

One

The Scariest Night of the Year

By seven p.m. on Halloween night, 2004, Lauren Meanza was back home at 2631 Dorset Street in Napa, California. It had been a busy Sunday. She had played some soccer – a game she loved – and then spent the rest of the day doing something she found not nearly as enjoyable: shopping. The shopping had been more exhausting than the soccer and Lauren was happy to be home. Greeting her as she pulled her car into the garage was the effigy of a luckless witch hanging from the front porch to let the local children know that, yes, this was a Halloween house where trick-or-treaters were more than welcome.

And they were. Lauren's two roommates, Adriane Insogna and Leslie Mazzara were there at the front door, giggling, cooing, and feigning fright at the little ghosts and goblins coming to call in sometimes spooky, but mostly sweet, costumes. The house supply of candy was going fast, but Adriane and Leslie didn't mind; they couldn't hand it out fast enough.

Lauren wasn't quite as enthusiastic about the annual Halloween ritual. "It's not that I don't like kids or anything," she was quick to point out. Rather, it was that her aging dog, Chloe, a German shepherd mix, didn't like strangers coming to the door and let everyone know it by barking each and every time someone rang the bell. It cracked the roommates up, and they looked at Chloe and laughed every time the doorbell rang.

It was a fun night, as it often was down on Dorset Street, just minutes from Napa's downtown. Lauren, Adriane, and Leslie – three single women – got along

famously and without “all that drama” that’s part of many roommate situations. All three were brunettes and twenty-six years old, but that’s where the similarities ended.

Leslie Mazzara, a small-town beauty queen with stunning green eyes, had been in Napa for only six months. She grew up near Orlando, Florida, and later in Anderson, South Carolina, and went to college at the University of Georgia. Being a Southerner, Leslie was the most distinctive of the three roommates, simply because she was the outsider. New to town, Leslie was in a hurry to meet new people, and she did so with a vengeance. She was brimming with social energy, eating out, going to bars and dancing till all hours of the night. Leslie loved dancing and had studied classical ballet for 15 years. During the day, she worked at the Niebaum-Coppola winery in the sales department, where she used her well-honed people skills to good advantage.

Adriane Insogna (rhymes with *lasagna*) was an assistant engineer at the Napa Sanitation District, having graduated from Cal Poly down the coast in beautiful San Luis Obispo. She was local and had been raised Up Valley in Calistoga, where she’d lived since she was nine years old. Adriane was a bit overweight, with a warm smile and an engaging personality. She was close to her mother, Arlene Allen, and made an effort to include Arlene, who was twice divorced, in some of her social activities. In short, she was the perfect daughter. She couldn’t cook, friends said, but she loved to bake, and she and Leslie had made Halloween cupcakes that very day. Adriane also loved volleyball and volunteered as a scorekeeper at Napa Valley Community College.

Tall and lanky Lauren Meanza was the quietest of the roommates. If you had to rate the three and pick the one who was the least social, Lauren, who spoke unemotionally and affected a blasé attitude, would win hands down. A jock and the most

athletic of the three, she coached volleyball at the local community college and played volleyball and soccer in adult leagues every chance she got. This was her first apartment on her own, and she had brought along her dog, Chloe. Lauren was also the neat freak of the three and often had to clean up after her buddies, but she didn't mind – not too much, anyway. They were both good roommates, kind and loving and she knew they'd do anything for her.

Lauren had met Adriane earlier in the year when they both took a volleyball class at Napa Community College. At that point, Lauren was still living nearby with her parents, but she didn't know a lot of people in Napa. In fact, that's how she'd connected with Adriane, who had approached Lauren between games. Adriane knew a lot of people in the Valley, and as she prodded Lauren to see if they had any mutual acquaintances, Lauren finally blurted out, "I don't have any friends in Napa."

"Well, you do now," Adriane answered.

And so their friendship was formed. Back in February 2004, when Lauren found the little house for rent on Dorset Street and thought it would be a good place to live, Adriane was the first one she approached to be her roommate. Adriane was all for it, and with the help of her tight clique of friends – Ben Katz, Lily Prudhomme, and Lily's boyfriend, Eric Copple – she successfully moved her stuff into the compact house. From the beginning, there were fun times, beginning with the first night Lauren and Adriane hung out and had pizza and beer with Ben, Lily, and Eric. And it wasn't long before Lauren, who was breaking out of her quiet shell, introduced herself to a group of young women living in the house next door. They were a fun bunch, too, none more so than Leslie Mazzara. "She was a pistol," Lauren said, "She definitely was a Southern girl, with

lots of makeup and right away I really liked her. She was definitely different than I was, very girly-girl, lots of makeup and very feminine.”

Leslie, with her sugar-coated accent and approachable personality, attracted men in droves, and they often fell hard for her. While there’s no doubt she was very pretty, her real beauty seemed to spring from somewhere inside, and it was her charisma that brought people in. Friends say she had a way of connecting that was otherworldly; she effortlessly made every person she came across feel a solid connection to her. It was a gift, and she had it long before she was ever a pageant winner. When Leslie’s own housemates announced plans to move out, Lauren and Adriane asked her to move in with them. They both really enjoyed Leslie’s vivacious personality, there was a spare upstairs bedroom, and the rent would be split three ways instead of just two. Leslie agreed and moved into the house in late June 2004.

It was now Halloween, and the girls were looking forward to Christmas, when Leslie promised to make Southern-style treats and show her new friends what a real, old-fashioned Christmas was all about. That was a point of friendly debate between Lauren and Leslie. Being from the South, Leslie told them she considered Californians to be too guarded, while Southerners were more open and friendly. Lauren found herself good-naturedly defending her California brethren.

By nine p.m., the trick-or-treaters were winding down, and the women were settling in for the night. Even though it was Halloween, they had no plans to go to a party or a bar, because the next day, Monday, was a workday. Despite Napa’s worldwide reputation as the capital of California’s beautiful wine country, it is not, as any young

adult resident will tell you, exactly party central. The girls had their favorite bars, such as The Bounty Hunter, Uva's, and Downtown Joe's, but most of the time, it was the same old faces, which was one reason Leslie attracted so much attention as the new girl in town. This particular Halloween, falling on a Sunday night, seemed more quiet than most, just another night to grab some food from the fridge and plop down in front of the television.

Adriane told the others she was going to pay a short visit to her on-again, off-again boyfriend, Christian Lee, who lived one block away. Lauren headed into the kitchen to fix something to eat while Leslie kept her company. Then they both moved into the living room. Lauren had a DVD set of the HBO series *Six Feet Under*, and they watched an episode and chatted until about 9:30 p.m. when Lauren got a phone call and wandered into her downstairs bedroom. About twenty-five minutes later, she heard Leslie say good night.

"Goodnight," Lauren answered, "see you tomorrow."

Upstairs, Leslie prepared for bed and received her second call that day from Lee Youngblood Sr., the father of an ex-boyfriend from South Carolina. Friends say it bothered Leslie that Lee called so often, and she didn't take the call. It seemed as though he never had gotten over the breakup between Leslie and his son. According to one of Leslie's closest friends, Leslie broke up with Lee at least partly because of his father. Ultimately, she decided to part ways with her boyfriend and leave South Carolina. That did not keep Lee from calling.

By 10:30 p.m., Adriane was back from Christian's house and found Lauren back in front of the television.

“It’s been a long day,” Adriane said. “I’m going to bed. See you tomorrow.”

“I’m turning in soon, too,” Lauren said.

Adriane went straight upstairs to her bedroom, across a tiny second-floor landing from Leslie’s room. The bathroom was between them. Inside her room, Adriane replayed the last twenty-four hours in her head. She had been with Christian the previous night and long into the morning hours and had gotten virtually no sleep. She was as close to love as she’d ever been. She was tired but happy and wanted to luxuriate in that feeling a bit longer, so before falling off, she sent Christian one last text message: “Thank you for yesterday. It was one of the best days ever. I wish it could be forever.”

Downstairs, Lauren let her dog, Chloe, outside and closed up the house.

“I did the normal things,” she said. “I checked to make sure all the doors were locked and secured and then went to bed about 11 p.m.”

The house had a few ways to get in and out: the front door, the back door, and the garage door. “I made sure the back-door slider was locked because sometimes that would be left unlocked, but that night, I locked it.”

She did not, however, check any of the windows, even though her bedroom was on the first floor.

She was tired, and by 11:30, she was asleep.