages from my second-story room.

By the fourth — and last — night that Norm was with us, he and Ricardo were sitting at opposite ends of the table.

Naturally I'd passed this information on to the police, noting that yelling at someone does not necessarily make them a murderer.

"Non te preoccupare, principessa," the officer reassured me. "In Italy, shouting is common. When I left home this morning, my mother was shouting, my sister was shouting. It will not — as you say — prejudice the investigation."

Norm's body had been discovered the day before, just a few miles from the villa. The death of an American citizen on foreign soil was no light matter, and the local police force had already turned the matter over to the *carabinieri*.

The local officer before me had simply been sent here to save face — the same bureaucratic dance happened everywhere, it seemed. The police resented having their jurisdiction overruled, so they kept their hand in the pot, but they didn't really have the authority to

Transpired - Happened

Prejudice (v.) - Make biased without proper cause

Bureaucratic - Overly concerned with the procedure at the expense of common sense

Jurisdiction - The authority to interpret and apply the law

run the investigation.

Belatedly, it struck me that I was now a few miles from the villa myself. *Why hadn't I inquired which trail had taken Norm to his death?*

Turning on my heel, I started back towards the Villa Tarconti. The sun had begun its descent, framing the castle in crepuscular tones of brilliant pink and orange.

The view was straight out of a film, but the sight didn't cheer me. It would set quickly now, and I didn't fancy walking home alone in the dark.

Just then, a figure emerged from the shadow of a tree.

"You should not be here," a low, accented voice said.

Belatedly - Later than should have been the case

Crepuscular - Relating to twilight

CHAPTER THREE



"Jesus, Ricardo, what are you *doing* here?" fear made my voice sound angry. Angry was good. Angry was better than afraid.

"I came to pay my respects. The *polizia* were everywhere yesterday, but now...it is more peaceful." Ricardo reached for my arm. "But it is too late for a young woman to be out alone. Come, I will take you back to the villa."

I instinctively pulled my arm away and did some rapid mental calculations — the type that every girl, unfortunately, has had to make. *Fight, flight, or hope that neither is actually necessary?*

A line from a book I read flashed through my mind — something along the lines of, "Most people are more worried about offending somebody than being murdered." Because of this, they don't fight or flee. The embarrassment they'd suffer if the guy was above-

board is a greater deterrent than death.

Well, in this case, I was unlikely to win a fight, and flight was impossible. I was a petite woman and he was a full-grown man. I could hold him off for a while, but I wasn't confident I could win an outright altercation. And we were two, maybe three miles from the villa. I may be younger, but he was in fighting shape for his fifties.

Naturally, these thoughts flashed through my mind in far less time than it takes to recall them. I don't believe more than a moment passed before I gave him an innocuous smile and said, "Great, let me just text Jack to let him know we're on our way back."

I strode past him, typing, "*W/ Ric on w path,*" then hit send before Ricardo caught up with me. When I put my phone away, I kept my hand in my purse, finger on the trigger of my pepper spray.

Ricardo didn't miss any of these actions. "Very sensible," he nodded in approval. "I am a man who you do not know. We are alone. There has been a tragedy."

I bit my lip, but didn't withdraw my hand. "You forgive me for taking precautions," I said.

"*Certo*. I only wish my daughter displayed such sense. Children these days..."

Ricardo began a familiar lamentation — reiterating the woes parents have sung for thousands of years — moaning about how lazy his children were, how

Deterrent - Something that discourages someone from doing something

Altercation - Fight; noisy disagreement

Innocuous - Innocent

Lamentation - A dramatic, heartfelt complaint

Reiterating - Repeating

much he'd done to give them the opportunities they were now squandering, etc.

I listened with one ear, my senses more attuned to his hands and any sudden movements they might make. Unfortunately, being Italian, his hands were always in motion. My arm jerked more than once, ready to spray the bastard.

I didn't take a proper breath until we entered the rickety fence surrounding the villa.

CHAPTER FOUR



“What is this?” Jack was sitting on the tile floor outside my room when I returned. “W/ Ric on w path?” He stood up, dusting off his pants. “You know I’m not the jealous type, but isn’t he a trifle old for you?”

I knew he was being sarcastic, but I took the bait. “Thanks to our little chat this afternoon, I scared myself half to death when I saw him creeping around the scene of the crime.”

“The scene of the crime?” Jack’s face went deadly serious. “And what were *you* doing at the scene of the crime?”

“I didn’t *know* it was the scene of the crime until I got there. I just went for a walk. I didn’t realize Norm had taken that path, too, when he was — that is, when he died.”

Jack took a deep breath. “I’m flattered by your confidence in me, darling. Only a true genius could inter-

pret this cryptic series of abbreviations and come riding to the rescue. But perhaps we should come up with a slightly more specific way of alerting one another when danger is near?"

"There *was* no danger," I replied, attempting to unlock my door. "Your paranoia temporarily infected me, is all. Do you honestly think you know more than the police?"

The lock was stuck, as was its charming tendency. I threw my shoulder into the turn of the key, then shoved the door with my hip. It swung open, and Jack followed me inside.

"Do make yourself comfortable," I said.

"Thank you," Jack seated himself on the settee at the end of the bed. "I'll leave in a mo', but this really isn't the sort of conversation I want to have in a public hallway."

"For goodness sake, Jack, if you're so confident in your theory that one of us is the killer, why bring it to me? Take it to the police."

"I did. They...They didn't take it seriously." A flush spread across his tanned face. I couldn't tell whether it was from embarrassment or irritation.

I leaned against the fireplace opposite him, folding my arms. "Perhaps it's time I heard the theory that disqualifies either of us from being the killer, but leaves the other writers exposed."

"It's simple," Jack responded, palms turned up. "The murderer is a deranged novelist. You've heard of

Cryptic - Difficult to understand

Tendency - Habit

Deranged - Crazy

method acting? This person is method writing. They're using us to add verisimilitude to their next book. The novel will be hailed as 'chilling' and 'realistic' because the author watched — and caused — it all to happen."

"Uh-huh. And that disqualifies us why?"

"You are writing a comedy, and I'm writing non-fiction," Jack said. "I've also ruled out Fernando and Isabella for the simple reason that they aren't actually writing anything."

"I'd ruled them out too, but for different reasons. The biggest being, I don't believe the murderer is here. They're probably a thousand miles away by now, or at the very least in some alley in Rome, where there's safety in anonymity."

"How can you be so narrow-minded?" Jack demanded. "Just because the killer's motives aren't rational doesn't mean they don't apply. If the killer were rational, he wouldn't be a killer."

"I have to get changed for dinner, and so do you. Be gone with you, and I'll try to forget how irrational *you* sound."

Jack's jaw clenched. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Verisimilitude - The appearance of being true or real

Anonymity - The state of being anonymous