



A Midsummer Night's Ghost

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Description: The only constant in life is change and Bailey Burke is embracing the spirit of it. A previously reluctant spiritual medium, she has decided that it's time to accept that ghosts are a part of her new reality and to start working with law enforcement to solve murders.

Along with moving into a new house with her detective boyfriend, and a dead best friend whose ghost likes to pop in and out at will, Bailey is charged with taking her grandmother to play practice at the local senior center. The only thing she should be saying is "break a leg," right?

Only the director of the senior's Shakespeare production is Bailey's high school friend/enemy and the janitor has turned up dead. When one of the actors is also killed in a prop plot twist it's time to investigate.

While all the world's a stage, it's also full of ghosts and Bailey needs to solve the Midsummer Night Murders to get back to the simple life of designing beautiful houses and avoiding her future mother-in-law...

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ONE

I'd been threatened at the hands of madmen at least three times in the last six months and survived.

Yet it was now obvious what was going to kill me. I was going to be crushed by moving boxes in my own house.

"Grandma Burke, why do you have so many books?" I asked, huffing and puffing as I struggled up the porch stairs with yet another box undoubtedly filled with ancient Harlequin novels. "You don't even read paperbacks anymore."

She read on her iPad with the font set at twenty-five.

"These are classics," she replied, lounging like a tiny Celtic queen on the wicker sofa, feet crossed at the ankles, face turned to the balmy May breeze. "From when I was in my smut era."

Did my Irish grandmother just make a Taylor Swift reference?

You never knew with her.

She was equal parts old-school and TikTok trends. She'd been given the power of voice command on her phone and our smart home management devices and she took that seriously, bossing Alexa around, texting with wild abandon, and purchasing items she no longer needed or necessarily understood. If she ordered one more latte for home delivery and then complained it had milk in it, we were going to have to

delete her DoorDash app.

“Why do you have so many shoes?” Jake, my patient boyfriend, asked me, right on my heels, ironically.

He was double-boxed. Two boxes piled on top of each other because he was thirty and worked out an hour a day and liked to prove it. He looked good hauling boxes, I had to admit, competent and not gasping for air, unlike me, who was sweaty and winded.

“I think this should be a judgment free zone,” I said, not wanting to admit that my wardrobe took up a disproportionate number of the boxes we had been hauling into our new house all day.

Jake gave a snort and bypassed me on the porch with long strides, disappearing into our burgeoning living room. I dropped the heavy box on the porch floor and sat down next to my grandmother with a sigh.

“My arms are killing me.”

“Don’t joke about death, Margaret,” Grandma Burke said, patting my knee. “It’s no joke at my age.”

My grandmother was the only one who ever called me Margaret, which was actually my middle name. My parents named me Bailey, but that wasn’t Catholic enough for her. Irish enough? Sure. But it was worth nothing because it wasn’t a saint’s name. Since my father worshiped at the altar of the Church of Whiskey my name was divine in his eyes.

“Sorry, Grandma. You’re right. Death is no joke.”

Unfortunately, death seemed to follow me.

Jake, who everyone called by his last name, Marner, chose to deal in death—he was a homicide detective. Bodies were a puzzle for him to solve and he was great at his job. He was empathetic for the victims and their bodies and took great pleasure in putting away murderers.

I got no such satisfaction because seeing dead bodies wasn't my choice.

I was a spiritual medium through no fault or request of my own.

My ability to see ghosts had just appeared one day, kind of like mold, in the form of my dead best friend, Ryan.

Poof.

He was just there, in my kitchen, talking like nothing was odd about the fact that he had been dead for six months and yet was still being a smartass.

After Ryan, the ghosts kept coming, like an otherworldly conveyor belt of needy spirits wanting me to listen to their sob stories. Which was fair. I think it would be terrible to be trapped in limbo and no one can see you. We all want to be seen.

However, the popping in and out thing was both startling and an invasion of privacy. I still hadn't quite managed to set boundaries regarding my personal space.

Generally speaking, ghosts are socially awkward and I never wanted to push too hard because they had the ability to annoy me twenty-four/seven if I made them truly angry. Like the one guy who sat on the edge of my bed and sang pop songs in the middle of the night until I agreed to help him.

Also, I felt bad for them. Most were confused, upset, frustrated. Not sure what was going on or where to turn. Having me as their only point of contact wasn't exactly reassuring for them. I was a novice spiritual medium at best.

“Are you taking me to my theater class?” Grandma asked. “It starts in an hour.”

I swiped my red curls back off of my forehead. I had remembered the class, but hoped she'd forgotten. The senior center was hosting a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which was, to put it mildly, ambitious. Considering half of the cast couldn't remember what they ate for lunch, it was a stretch to expect them to remember Shakespearean monologues.

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But I appreciated the confidence the director, Sara Murphy, had in her actors.

Sara and I had gone to high school together, where she had been an It Girl. National Honor Society, drama club, salutatorian, lacrosse player, and student council president. Not to mention gorgeous with flawless skin. Yet you couldn't even hate her (I can admit to being jealous in high school though) because she was genuinely nice to everyone, had founded the inclusivity club, and logged the most volunteer hours of our entire graduation class.

After heading to NYU and a stint as an actress in some off-Broadway shows, Sara was back home in Cleveland, working on a teaching degree and volunteering at the senior center.

Grandma Burke's role was "A Young Woman of Athens," which obviously delighted her. She'd started referring to herself as a Greek goddess at random intervals, much to my father's irritation and Jake's amusement.

"Let me call Dad and see if he can pick you up," I told her. "We still have a quarter of the truck to unload."

"What happened to Jake's friends? I thought they were supposed to help you."

"I did too."

It just so happened though that Jake never actually asked anyone to help.

Which tracked with his personality.

Why ask for help when you can stubbornly do it all on your own and risk a back injury?

“Your father is too busy drinking and whoring to pick me up,” Grandma Burke said.

I almost fell off the wicker loveseat at that.

I knew my grandmother had a problem with both Dad’s drinking and his recent divorce from my mom, but those were strong words. But considering that he didn’t make a ton of time for his aging mother, I couldn’t blame her for being salty. She was living with me and not him for that very reason.

“Let me at least text him.”

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I saw I had a text from Jake’s mother.

Can I drop by in an hour to see the house? I have a bundt cake for you and Jake.

On second thought.

“I’ll just take you, Grandma.”

Jake’s mother was not happy that we were living together without being married. She was even less happy that we were not even engaged yet and kept dropping not-so-subtle hints about a ring. I could use a day free from her criticisms of my age, my job, the birthday party I had thrown for Jake, and my apparently incredible talent at “bamboozling” her son into putting his name on a mortgage with me without us being married.

To be fair, my career had seen better days. But the rest? I don’t consider being twenty-eight an issue for anything other than I was at the age that half my friend

group was getting married, and the birthday party was lovely, thank you very much. Jake would have been content with a six-pack of beer, some cupcakes, and me in only high heels and a bow.

Plus, I'd never bamboozled in my life.

I wouldn't even know where to begin with bamboozling.

It was Jake's idea to buy a house together and he—mostly—picked this very dated, rambling, nineteen-forties bungalow.

I texted her back, wanting to avoid seeing her and enduring another round of I-can't-believe-you-bought-a-house-without-being-at-least-engaged guilt cycle.

Jake will be here but I have to take my grandmother to an appointment. I'm sorry I'll miss you. Bundt cake, yum, thank you!

"Jake's mother?" Grandma gave me a shrewd look.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"You always get a panicked look when she texts you."

I couldn't even deny it.

"You think I'd be desensitized to strong women, given Mom, but I can't help it. Jake's mom is relentless with this marriage thing. My mom may only give me a hug on my birthday and Christmas, but she also doesn't even bother to harass me about marriage anymore."

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“She’s anti-marriage now and who can blame her? My son was a lousy husband, which really irks me. I didn’t raise him to neglect his family the way he has.”

If Mrs. Marner was hung up on marriage, Grandma Burke used every opportunity she could to complain about my dad, who was being a jerk of late. Or always. But he was a fun dad, so I was always willing to forgive him, until he left Grandma—his own mother—alone on multiple occasions and my mother had to intervene.

Sensing an hour long rant about Dad on the horizon, I stood up quickly. “Let me go tell Jake real quick, then I’ll take you to class.”

As I opened the front door, Ryan was standing there, gesturing with a sweep of his arm.

“Welcome home, Bai.”

I jumped, not expecting to see him today. It was possible he might appear out of thin air at any time, but lately he’d been following Jake’s work schedule and only showing up when my boyfriend was at the office. Before he died, Ryan and Marner had been partners in homicide and great personal friends, so that wasn’t the issue. It was more that Ryan had a deathly fear—pun intended—of popping in when Jake and I might be, well, busy.

A fear I shared, frankly.

After Ryan had asked me for a breakdown of our usual times for getting frisky, it had gone too far. I had told in no uncertain terms it was none of his business.

Friendship only went so far and it didn't involve kissing and telling.

So now, Ryan tried to stop by when Jake was at work.

"Hey, Ryan," I said, easing between him and a stack of boxes. He might not have a physical being, but it would be rude to not respect his space. "What's up?"

"What?" Jake asked, looking up from where he was on the floor, wrestling to twist on the legs on the couch that the movers had delivered earlier today. "Bailey, why are your hands empty?"

"Oh, shoot, I forgot my box on the porch," I said, not regretting that fact at all. "And I'm talking to Ryan."

Jake sighed but he did glance around and say, "Hey, man, what's up?"

Jake couldn't see or hear Ryan, but he did believe me—most of the time—that his ghost existed.

"Yo, Marner," Ryan said, because he was dead and didn't understand that no one should say "yo" anymore. "How's it hanging?"

Or say 'how's it hanging.'

Then again, Ryan hadn't even been dead for two years.

Maybe he'd always sounded like a caricature of a cop and I'd just never noticed.

"I need to take my grandmother to play practice," I said to the room at large, meaning it for both of them.

Ryan's response was a snort. "I will definitely be joining you for that production. Not."

"We're not done unloading the truck," Jake said with a frown. "Can't she skip tonight?"

"She needs the stimulation."

"I need stimulation," Ryan said. "Things have been so boring lately. No hot chicks in the afterlife, no assignments from the Office, no murders to solve."

I ignored him because my boyfriend's frown grew more pronounced. "I have to take this truck back tomorrow morning."

"Am I actually of any benefit to you unloading a truck one tiny box at a time?" I asked, perfectly serious. "Can't we phone a friend? What's your brother doing?"

"His side piece," Ryan said. "Last I heard."

Again, I ignored the comedic ghost in the corner, who was surveying the labels on the boxes with a critical eye.

"He has softball practice."

"Softball practice." Ryan snorted again and made a lewd gesture that I wasn't entirely sure the meaning of.

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“I guess I should have lined up some friends to help. I didn’t think we had this many boxes.”

“I told you to plan on at least fifty. We should have booked the movers for more than just the furniture.”

This was a suggestion I’d made twelve times in the last month, each one ending with a Marner “we’ll see” which meant no. He thought he was right, I thought he was insane, and here we were—drowning in boxes both inside and out.

“Who reads this many books?” Ryan asked. Considering his idea of reading when alive had been to open text messages, I didn’t exactly value his opinion.

“You go. I’ll figure it out,” Jake said, which meant he’d be unloading boxes until midnight, too stubborn to admit he might have made a miscalculation.

Part of me felt like I should roll up my sleeves, put my hair back into a ponytail, and get in the trenches with my man, schlepping box after box until I collapsed in a pitiful heap of pale skin and frizzy curls.

The other part of me that lived in reality knew that my noodle arms had reached their max lifting capacity for the day. Kenny Rogers had the right of it—you had to know when to hold ‘em and when to fold ‘em.

There was no more holding ‘em for this girl.

“Just lock the truck if you can’t get it all done,” I said.

“We’ll see.”

I rolled my eyes when he wasn’t looking.

“I’ll pick us up something to eat on my way home.”

“Don’t get me anything. I don’t want to stop to eat.”

Because that was smart. Just starve and haul boxes until you dropped.

“Okay,” I said cheerfully, already knowing I was going to pick him up something to eat or he’d be ordering a pizza at midnight the minute the last box was in the house.

“This house is seriously ugly,” Ryan said.

It was. I couldn’t even lie. But I was still offended.

“It’s a tight market,” I protested. “There’s lots of potential.”

“What?” Jake asked.

“Potential for a sledgehammer.”

“Stop,” I said.

“Stop what?” they both said.

It’s really darn hard to have simultaneous conversations with two men who can’t hear each other.

If anyone tells you being a medium is a gift, they haven’t had two stubborn men in

their ear at the same time.

“I’m leaving,” I said to both of them. “I’ll be back later.” I leaned over and gave Jake a kiss. He was sweaty and practically reeked of dehydration but he was hard-working and adorable and the best man I knew—alive or dead.

Sorry, Ryan. It was true.

“I love you,” he said, kissing me back, hand fisting in my hair.

“Gag. Gross. Totally unnecessary,” Ryan said.

I waved my hand back at Ryan and really gave my all to the kiss. When I finally broke away, Jake was reaching for me again. He had two fingers on my T-shirt before I slipped away. “Gotta go. Oh, and your mother is stopping by in forty-minutes. Love you, bye!”

“Seriously?” he demanded. “You just set me up.”

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“Not at all. I have to go.” I gave a finger wave and hightailed it out of there before he guilted me into staying and unloading more boxes, or worse, making small talk with his mother, who had many opinions on many things.

“That wasn’t smooth, but it was effective,” Ryan said, falling in step beside me. “Power of the?—

“Ryan!” I cut him off sharply. “Grandma is on the porch.”

“Oh, hey, Mrs. B,” he said, giving her a charming smile and a wave. “You look fresh as a daisy.”

“Just got a perm,” she confided, patting her tight curls. “And my eyebrows tattooed on.”

“No kidding? You can tattoo eyebrows on?” He sat down on the wrought iron loveseat that had come with the house next to her.

“It’s called micro-blading.”

The micro-blading had been a choice. Not one I would have made for her. With her hair a silver with a lavender hue, she should have gone with light eyebrows if she really wanted more definition. Instead, she’d defaulted to her original pre-gray haircolor and now she looked like my sister Jen’s kids had etched out eyebrows for her with a chocolate-colored marker.

“No kidding? They can do that? I have to say, you look very fancy.”

“Thank you.” Grandma Burke was the only other person who could see Ryan. Or any ghosts, for that matter. She said it skipped a generation and only passed down between the women. That we were empathic.

“Your father is just pathetic, not empathic,” she’d added when we’d had this talk a few months prior.

So yeah, she was definitely not happy with my dad. It was a running theme.

“I have to look and dress my best every day now,” she told him. “In case I die and stick around like you. Can’t have my ghost looking shabby.”

“Fair enough. If I had known I was going to kick it that day, I would have shaved.” He rubbed his ghostly five o’clock shadow. “At least I didn’t die wearing a suit. That would have sucked.”

Ryan’s ghost was permanently wearing jeans, boots, and navy blue T-shirt with a flannel. His off-work uniform pre-death.

“But you look so handsome in a suit,” Grandma told him.

“Okay, we have to go, so save the mutual admiration club for another day, you two.”

Ryan’s phone rang in his pocket. He pulled it out. “Hello?”

I still couldn’t get over the sheer horror of having a cell phone in the afterlife. My vision of just floating on a cloud eating peanut butter cups was shattered by the thought of getting text messages requesting I donate money to political campaigns from here to eternity.

And Ryan wasn’t even in hell.

He was in purgatory.

He'd had a shot at the pearly gates and we'd thought we were there, but Ryan said his paperwork had been misfiled.

Which was basically code for he'd screwed up somehow.

Ryan ended the call and eyed us. "We gotta go, ladies. We've got a fresh one."

TWO

My heart sank at Ryan's words as I grabbed Grandma Burke by the elbow and hauled her to her feet. "Another dead body?"

"Yep." He gestured for me to step a few feet away from Grandma. "At the senior center."

Oh, no. "Someone my grandma knows?"

"How would I know who your grandma knows?"

"What are you two talking about?" she demanded. "I may be hard of hearing but I'm not stupid. You're both wearing the don't-tell-the-old-lady look."

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“Do we do that often enough that it’s a look?” I asked, bewildered. “You act like we’re keeping secrets from you left, right, and center.”

“Don’t evade, Margaret.”

“Fine. There may be an issue at the senior center, but I don’t have details so let’s just get in the car and go.”

As we stepped off the porch, a rousing gust of wind blew my curls into my face. Since I was holding onto my ancient grandmother for dear life, terrified she’d fall, I couldn’t swipe them away. I just had to cough and splutter my way around feral hair until we got to my car, in our new two-car-wide driveway. The improved parking—especially come February—made our dated kitchen with the burnt orange built-in can opener and wall mounted Seal-a-Meal worth it.

My previous house had a very skinny and super short driveway that fit just one car, so I was thrilled not to have to park on the street anymore in bad weather, a regular spring occurrence.

May in Cleveland is like a promise ring. Good intentions, but not an actual commitment. May was just trying to buy time, put you off before you demanded eighty degrees and sunshine. Some days were balmy with blue skies, others were gray with gusting winds and precipitation.

Today had been both. It started out with blue skies and was now determined to test the stability of patio furniture and tree branches everywhere.

“Whoa, you guys have a lot of boxes to unload still,” Ryan commented.

“Don’t let Jake hear you say that.”

“He can’t hear me, remember?”

Right. The whole ghost thing.

I really did forget sometimes.

Once we were all in the car I asked, hopefully, “Is this a regular death? Like someone who was one-hundred-and-one and their heart gave out?”

Ryan scoffed. “You know that’s not our department. We’re Homicide.”

This lady doth protest. “No, we’re not. You are. Or you were. Whatever. Why does this keep happening?”

“Murder? Because people are dicks.”

I mean, true, but couldn’t everyone take a breather and enjoy the spring thaw?

“I don’t know how many more murders I can stumble across without needing some serious therapy,” I told him.

“Who got whacked?” Grandma asked, fussing with her seat belt. “I hope not Sara Murphy. She’s so young.”

“Sara Murphy?” Ryan leaned forward from the back seat right as I glanced behind me to check for traffic before I backed up.

My face melted into his and it felt like I'd sucked on seventy-five mints simultaneously. Cool air shot across my lips and into my mouth.

"Ah! Jesus, don't do that." I scrubbed my lips and chin.

"Don't take the name of the Lord in vain," Grandma said.

"Yeah," Ryan agreed. "And don't even pretend like you weren't just trying to kiss me."

"I was not trying to kiss you! I didn't know you were there." I hit the gas harder than I intended and all of our heads whipped forward. "Sorry."

But he was right. That had been like a kiss. A weird, ghostly and creepy peck from a dead man I had once fancied myself in love with pre-Jake Marner.

Ryan liked to refer to my life prior to dating Jake as BJ, which allegedly meant Before Jake, but we both knew that's not what he really meant because he was super mature that way.

The facial collision had been an accident, but it still felt weird and oddly intimate in a way that made me uncomfortable. Determined to ignore it, I said, "What do you know about Sara Murphy?"

"She's hot, right? I think I remember her from high school. A bonfire, some PBRs, a little country music playing in the background..."

Ryan's sentence trailed off and I glanced at him in the rearview mirror as I drove. He looked strangely melancholy and it bothered me. "You didn't even know me in high school. I doubt you knew Sara Murphy."

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“How do you know who I knew in high school?”

“Do you know who I knew?” Grandma Burke asked.

Ryan took the bait. “Who?”

I didn’t. I already knew where this was going.

“Phil Donahue.” She preened as if she was personally responsible for his talk show success. “I dated him. We had math class together.”

There it was.

“Grandma, you did not. He went to St. Ed’s, which is all boys.” We’ve had this conversation like twelve times already. She never even met the man. But at this rate, in another two years, he would be her secret first husband.

“Ryan, just tell me it’s not Sara.”

We weren’t exactly friends in high school but we weren’t rivals or enemies either. It was more like she was there, in everything, surrounded by popular girls. I was not in that group of girls. I wasn’t unpopular, I was just background noise. Elevator music. You’re vaguely aware of it, and might hum along to it, but you forgot about it the second the elevator doors open.

“It’s not Sara. It’s some guy named James Kwaitkowski.”

“Never heard of him,” Grandma said.

Me either.

We all fell into speculative silence about one James Kwaitkowski and his unfortunate fate.

“The files don’t tell you anything?” Grandma asked.

“Nope. Just DOA.”

“When did you ever listen to country music?” I asked Ryan, stuck on that. He was always a heavy metal guy.

“At bonfires when I was trying to get with hot girls named Sara. Or Nicole. Or Jessica.”

I was sorry I had asked. “Right. What was I thinking?”

“That you wished you were a hot girl.”

He wasn’t wrong.

Fortunately, I’d grown into my face. More importantly, I’d grown into my fashion sense. I could dress my thin frame like nobody’s business now.

“Bailey was a late bloomer,” Grandma said. She reached out and patted my knee.

“Thank you, Grandma.”

“And she has a good personality.”

Ryan let out a crack of laughter from the back seat.

There was a coroner's van at the senior center when we pulled in and one cop car.

"Meat wagon's here," Ryan said, in his usual compassionate way.

"It seems kind of quiet for a homicide." I bit my lip as I looped around the parking lot. I'd been trying to score a handicapped spot for Grandma, but all six were occupied with cars. You had to be on the ball at the senior center to score those prime spots.

"It really does," Ryan said, craning his neck to see who was in the patrol car. "That's just a beat cop. I don't see any detectives."

It also occurred to me that if there was a vicious homicide at the senior center, Jake would be calling me right now and telling me to come home. He didn't always know about homicides when they happened, depending on who got assigned the case, but everyone at the station knew me and my family, for reasons good and well, maybe a tiny bit infamous.

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My mother was a well-known, tough-as-nails prosecutor. I had also done a brief stint as an evidence tech in my early twenties, before I realized I don't like to wear clunky shoes or collect saliva from combative suspects or from dead bodies. Then there was the whole serial killer thing, where I'd been held captive, chained to a mid century modern rattan patio set for a couple of hours, which had gained me some notoriety.

And possibly by the fact that I tended to have an abnormally large number of dead bodies pop up in my immediate vicinity.

Plus, I was dating Jake.

All of these factors (and maybe more, who knows) meant I was heavily on the CPD's radar and Jake was often informed of what his mother deemed my antics. As if I were trying to stumble across corpses.

Though I supposed no one would know where I took my grandmother for Shakespeare in the gymnasium, especially given it was in a suburb, not Cleveland proper.

Ryan promptly disappeared from the backseat, something I was pretty sure I would never get used to. I jumped a little and blew out a breath, before getting out of the car and walking to the building with Grandma Burke.

No one stopped us or threw up crime scene tape as we were walking up the sidewalk, so I figured we were in the clear. Maybe there was a clerical error in the afterlife and there was no homicide.

Inside the building, we could hear the tinkling of piano music and voices. Distracted, I kept looking left and right, waiting to suddenly see the ghost of James Kwaitkowski shuffle in front of me. We made it all the way to the gymnasium without incident.

Normally, I just dropped Grandma Burke off at the gym doors and took off, leaving her the autonomy of time with her peers. But I was both avoiding Jake's mother and too curious about what Ryan had said to just drop her off and go home. Though I wasn't sure I could manage two hours of sitting through line reads. I've never been a huge Shakespeare fan and there was a coffee shop right across the street. I'd rather drink a latte than listen to Mrs. O'Malley pretend to be under the influence of a love potion, while Grandma mocked her acting skills. As happy as Grandma was to be Young Athenian Girl, she was also annoyed that her rival in all things, Maggie O'Malley, had a bigger part.

"Bailey? Bailey Burke?"

Sara Murphy.

There she was. Smiling and squinting in my direction.

"Oh my gosh!" She came over and enveloped me in a warm hug.

I don't think Sara had ever hugged me in high school, but a funny thing happens once you graduate and move on with your lives—suddenly you have a bond that didn't exist before simply because you were forced to be educated alongside each other at sixteen.

"Hi, Sara. How are you? I heard you were back from New York."

She pushed her long glamorous waves (hair extensions, they had to be) off of her face and laughed. "I can admit it—New York chewed me up and spit me out. I'm back

home with my tail between my legs. I couldn't afford over three grand a month for a three hundred square foot apartment with mice living in the walls."

"Yikes. Well, welcome back."

"Thanks." She beamed. "How are you? Are you married?" She glanced at my ring finger. And seemed to notice my outfit, which was leggings and a huge sweater over a ratty T-shirt emblazoned with the name of the dance school I had gone to until I was seventeen. There were bits of cardboard box and dust all over me.

"No, uh, not married." I felt the need to explain my outfit. "But today is actually moving day. My boyfriend and I bought a house in Fairview and we've been hauling boxes all day. I'm exhausted and totally need a shower but I didn't want my grandmother to miss her play practice."

"You bought a house? Congrats! Who's your boyfriend? Someone from high school?"

I couldn't think of a single guy we knew from high school that I would want to live with. "No. He's a homicide detective. We were friends for years, then, you know... sparks."

Sara didn't need to know Jake and I had trauma bonded over our grief for Ryan.

Frankly, I liked to pretend that never happened.

That me and Jake were together via a meet cute, like we bumped into each other at the airport after not being in touch for five years and bam, sparks.

Telling people I got drunk and cried all over him, insisting our dead friend hadn't committed suicide, wasn't nearly as romantic.

“Homicide detective? Oh, wow, that’s hot.”

Okay, Paris Hilton.

I had no idea what the heck to say to that. I’d never once thought of homicide as hot.

“How about you? Married? Boyfriend? Girlfriend? Both?”

Sara laughed and slapped my arm. “Oh my gosh, you were always so funny, Bailey.”

No one had ever called me funny.

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“No one special in my life. Plus, I’m living with my parents.” Sara was laughing again, but it sounded slightly maniacal. “Oh, and directing a geriatric play. Winning at life, that’s me.”

More laughter. Tinny and high-pitched.

Sara Murphy was a former high school it girl on the edge.

Feeling awkward, I said, truthfully, “I think it’s amazing you’re directing this show. My grandmother loves it. She’s been practicing her one whole line every day for a week.”

“It’s court ordered community service,” she said flatly.

Um...

“Sara!” a gravelly voice bellowed from near the stage. “Let’s go!”

Sara rolled her eyes. “George, the pianist. He’s full of himself.”

“I’ll let you go. Great to see you again, Sara.”

Lie.

Sara Murphy was scary now.

I was questioning if I should actually be leaving my grandmother alone with her.

“Can you believe our ten year reunion is this summer? Are you going?”

“I guess?” I posed it as a question because I had given zero thought to it. I was more preoccupied with sorting my life out.

“Why are the hot girls always crazy?” Ryan asked.

“Jesus!” I jumped. I shot him a look of annoyance.

“What?” Sara asked, bewildered. She took a step back away from me, like I was the one who was a little off.

I bent down and slapped at my ankle. “Something just bit me. Must have been a fly. Hey, do you know why the coroner’s van is outside?”

“Oh, I guess the janitor died. They found him in the supply closet. Heart attack or something, I don’t know. I never met him.”

With that, she turned and strolled away, a sway in her hips that I had never mastered.

“I guess if she didn’t meet him, he doesn’t matter,” I mused to Ryan.

“She’s exactly my type,” he said, rubbing his jaw. “Sexy and crazy. That woman has restraining order written all over her. Too bad I’m dead or I’d totally go for it.”

He wasn’t even lying. Alive, Ryan had stumbled from one hapless dating disaster to the next. If a woman was fragile or violent, he was right there buying her a drink. It was a terrible gift he’d had.

“I don’t remember her being like that in high school. She always seemed put together, sure, but also genuinely sweet.”

“A decade changes people.”

“I’m exactly the same,” I declared confidently.

“Even wearing the same T-shirt,” Ryan agreed.

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, let’s go figure out this James Kwaitkowski thing.”

I wasn’t trying to disguise the fact that I was talking to what most people would perceive as thin air. Now that people talk on their phones all the time with airpods, most people didn’t think it was odd I was speaking aloud to no one. All hail the blue tooth.

“Did you hear what she said about court-ordered community service?” I asked as I headed for the hallway. “Is that really a thing? Unleashing criminals on seniors who may or may not have dementia?”

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“I have no idea. I never paid attention to any of that. I just liked the take down.”

That didn't surprise me. “You're a questionable human being.”

“Ah, the real question is, am I even still a human being?” Ryan raised his eyebrows up and down. “Who am I, Bai? That is the question.”

Since I highly doubted Ryan was referencing an ancient philosopher and was just trying to be entertaining/annoying, I didn't answer. I just pushed open the auditorium door and went into the hallway.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” he said, pretending to brush off my T-shirt. “That's more you than me. Damn, you're filthy.”

“Stop, that's weird,” I said, still thinking about that strange moment in the car when our faces had melded together.

“Get back, demon!” a man's voice suddenly burst out.

It should have been more unnerving than it was.

But with a heavy sigh, I turned, fully expecting this was my introduction to one James Kwaitkowski, recently deceased.

Fresh spirits are always a little kooky, and it seemed the senior center janitor was no exception to that rule.

THREE

In my experience,ghosts have one of two reactions when they're new to the game.

They're either super casual, to the point that you grow concerned they don't know they're dead (I'm looking at you, Ryan Conroy) or they freak out. Big time. Not, say, slightly agitated or mildly distressed. Not even anxious with a side of raised voice.

Nope. They freak the you-know-what out.

James Kwaitkowski was the latter.

Around sixty years old, he was standing in the hallway, wearing a blue janitor's uniform and waving his arms wildly. His eyes were filled with terror and panic.

Ryan stopped walking and glanced back behind him. "Who's he calling a demon? You? That's ridiculous. That's like calling a bunny a polar bear."

I didn't follow his logic exactly, but I knew what he meant. I was not in any way threatening, even on a bad day.

"You!" James Kwaitkowski hissed, pointing directly at Ryan. "The demon in flannel."

"Oh, he means me. Wait, you can see me?" he asked James.

Generally speaking, the ghosts I encounter can't see each other. Living humans can't see any of them. But there don't seem to be hard and fast rules. Some ghosts have seen Ryan and vice versa. It gets very confusing.

"I see your evil heart beating inside you and your yellow eyes."

Okay. That was new. Was it possible James was somehow seeing Ryan the way his fear projected an image onto him? Or was Ryan really a yellow-eyed demon?

Now there was a twist I wouldn't have seen coming.

I took one step away from Ryan, very discreetly.

Not discreetly enough.

"Seriously?" he demanded of me. "You actually think I'm a demon? You believe the babbling dead guy over your oldest friend?"

"Alyssa is actually my oldest friend."

"You know what I mean," he snapped. "I'm not evil and I would never hurt you. Morally gray at certain points in my life? Yes, that's probably fair. But evil?" He made a huffing sound of impatience. "That's just insulting."

I instantly felt guilty, because everything made me feel guilty. "I'm sorry. It just caught me off guard."

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“Who are you?” James Kwaitkowski demanded, still staring down Ryan.

“I’m Ryan. I guess you’re new to the program. You’re James Kwaitkowski, right? Nice to meet you.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I got the intel from upstairs. I got a notification that you died about an hour ago.”

“Are you going to drag me to hell?” James jumped back and threw his hands up like he was going to box his way out of being taken into a fiery afterlife.

“Nope. Not my department. I’m here to make sure your homicide is solved and to act sort of like an onboarding consultant.”

James frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Say you get hired for a new job. I’m the guy that trains you, shows you the ropes, how to fudge your time card, and how to do as little as possible and still get paid.”

“Really?” I shook my head at Ryan.

“Told you. Morally gray. Hey, I had a twenty percent solve rate on my violent crimes caseload. That’s seven percent higher than the average. The homicides themselves I took seriously because no one deserves to be murdered. But continuing ed classes? Screw those. I learned everything I needed to know to do my job out on the streets and from the older detectives.”

I was listening to him but I was also doing math in my head. “Only thirteen percent of homicides are solved? That’s really...low.”

Appallingly low.

Gave-me-a pit-in-my-stomach-low.

It reminded me of a conversation Jake and I had a few weeks back. He had suggested I come into the department and advise on some cold cases. As a psychic. I had tried to explain that it didn’t work that way. I couldn’t just conjure up ghosts, they appeared at will.

But now I was having a change of heart. I could at least try. Because that solve rate was pure crap.

“No, violent crimes. Murder is more like fifty percent. Well, that’s the arrest rate,” Ryan said cheerfully. “Conviction rate is lower.”

“Who are you talking to?” James asked, head wiping back and forth rapidly. “Is there another demon here I can’t see?”

That was intriguing.

“You can’t see me?” I asked him.

He never even looked my way.

“Answer me, demon!”

“Okay, listen, I told you my name is Ryan. If you keep calling me demon this conversation is going to be over and you’ll be on your own navigating your entrance

to the big house.”

“Prison?” James calmed down slightly. “I’m not going back there.”

So James had a checkered past. Also interesting.

“No, you know, upstairs.” Ryan pointed toward the ceiling. “To the great beyond. Right now you’re stuck hanging around until your murder is solved.”

“I was murdered?”

I sighed. “The EMTs think you had a heart attack.”

“What do you remember?” Ryan asked when James ignored me yet again.

James really didn’t see me. Huh. That was a first. Most of the time the spirits couldn’t see Ryan, but they were all up in my business, demanding attention. I liked this way better.

Then immediately I felt guilty for that thought.

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I also realized that meant I would have to give control of the situation over to Ryan, who was unreliable at best. I am nothing if not a control freak.

“I haven’t been feeling well the past few days. Sick to my stomach, clammy, that sort of thing. Came to work anyway because I have to pay the same child support whether I take a day off or not and I didn’t want to lose out. Got here at four, went to get my cart from the closet and then...nothing.”

That honestly sounded like a heart attack to me. Not feeling well with vague symptoms that could easily be ignored, then cardiac arrest and instant death.

The gold standard of least terrible ways to die.

Then I realized what he’d said. Child support. This man had a son or daughter under eighteen who had just lost their father.

“Ask him about his family,” I urged Ryan.

He nodded, but then he said, “Go outside and talk to the coroner and see what you can find out if they’re still here.”

“Great idea.”

“Yeah, it’s almost like I’m a detective or something.” Ryan gave me a grin.

“Fair enough.” I left him to interrogate James Kwaitkowski and went out into the parking lot.

The van was still there. The driver seemed to be taking a nap behind the wheel. When I tapped on the window he jumped and rolled the window down. The frown on his face indicated he wasn't thrilled I'd interrupted him.

"What's going on here?" I asked him.

"I can't disclose that information." He started to roll his window back up.

"My uncle is the janitor here," I lied. "I can't find him. Is the person who died?"

I tried to look suitably panicked, which I was probably successful at, given how much lying makes me nervous. It makes me fidgety and jittery.

"What's your uncle's name?"

"James Kwaitkowski. Thin, gray hair, in his early sixties."

His expression softened just a tad. "Yes, it was him. I'm sorry."

"What happened?" I tried to look shocked.

"I can't speculate on that."

"What happens now?" It just occurred to me that he was napping with a dead body in the back of his van. I guess when you're surrounded by bodies all the time at your day job, it's of little consequence.

I always see in movies and TV where coroner's and medical examiner's are eating lunch two feet away from bodies. The image popped into my head and I felt instantly queasy. I clapped a hand over my mouth.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I said, and I wasn’t lying. I’d been hauling boxes all day and barely eaten. I felt myself sway a little on my feet.

Sometimes the reality of the ghosts I interact with having actually died hits me hard. James was both in this van and in that hallway talking to Ryan. It’s a weird concept.

The coroner, or whoever this guy was, sat up straight in alarm and rolled his window almost the entire way up, like he didn’t want to get splashed. I can’t say I blame him.

Then again, he didn’t have an issue with dead bodies, so why was a little vomit alarming to him?

Swallowing hard, I took a deep breath. “Why aren’t the cops here? Don’t they have to investigate all deaths that don’t take place at the hospital?”

I don’t know why I thought that—probably also from TV. But this was a suburb. I figured they had time on their hands to show up whenever anything happened.

He looked at me like I was nuts. “I’m sorry for your loss. You can contact our office to request an autopsy and claim his personal belongings.”

Well, that was that. “Thank you.”

I turned to go.

“Hey.”

I looked back at him.

“Have we met?” he asked, studying me curiously.

It was entirely possible, given my mother’s career involved lots of fundraisers and parties and election work, and she had forced my sister and I to go to them with her when we were younger. It made the she-bitch prosecutor look relatable to have daughters. Her words, not mine.

“No,” I said, because my mother would not be happy if she knew I was going around claiming to be related to dead people. Jake wouldn’t be thrilled either.

Time to disappear. I waved in thanks and hot-tailed it back inside the building.

Ryan was sitting on a console table that held flyers for events going on around time.

James Kwaitkowski was nowhere to be found.

There were a few people coming in and out of the auditorium so I put my phone up to my ear to pretend like I was using it while I talked to Ryan.

“I got nothing from the guy out there. He said to call to request an autopsy.”

Ryan nodded. He looked a little troubled. “Something weird is going on here.”

What else was new?

“Where is James, by the way?”

“He poofed. That’s what I’m saying. This is weird. Why can’t he see people but another dead guy? I got a text from HR that says James is a Class A spirit, but I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“Class A? I swear you’re just making this stuff up. Every time I turn around there’s a new level or rule or new classes you have to attend. The afterlife is about as efficient as the government.”

“Tell me about it. I’m stuck working out of a basement office.”

I wasn’t even sure if he meant that literally or not. “What now?”

“I don’t know.” Ryan rubbed his chin. “Maybe talk to his wife.”

Because that sounded easy. “Just stroll up to his wife and start asking her questions about her husband’s death? I don’t know. Let me think about this. Right now I have some errands to run.”

“Like what? What’s more important than this?”

“I need to get Jake something to eat. I’m going to run across the street and get him a sub sandwich that he can eat when he finally stops pushing himself beyond what any normal human should do in one day.”

Ryan laughed. “He’s not a superhero, Bai. It’s just a few boxes and he knows his

limits.”

“He really doesn’t,” I insisted. “He’ll be on the verge of passing out and I’ll ask him when the last time was that he drank water and the answer is always, “Oh, I bet that’s it,” and he drinks a glass of water and instantly feels better.”

“Good thing he has you to feed and water him.”

But Ryan’s tone didn’t sound like he thought that was a good thing at all. “What?”

He was instantly defensive. “What do you mean what? Nothing.”

“You have a tone.”

“You mean the tone that I think it’s ridiculous that you mother him?”

I gasped. “Motherhim? I do not! This is what you do in a relationship. You look out for each other. It’s a nice gesture to get him dinner, not some overbearing control issues.”

I was genuinely offended.

Ryan rolled his eyes.

“Do you have a problem with me and Jake being together?” I asked, astonished.

Ryan always made jokes about it, but I assumed that was just his sense of humor. He joked about everything, even his own death.

“I have a lot of problems but your dumb relationship isn’t one of them.”

My jaw dropped. “Dumb? What is your problem?”

“Just drop it. Go get your little sandwich and I’ll talk to you later.”

“Fine. Bye,” I muttered into my phone and then dropped it by my side.

Turning on my heel, I walked right out of the senior center and stormed across the street to the sub shop. My hands were shaking and I wasn’t even sure why. Ryan had a history of being insensitive. Maybe he was struggling to cope with being stuck a ghost. I could understand that.

But I had always been there for him and taking pot shots at my relationship wasn’t cool.

For some reason my irritation with Ryan caused me to order two sandwiches for Jake, not just one. Roast beef and an Italian club, just in case one sounded better than the

other to him.

Take that, Ryan.

I had the satisfaction of watching Jake eat both at midnight, leaning over our burnt orange vinyl countertop in our now burgeoning and dated ranch house.

No ghosts anywhere in sight.

FOUR

“Do you remember how I got married last week?” Alyssa Dembowski asked me as she put an adorable polka dot satin top on a hanger the day after our move.

I’d forgotten I had that top. I would have to put it back in the outfit rotation now that it had been rediscovered. Moving had its advantages.

But this wasn’t the time to worry about my wardrobe. We were talking about Alyssa’s “wedding.”

I paused and pulled my face out of my closet, where I was filling a shoe organizer in an attempt to unbury myself from boxes. I eyed my best friend.

“I don’t exactly think I could forget that you got drunk at a police function and married a random stranger three hours after you met him. What about it?”

Unlike me, Alyssa was brass, unapologetic, confident, and very analytical when it came to her career and her finances. When it came to her personal life, however, she was impulsive, the life of the party, and probably on some level still the insecure sixteen-year-old who was bullied mercilessly for her weight.

It led to her having a revolving door of boyfriends and dates, and now, apparently, to a husband. They'd run into each other at the Fraternal Order of Police annual tattoo social event and a mere three hours later drunkenly got married by what I had to assume was an equally drunken judge.

"That's completely false. I met him with you months and months ago when that old guy died in that lake house you were staging."

"You met the sheriff for like five minutes. But fine. I'll give you he wasn't a totally random stranger." He also wasn't exactly a fan of me, so that was a little awkward.

"Thank you." Alyssa held the blouse up in front of her and paused dramatically. "We're going on a first date."

"You and your husband?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's exciting. Where are you going?" Just because the sheriff had seemed annoyed by me finding a dead body in his jurisdiction didn't mean I wasn't rooting for Alyssa to have a happily-ever-after.

I stuck my camel-colored sling backs in a shoe slot. Everyday shoes got the organizer. The special ones got their own storage containers put up on a shelf, with a photo of the shoes inside on the outside of the box for easy access. I liked my closet tidy. I couldn't say this was the closet of my dreams, but Jake had given me custody of the primary bedroom's closet and he was using the guest room.

"It's a surprise. He planned the whole thing. Isn't that romantic?"

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Romantic was one way to interpret that. Terrifying was another.

“Are you sure the surprise isn’t you at the bottom of the lake?” I asked skeptically. “I mean, you don’t actually know this guy all that well.”

“He’s a sheriff. He’s not going to kill me.”

I wasn’t touching that one with a ten foot pole.

“Share your location with me. Does Jake know your new husband? I should ask him before you go anywhere alone with this guy. What’s his full name? I confess, I can’t remember it.”

The way she dramatically announced, “Lawson Hill” I half-expected doves to fly out of a box at her words. “I’m sure Jake will tell you he’s amazing because he is.”

Right. Lawson Hill, the older guy with salt and pepper hair, who Alyssa had insisted gave her the “look.” Apparently, she had been right.

“I’ll ask Jake about him before you go out with him tonight.”

“It’s not a big deal. I’ve already spent the night with him after our wedding.” She hung the blouse in the closet and waved her hand. “It was fine. He’s sweet. I wouldn’t have married him otherwise. He was a perfect gentleman. Well.” She picked up a pair of tailored pants and grinned. “In that he didn’t say or do anything rude or violent he was. I wouldn’t say he was a total gentleman, if you know what I mean.”

I obviously knew what she meant. But considering I'd known Jake for years before I started dating him, our dealings with men were not on the same playing field. Alyssa was the soccer star, kicking goals and taking headers, and I was observing game play from up in the stadium nosebleeds.

Alyssa did look happy. She was wearing a skintight off-the-shoulder sweater and wide leg jeans with full makeup and loose curls. She had on stiletto boots, making me feel less than glamorous in my leggings and giant sweatshirt. I had been phoning it in with my outfits lately, I had to admit.

"Please don't ever let Jake's mother get wind of the fact that you're now married. She'll lose her mind if she finds that out when Jake and I aren't even engaged."

Alyssa slipped the pants onto a hanger. "I feel like she would be judgmental about me getting married after only meeting someone twice for a total of four hours."

"No, she'll judge you if you get divorced, not on how or why you got married." I was only half-joking.

"I did wait until marriage to sleep with him. I should get points for that."

We looked at each other and both burst out laughing.

"That feels like a loophole," I told her. "What did your parents say about all this?"

"They're on a heavy metal rock cruise right now so they're in the middle of the ocean with spotty cell reception. I'll tell them when they get home but you know they won't care. They're high half the time and super happy. Even more happy now that THC is legal."

Alyssa's parents were Gen X through and through, still dressing like they had in the

eighties and going to concerts all the time. Her dad wore Converse and an AC/DC T-shirt almost every day. Her mom looked like she was ready to jump on a motorcycle at any given moment. They were in their cannabis era, as Alyssa liked to say, both semi-retired and determined to live like they were still twenty-two.

They were also a lot of fun to be around.

“You have no idea how jealous I am of that.”

“Yeah, well, they’re definitely nonjudgmental, which I love. But someday when I have kids I’m going to miss having a mother who wants to babysit every weekend and a father who wears a sweater vest.”

“My mother is never going to babysit. Not even for ten minutes.”

“I thought she always pressured you to have kids.”

“She does. Doesn’t mean she plans to help me raise them. Which is her right, don’t get me wrong. Jake’s mother is going to be the one who helps all the time but will also rearrange my furniture when she’s babysitting. The babysitting won’t come without a price. Not that Jake and I are having kids,” I added hastily, because I didn’t want to jinx my own future in discussing something Jake and I hadn’t even really discussed.

“Of course you’re getting married and having kids with Jake eventually. You just bought a house together. I wonder what my mother-in-law is like,” Alyssa said, holding a dress up against herself in the mirror. “God, you’re tiny. This dress looks like it was made for a bitty baby.”

That’s a new backhanded compliment I haven’t heard before. Usually my small frame earns me, “Are you okay?”

“I’m short and there’s nothing I can do about that. I never really gained the weight back that I lost when Ryan died either. I’m fun size, what can I say?”

“I love that for you.” Alyssa put the dress in my closet. “Have you seen Ryan recently?”

Alyssa is a skeptic. She thinks Ryan is a figment of my imagination. Some sort of grief conjured delusion. But she’s a supportive friend so she does ask about him and the whole spiritual medium unintentional side gig.

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“Yes, and he was kind of a jerk to me. He said I mother Jake, which is creepy. Also, some guy died at the senior center and no one seemed to think it was anything other than natural causes but Ryan insisted it was a homicide.”

“It’s easier to kill old people because that’s what everyone assumes—natural causes.”

That made me jerk back and hit my head on the buckle of a belt that was dangling down. “Ow,” I said automatically, even though it didn’t really hurt.

Alyssa’s words had struck a chord.

Ryan’s intel said it was a homicide. Just because at first glance no one in emergency services didn’t think it was didn’t mean a thing.

“You are so right,” I said. I dropped the suede pumps in my hand and pulled my phone out of my hoodie. I typed in James Kwaitkowski’s name.

What popped up was not his obituary, as you would expect, but a few social media hits and his rap sheet. He’d been convicted for not paying child support and for domestic battery.

“Hmm.”

“Hmm, what?”

“I don’t know.” I went to his social media page and started scouring through his posts. He typed in shorthand, with zero punctuation, which wasn’t a crime, but should

be, but otherwise I didn't see any violent rants and cussing out of the ex-wife or girlfriend. I also didn't see any pictures of his child or children either.

It was mostly James in bars with a variety of people his age, holding up drinks.

The one bar, Danny O's, appeared to be his favorite haunt, based on the number of times he marked himself there. I couldn't tell from the pictures if it was all the same place. One dive bar looks the same as any other. But given the crowd seemed to be the same people and the background was generally the same, it was a fair assumption he was a Danny O regular.

"Do you want to go to Danny O's with me later this week?" I asked Alyssa.

"Ew, no. Why would you want to go there? That's one sketchy and...sticky bar."

Not reassuring.

I knew vaguely where it was but had never even contemplated going in there before today. It definitely looked like a third shift bar, given the number of smokers outside of it at seven in the morning.

"To see what the patrons at Danny O's know about our recently deceased spirit?" I asked, hopeful. I didn't want to walk in there alone and start asking questions. I've been told I look like a social worker. I showed her my phone. "It's his favorite bar."

Alyssa eyed me. "If I say no, you're going to go alone, aren't you?"

I nodded, biting my lip.

"Oh, Lord." She sighed. "I'll go with you. I'll ask Lawson to go with us if you don't want to ask Jake."

I didn't want to ask Jake. I didn't want to lie to him either. "But if you invite Lawson, then Jake will find that weird. If I just say you and I are going out, he won't think anything of it."

"You and I just strolling in there is going to be weird. We're going to have ninety-year-old convicted felons hitting on us."

"There are worse ways to spend a Thursday night?" I posed it like a question because I couldn't convince even myself that this wasn't a bad idea.

Alyssa snorted. "I would take laser hair removal over this. A colonoscopy. A meeting with the IRS because you owe them money." She paused. "Okay, not the last one."

"See, there are worse things." I shoved my platform wedges onto the closet shelf. "What should I wear?"

"A gun."

That made me laugh. "You're exaggerating."

But not by much.

A blast of hot air that smelled like fried bologna hit me in the face when I yanked open the door to Danny O's at nine that night. I had wanted to go immediately but Alyssa wisely pointed out that even barflies don't usually hit the local watering hole before seven.

"At least they don't cheap out on the heat," Alyssa murmured behind me. "It's like a sauna in here. A stinky sauna."

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Multiple sets of eyes turned our way in curiosity. I suspected it was habit to see who was entering the bar, but in our case, our entrance was met with raised eyebrows.

I had taken Alyssa's advice and forgone the usual uniform I wore of sweater sets and wide legged pants with designer shoes. Instead, I had put on jeans and a basic sweater with boots that could best be described as chunky. They had been a gift from Alyssa's dad, who had attempted to convince me to learn how to ride a motorcycle. Which had resulted in me screaming on the back of a hog for five minutes straight while my noodle arms clung to his waist in a manner that felt inappropriate, yet necessary for survival.

"I appreciate these boots from your dad."

"I honestly wish my dad was here right now," Alyssa said.

"I agree." I sidled into the dim establishment and found the most open spot at the bar. It was tempting to grab Alyssa's arm for support but I had to pretend I could handle this.

The bartender approached as we took two stools. He was around sixty, covered in tattoos, sporting a grizzled beard. "What can I get you ladies?"

In the nick of time, I stopped myself from ordering wine. "Uh, a light beer."

He gave me a funny look but nodded and turned to Alyssa. "How about you?"

"Tito's on the rocks."

He seemed to approve her choice more than mine because he smiled. “Sure, sweet thing.”

Alyssa grabbed my knee and squeezed it hard beneath the bar.

My phone buzzed. It was a text from her. She obviously didn’t want to be overheard.

Told you we’d get hit on.

That made me roll my eyes.

Just you.

“Do you recognize any of these customers?” she asked in a low voice, leaning on her elbow so she could talk directly to me, blocking the patrons behind her, presumably so they couldn’t hear her but also as a front so that I would appear to be talking to her while I was actually checking the customers out.

I was impressed with her subterfuge.

Glancing over her shoulder as casually as possible, I took stock of the people present. As to be expected, there was a couple of ancient men nursing drinks, seemingly alone. There was a young couple who arguably were not old enough to be drinking. Then a mixed group of three women and two men of varying ages.

The one woman looked like someone I had seen in James’s pictures.

“Maybe.” I opened my phone and did a casual (in my mind, anyway) check.

Obviously no one else agreed, because the woman slid off her stool and stalked over to me. “What are you doing?”

She looked like she was around forty, heavy eye makeup, a pack of cigarettes tucked into her bra. She also looked menacing, completely different from the cheerful pics I'd seen of her posted online.

"Uh, just having a beer?" I couldn't help it. My voice rose at the end, turning the statement into a question.

"I've never seen you here before and you're messing with your phone too much. Are you taking my picture? I'm not drinking."

Alyssa jumped in. "No one is taking your picture. Everyone our age messes with their phone too much. It's a national plague."

"I don't care if you're drinking or not," I assured her.

"You look like a social worker."

There it was. I didn't even have a sweater set on. "I'm not a social worker."

"I'm not losing custody of my kids again." She scowled at me.

I tried to smile reassuringly. "I'm not with CPS. I'm just wondering if anyone here knows anything about James Kwaitkowski."

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The bartender slapped my beer glass down so hard it sloshed over the edges and I jumped. “What about James?” he demanded.

Alyssa gave me a look like “what are you doing?” but I figured there was no way to get any information without actually asking about James. Besides, I didn’t want to hang around here longer than was necessary.

“I work at the senior center,” I lied. “I was there when he...”

Three sets of expectant eyes drilled into me. Another man had come up behind the woman and put his palms on her shoulders.

“When he what?” New Guy asked.

“Did he quit his job?” the woman demanded. “That son of a bitch. I knew he’d do this. He’s trying to weasel out of paying child support to me.”

So James and the ex he owed child support to partied together regularly at the bar?

Huh. That seemed like a mixed message to me.

“Well. I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but he passed away,” I said, lowering my voice into a sympathetic hush. I hadn’t expected that no one in his circle would know he died. I would have thought the police would notify the mother of his child, but maybe she’d been at Danny O’s instead of at home when they had swung by.

Or they’d called her and she hadn’t called them back, because this was a woman who

looked suspicious regarding law enforcement.

“What?” She stared at me blankly. “What do you mean?”

The man behind her swore and took a menacing step toward me. I eased back a little on my stool.

“I mean he died. At work. At the senior center. They think he had a heart attack.”

Shock crossed her face then she instantly became angry. “How do you know he’s dead and I don’t? I’m the mother of his child, his ex-wife. His girlfriend now, off and on. We’ve been on this month, actually, and it was going really well. Was he cheating on me with you?”

“No! I told you, I work at the senior center. I have a boyfriend and she’s married.” I jerked my thumb in Alyssa’s direction.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” she said disdainfully. “James was charming.”

Not from what I had seen. Of course, to be fair, that was post mortem. Maybe he’d been a swell guy prior to death. “I only met him once. But I was at the senior center when...it happened.”

“So why are you here then?” the man asked.

The other three people with them had come over and now we’re encircling me and Alyssa like a schoolyard fight was about to ensue.

Nope. No and no. Time to leave.

“I saw he comes here all the time and I just wanted to raise a glass to him.”

That almost sounded believable. I tapped Alyssa's leg and threw a twenty on the bar top. We both slid down our stools but we were left with very little room. Alyssa's knee accidentally bumped the second man, perilously close to his crotch.

"Did you just touch my man?" one of the other women, who had frosted tips and an unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth, asked.

She looked about sixty-five and super unhappy.

At the moment, I understood her vibe. I wasn't thrilled with the circumstances either.

"Not on purpose, trust me," Alyssa said, throwing her hands up. "Now can you please step back so we can leave. I'm sure this news has been unsettling for you."

"What's 'unsettling' (yes, she used air quotes) is that you're hitting on my man right in front of me."

"I am not hitting on your man," Alyssa snapped. "Seriously, back up."

I was grateful Alyssa was with me. I would have been like a baby bunny in a cage full of Rottweilers if I were there by myself.

Though I was regretting not taking her up on her offer to drag Lawson along with us.

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I'm sure that me wanting to go to Danny O's to investigate a crime that wasn't even considered a crime would have gone over well with him and made a fabulous second impression of me. He had already thought I was slightly nuts the first time we met.

"Don't talk to my friend like that," James's ex-wife/girlfriend said, sticking her finger in Alyssa's face.

"Excuse me," I said, trying to slide through between the two women. My heart was starting to race and I had serious doubts about my ability to defend myself in a bar fight. I patted my back pocket to make sure my phone was still there.

Not that I could call for help if I was down on a sticky bar floor fending off the tobacco tag team duo.

As it was, I was starting to suffocate on the overpowering scent of Stetson cologne and cheap beer. I again tried to ease past the women when the blonde made like she was going to forehead bump me into unconsciousness.

She didn't but I still screamed, which made her laugh.

In good news, she shifted to the side.

"Hey," Alyssa protested. "What is your problem?"

"I'll show you my problem."

"No, you won't," I said. I grabbed Alyssa's hand and dragged her through the

opening we were given, praising Alyssa's father in my head for buying me the boring but highly practical boots.

We stumbled out of the bar and ran a full block before we stopped, winded. I was bent over gasping for air and checking to make sure we weren't being chased when Alyssa burst out laughing.

Now that we were safe, I gave a nervous laugh as well.

"Oh, my God," Alyssa said. "That was so...ridiculous. And a little scary."

"Very scary. Though you were seriously badass."

"I try. I've had a lot of experience with bullies. So much for our investigation skills though. All we did was give them information."

"That really wasn't useful at all," I lamented.

We started walking back to my car.

"We did learn James is charming," she said with a grin.

We both laughed again. "I think those ladies have low standards. She was dating the man she was suing for child support. That seems like a poor choice."

"As was us coming here."

"I will concede that point. But the ex obviously didn't kill James. She seemed genuinely shocked."

"One ex down. Probably seven ex-wives to go."

She was joking, but a quick search on my phone in my car proved she wasn't far off. "Only four," I told her cheerfully. "How does your weekend look?"

Alyssa groaned. "Bailey. That's such a bad idea."

I unlocked the car. "Do you have a better one?"

"No. But I can tell you that I was actually checking that guy out."

I paused with my hand on the door handle. "You cannot be serious. If that is true, I may need to rethink my friendship with you."

"Not the way she was thinking though." Alyssa gave me a sly smile. "I was looking at his forearm when he blocked blondie from beating us up. He has a brand new tattoo. You can tell because it was scabbing over."

"Yuck. Okay. Of what? Who cares?"

"Get in the car and I'll tell you. I'm not sure those women still won't follow us. And there is some guy who is following us."

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Glancing back, I saw she was right. One of the guys seated at the bar was walking toward us, gaze drilling into me.

“Yikes.” I obediently slid in the car and once she was in, I made sure the doors were locked before pulling out of the parking lot. “So...?”

“It was a date. Tuesday’s date. Day, month, year. New ink, still shiny from lotion. With a skull. Now why do you think that is?”

My heart started to hammer. “Because he already knew James was dead. It was a memorial tattoo gotten right after James died.”

“Bingo. That guy knew.”

FIVE

“What am I looking at?” I turned the small white sensor over and over in my hands.

Jake took it from me. “Just sit down while I do this. You look tired.”

“I am tired.” I was also always willing to sit down.

I recently took a job at a home remodeling company for a number of reasons.

My staging business, “Put It Where?” was struggling because in the hot real estate market no one bothered to spend money on staging. It wasn’t necessary for a sale. You could have filthy forty-year-old mauve carpet and asbestos basement floor tiles

(like our newly purchased house) and it wasn't a deterrent. The entire house could be filled with dirty diapers and if it was in the right neighborhood there would still be multiple offers on it.

So my staging income had shrunk to almost nothing.

It also turns out that when you want to buy a house in a hot real estate market there is no patience for self-employed buyers in the mortgage process. Sellers want a fast close and there is no time for massaging a loan for someone whose income goes up and down with no pattern. That takes senior underwriters, creative lenders, and closer to forty days to close instead of the current preferred two weeks. I needed a stable paycheck to prove I was house buying worthy so I was back to punching a virtual time clock.

The job wasn't bad, really. It turns out that the other effect of higher interest rates and competitive prices is that people who don't have to sell, don't. They stay put and remodel their houses. It was fun to put my design skills to use helping residents work out their home improvement dreams in a ten thousand square foot design center.

But it also meant that I had regularly scheduled hours and I wasn't used to that.

Neither was Grandma Burke.

She refused to go to adult day care or my father's, so Jake and I were spending the night after Alyssa helped me unpack installing an integrated smart home security system aka granny cams. If she falls she can tell Alexa she can't get up.

Or as it turned out, Jake was installing the security system.

"I'm officially thirty," Jake said. "I'm working on our house on a Friday night."

I glanced around at our still half-unpacked kitchen and told myself I could only sit for five minutes, then I really needed to tackle organizing the utensils drawer. “We are very domestic these days. All we need is a dog.”

Jake paused and shot me a hopeful look. “Can we get a dog?”

I laughed. “No. Not with Grandma. Dogs are notorious for tripping the elderly.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Good point.”

“Hey, do you know Alyssa’s husband?” I asked, leaning onto the kitchen table.

“Are we really calling him that with a straight face?” Jake asked, tapping the screen on the command center tablet for the system.

“I’m following her lead.”

“No, I’ve never met him. Your mom probably knows him. He’s done some prisoner transfers and testified in court a few times.”

“Interesting.”

“Not really.” Jake kept fiddling.

“Do you want to go to dinner with them?”

“No.”

That made me laugh. Jake was always honest.

“Why not?”

“Because by the end of the month this marriage will be over and I’ll have wasted a night making small talk with some dude I’m never going to see again.”

“She really likes him though.”

“You’ve said that about the last three guys she dated.” Jake pressed a button and a loud wailing sound ripped through the room.

I jumped. “Geez Louise, that’s loud.”

“That’s the point.” He tapped the screen and the noise stopped.

“That’s loud enough to wake the dead,” Grandma Burke said, shuffling into the kitchen. “Or give me a heart attack.”

“Waking us up is the point. Heart attack is not.” Jake kept fiddling. “I’ll turn the volume down slightly.”

I wasn’t sure that was a good idea given that Grandma Burke had hearing loss but I didn’t want to point that out in front of her and offend her.

“Why are you two kids home tonight anyway?” she asked. “Shouldn’t you be out having fun? Going to a ballgame or a dance club now that you’ve had dance lessons?”

“We had three dance lessons,” Jake said. “And I sucked at it. I almost broke Bailey’s ankle twice.”

“It’s true,” I told her. “We’re not going out because we wanted to get this system installed so you have it if you need it.”

“This is for me?” Grandma stood in front of the cabinets and eyed them, mystified. “Why? And where is my tea?”

I stood up. “Because of that. You’re in a strange house surrounded by boxes you could trip on and you don’t know where anything is. Jake and I both have to work tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is Saturday,” she pointed out.

“It’s a busy day for remodeling design appointments and for death. What can I say?” I started rummaging around in our cabinets trying to find the tea. We (okay, me) had just shoved food into them in an attempt to get some boxes emptied and out of our walking path. Now I was staring at a cacophony of dried goods that might tumble down like an avalanche at any given moment. Add that to the to-do list.

“Your grandfather never worked on Saturday.”

Lucky him. “He also had a secretary and martini lunches. Times have unfortunately changed.”

“I can’t imagine you trying to work after having a lunchtime martini.” Jake grinned

as he came over and kissed the back of my head, reached around me, and pulled down the tea I was looking for. “You can’t even have a glass of wine without either dancing on a table or sobbing.”

I frowned at him. Just because all of that was true, didn’t mean I wanted it pointed out. But Jake looked so...capable. He was wearing sweatpants and an Ohio State T-shirt, socks on his feet, making this house a home for us.

Good grief, I was in love. It struck me at the oddest moments.

I stared at him too long. He frowned back. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I just think you’re cute.”

Jake rolled his eyes. “Is this a diversionary tactic so I won’t ask you why you were at Danny O’s last night with Alyssa?”

I almost dropped the box of tea bags. “Um, no, of course not. How did you know that?”

“It’s a cop bar.”

“Isn’t every bar a cop bar?” Grandma asked, taking the chair I’d vacated at the kitchen table.

“Probably,” I told her.

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“One of the guys I work with saw you and said there was a bit of an incident.”

I filled a mug with hot water and put it in the microwave. “I wouldn’t call it an incident. Just some woman thought Alyssa was looking at her boyfriend. Which she wasn’t, by the way. Because she’s married and he was gross.” Unkind of me, but true.

“Was that before or after you were asking about James Kwaitkowski?”

Dang it. “Who was the spy?” I asked, genuinely bewildered. No one had looked like a cop. “Not that I was doing anything that couldn’t be reported back to you, but it’s weird to feel like I’m being watched or something.”

“Nice deflection. No one was watching you. He saw you and told me because he was concerned.”

That explained the guy we thought was following us.

“James Kwaitkowski is the janitor at the senior center who died on Tuesday in the supply closet. I saw his ghost when I dropped Grandma off for play practice.”

“We had a bad rehearsal that day, too,” Grandma said, apropos of nothing. “Maggie couldn’t remember any of her lines. She’s no Titania.”

“I saw that he liked to hang out there, so I just wanted to see if any of his friends were there. Which they were. And his ex-wife who is currently his girlfriend. And the one guy had a tattoo on his forearm of a skull with the date of James’s death. Isn’t that odd?”

“Why didn’t you just tell me that? I could have gone with you.”

I carefully pulled the hot mug out of the microwave. “You would have gone with me? And not thought I was crazy?”

“Yes. I thought we had established this. I believe you see ghosts. I want you to be safe. I want to help you when you need help. That’s what being a partner means.”

See? Heart eyes. All day long. The man was perfect.

“Thank you. I’ll try to do better at sharing. But this happened out of your department.”

“But in county. We can still access some of the information.”

“Cool.” I dipped Grandma’s tea bag in the mug.

He nodded. “Cool.”

I nodded with him and repeated, “Cool.”

“Wow, another fun Friday night in the Marner-Burke house,” Ryan said, strolling into the kitchen.

“Where did you come from?” I asked.

“He was laying on your bed,” Grandma said. “I saw him when I was going down the hall.”

“You were laying on our bed?” I demanded, outraged.

Jake rubbed his chest like he had heartburn. “There was a dead person laying on our bed? Jesus.”

“It was Ryan,” Grandma told him.

“As if that makes it any better,” Jake muttered. He turned toward the living room, presumably in the general direction he thought Ryan was. “Stay out of my bedroom, Conroy. I’m not kidding. That’s too far, man.”

Ryan made a face. “I had a rough few days. I needed a nap.”

The fact that fatigue was a factor in the afterlife was very depressing to me.

“What have you been doing? I haven’t seen you since Tuesday. I have questions about this whole James thing.”

“So do I. This whole class A thing is driving me nuts.”

“What is a class A?”

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“Undetermined death but already moved on.”

I stared at him. “Then why is his ghost still here?”

“Because he only thinks she hasn’t moved on. That’s why he can see me. But he hasn’t moved on because he’s holding himself up. He’s still in the waiting room, so to speak. Because he’s not paying attention.”

“Isn’t there like a kiosk he can check into? Figure out what hallway he’s supposed to go down?”

“Not until we figure out what caused his death.”

“You said homicide, but now you’re saying undetermined. There is no way for me to figure that out. I’m not the medical examiner.”

Jake was clearly listening, but he was also rearranging the food in the cabinet. It always unnerved him to see me talking to what appeared to him as thin air. I understood the coping mechanism.

“Get me a look at the autopsy report,” Ryan said. “We need to get this sorted out because this guy is driving me crazy. He follows me around holding his fingers out like a cross. I haven’t slept in three days.”

“Ghosts sleep?” Grandma asked. “That’s interesting.”

“More of a figure of speech.”

“Why is holding his fingers out like a cross?”

“He thinks Ryan is a demon.”

“Oh, sure, sure.” She nodded like that was a no-brainer.

“Not sure,” Ryan protested. “Grandma, you know I’m not a demon.”

Now she was Grandma to him?

“I know, dear. But death is scary. You just need to be patient with James and hold his hand through this transition. That’s your job.”

Jake sighed into the cabinet.

I think he was wishing we’d gone out dancing instead.

Ryan sighed too, running his hands through his hair. “You’re right. But patience was never really my thing, you know that.”

“I certainly do.”

Ryan shot me a look. “Not helpful, Bai.”

“You’re not being helpful to me, either. I’m kind of busy right now.” I gestured to our disastrous box-filled mid century museum we called a house. “I have a lot on my plate, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“This house really is ugly,” he said.

“Thank you for repeating yourself. Just tell me what I’m supposed to do. I already

talked to James's wife and she clearly didn't know he was even dead, so she didn't kill him. He has three other ex-wives, but I feel like if they wanted him dead, they would have done it a long time ago. And the weird guy at the bar has no name."

Even if he did, I was feeling contrary right now with Ryan. He was not being a particularly good friend at the moment, dead or not, and I felt mildly (a lot) petulant.

I put Grandma's tea down in front of her.

She held it up to Ryan's nose so he could take a deep sniff, his eyes closed, face a picture of human longing.

Which made me feel guilty.

"Fine. I'll see about the autopsy report. But stay out of our bedroom."

Ryan gave a wink, clearly recovered. "You're the best. Have a boring weekend—oh, wait, you already are."

I immediately felt less guilty.

“Can you get me an autopsy report for James Kwaitkowski?” I asked Jake.

He sighed again, the deep sigh of a man questioning his love for me. “Already on it.”

SIX

“There’s the lovebirds,” Detective Cox said with a grin as I followed Jake into the room at the station stuffed with working cubicles. “Have a nice weekend?” He raised his eyebrows up and down.

“We were unpacking,” I told him, smoothing down the front of my taupe skirt and pretending to ignore his innuendo.

“Moving is hell,” Jake said, walking behind me.

“Hell is this case I’m working on,” Detective Debby Smith said, leaning back so far in her office chair it creaked and threatened to give way. She put her hands behind her head and stared at her computer screen. “Is the WiFi off? Why is my computer frozen?”

“Mine’s working,” Detective Cox said. “Maybe restart it.”

“Why is it everyone says that like I’m some kind of idiot? Just restart it.” She rolled her eyes.

“Because nine times out of ten, that fixes it. Did you restart it?”

“No.” Smith grumbled but powered off her desktop computer.

I hovered, determined to let the detectives take the lead with me. Neither of them were all that fond of me to begin with—Detective Cox because I called him out on his inappropriate flirting, Detective Smith because she thought I was a helpless female—and I had anticipated some resistance to me being there.

I wasn’t wrong to call out Cox. But Smith might not be wrong about me either. I get squeamish. But I had come a long way in the last year.

Jake gave me an encouraging smile, lifting his suit jacket off of the back of his cubicle chair and slipping it on. He’d met me downstairs at the security check-in and now that I was in the belly of the homicide unit, I remembered two things—he belonged here and I did not.

There was always something about the rows upon rows of cubicles in the center of the room, flanked by a perimeter of glass offices, that had given me claustrophobia. It was a practical workspace, humming with computers and detectives on phone calls, and swearing and shouts to co-workers. Clicking office doors and the endless clacking of fingers on keyboards. Nothing too grim, save the crime scene photos scattered around, and yet not designed for anything other than function.

It was why I had always felt so out of place there. I wasn’t practical. Not really. I owned too many dresses and expensive shoes for a woman with a modest income and I didn’t always dress for the weather. I ordered takeout more often than I should and I bought the pre-cut vegetables at the “fancy” grocery store because if I didn’t I would never bother to eat them because chopping is an extra step. I paid for a gym membership I never used and I was a streaming services dream customer. I signed up and paid in perpetuity for apps and channels I no longer even remembered I had.

I also valued pretty things. Delicate things. Like flowers and friendships and the sanctity of human life.

Jake belonged at the station. He was the epitome of practical. Keep it simple, stupid. The solution is usually the most obvious one. He was pragmatic, efficient, capable of compartmentalization. He was also empathetic, but never driven by his emotions. Not there, anyway. There he was Marner, not Jake. In his personal life, he was still practical, but also caring, romantic, and compassionate.

I liked both sides of him, or maybe I should say I loved the whole that made him who he was. A great man, and a great detective.

He also rocked a suit like nobody's business. Like a detective on a TV drama, not real life.

While I was admiring his biceps and abs in his well-fitted suit, Cox was smiling at me. "So how do we do this? You need a ouija board or something? Crime scene photos?"

He shoved a glossy picture into my hand.

At first, I didn't even understand what I was looking at. There was just blood everywhere. But then I realized that beneath all the blood, or in it, was a lumpy shape that was a body. There was mud and brown grass surrounding it. On the head was a crumpled up blue plastic bag with a grocery store name emblazoned on it beneath some patches of dirt.

I almost dropped the photo but I didn't want to show that level of weakness in front of Jake's colleagues. I tried to force myself to stare at it and not make horrified gagging sounds.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Jake demanded of Cox.

He snatched the photo from my hand and turned it down so I couldn’t see it anymore.

“Seriously,” Smith said. “This is an active investigation and you just showed her evidence.”

I almost rolled my eyes. Because what, I was going to run to the press and blast what I had seen? And I wasn’t helpless. Just different from her. Maybe that’s what it was. Sometimes you meet someone and they just don’t like you and there is no real reason why. That was me with Detective Debby Smith. She had just decided to dislike me the second she clapped eyes on me.

“Come on,” Cox said, doing the eye rolling at Smith for me. “She doesn’t even know what’s relevant, now is she going to compromise our investigation?”

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That wasn't exactly complimentary either.

"I do know what is relevant," I said. "But I'm not here to sabotage your investigation. I'm supposed to be helping, remember?"

It was a dubious concept and I understood their reluctance to have a spiritual medium offering opinions of a brutal homicide case, but still, no need to be insulting.

"You can't help us," Smith says. "Unless you're secretly a forensic anthropologist."

I gave Jake a look. I tried to tell him no one would take me seriously here. They hadn't when I was an evidence tech for a very short time five years earlier so they certainly weren't going to now.

"Just give it a shot," Jake told them. "We've got nothing to go on and it's been six months."

Yanking the photo back from Jake, I decided to take charge of this disaster. "Let's go into one of the conference rooms. I want to sit down."

With that, I held my head up high, tossing my red (ish) hair back over my shoulder and started walking in my heels toward what I thought might be an open room.

I ruined it though by glancing back over my shoulder. Smith wasn't getting out of her chair. She wasn't even looking over in my direction, but at a pile of papers on her desk. Cox was staring at my butt. Jake was grinning at me like he was proud of me or amused. Maybe both.

“Detective Smith, are you coming?” I said loudly.

Several detectives looked up from their desks, curious.

Debby Smith sighed and rose to her feet, grabbing her phone. “Because I have nothing to do at all today so sure, let’s waste my time.”

Cox stood up too, but he seemed more enthusiastic. He grabbed his phone and a file folder. “Just give me a name,” he said. “Just somewhere to start. I believe in you, Bailey. Our little station psychic.”

“That’s me.” I yanked the door open and was faced with the sight of a detective interviewing a crying woman. “Whoops. Sorry.”

I let the door float closed and turned to Jake. “What now, Detective Marner?”

Jake gave me a grin.

Oh, boy. I knew that look and it was not office friendly. I shot him a “behave” look back.

He went two doors down and pulled it open. “After you.”

Once we were all seated around a small round table in a room mostly filled with file cabinets, I asked, “Tell me what you can about the case.”

“Deceased female found behind a trap house. COD asphyxiation. Identified as Patricia Jackson, age forty-seven,” Cox said. “This one got under my skin because she’s got five kids and twelve grandkids and by all accounts was just working and taking care of her family. She was a home health aide and did food delivery as a side gig.” He pulled a map out of his folder and slapped it down. “She lived here.” He put

his thumb on the map. Was last seen here. She dropped off McDonald's at this house." He pointed again. "According to the data from the app. She sent a picture of the food on the porch to the customer via the app and they confirmed to us that they saw her drop it off and drive away heading west. At that point, she took another order request but never picked up the food at the restaurant."

"Rally's," Smith said. "So between here and here she disappeared and was suffocated with a plastic bag."

I cleared my throat. "Okay. I'm going to do something weird and please don't look at me and be all judgmental. I'm going to call Patricia forward and see if she's still with us."

"Is this like a seance?" Cox said, leaning back so far in his chair it made a screeching noise on the floor. "I'm a God-fearing man. I don't know about this."

"What the hell did you think it was?" Smith demanded. "You're the one who called her our little psychic."

"Yeah, but I thought psychics just look at a picture and images appear in their head. I don't know about calling on dead people." He nervously straightened his tie.

"It's not a seance. It's like...talking to a deceased relative when you're at their grave. It's conversational."

Cox pulled a cross on a necklace out from beneath his lavender dress shirt. He fingered it, clearly nervous. "Okay, go for it."

Smith gave him an amused look. "You are a paradox, dude."

"Don't 'dude' me." Cox rolled his eyes.

Jake was scrolling on his phone like he'd lost interest. Or maybe he was trying to prevent me from feeling nervous with three sets of eyes on me.

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Clearly, we were getting nowhere.

I turned my chair opposite the three of them. Then I cleared my throat, feeling massively self-conscious. It was worse than speech class in high school, which we had been required to take, which was cruel and unusual punishment. Who forces awkward teens to stand up and give speeches in order to get a high school diploma?

“Patricia Jackson?” I said. “Hi, I’m Bailey. If you’re with us, I’d like to speak to you.”

“If I hear a voice right now, I’m going to piss my pants,” Cox murmured.

“God, I hope that happens,” Smith quipped right back.

“Shh!” I commanded. Not because I needed to but because it felt good to reprimanded those two yahoos.

With power comes great responsibility and I was inclined to use it for petty revenge.

To my complete amazement they both went totally silent.

“Patricia, I’d love to speak to you,” I said in what I hoped was a gentle voice. “These nice detectives are doing their best to figure out what happened to you but they could use your help. Can you tell me who hurt you?”

Given that my only training was one book I’d ordered online on fostering your talents as a medium, I was winging it.

“Thomas did it.”

I jumped when I heard an unknown woman’s voice behind me. I turned and standing right between Cox and Smith and to the left of Jake was a woman wearing muddy jeans, a sweatshirt emblazoned with “Grandma” on it in plaid embroidery, and a blue plastic bag over her head.

That was unexpected.

I swallowed hard and tried not to look terrified.

But this was uncharted territory. Not only could I conjure up a spirit, she had a plastic bag over her head.

“What are you looking at?” Cox said, sitting straight up and glancing over each of us shoulders.

“Hi, Patricia,” I said, digging my fingernails into my thighs under the table to prevent myself from passing out or running screaming. “Who is Thomas?”

Smith frowned and glanced at Jake. “The ex?” she murmured. “He had an alibi. The girlfriend.”

“My ex-husband,” Patricia said. “He followed me, cornered me in the alley, then threw me behind that drug house.”

Still reeling from a disembodied voice coming out from beneath a grocery bag, I nodded rapidly. “So his girlfriend lied about his alibi?”

“She sure did. Because she’s afraid of him. Because of this.” She pointed to the bag.

“That’s understandable.”

“Where is she?” Cox whispered, his brown eyes wide.

“Right next to you.”

“Tell that fool—” Patricia started to say, but was cut off by Cox leaping out of his chair.

“Oh, shit!” Cox walked right into Patricia.

“Stop—” I tried to tell him but now he was waving his arms and his shoulders shook. Patricia instantly vanished.

“A cold breeze just went through me,” he said.

“You just walked into Patricia.”

“Oh, hell, no!” Cox made all kinds of noises and flapped his arms and brushed off his pants.

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Smith started cackling. “Tough guy murder cop freaking out over an alleged ghost. That was gold.”

He swore at her.

Jake wasn't reacting at all. He was flipping through the folder Cox had brought. “We need to bring the girlfriend in again. See if we can get her to talk.”

“Patricia said the girlfriend is afraid of Thomas. Because, you know, he puts bags over women's heads and suffocates them,” I said.

“It's been six months,” Smith said to Jake. “Maybe he has a warrant or he's in jail right now on unrelated charges. If we're lucky.”

“You're idea of luck and mine and two completely different things,” I said. “For the record.”

Debby Smith cracked a grin at me. “Oh, I'm sure. And I don't believe you see ghosts. For the record.”

“I do,” Cox said. He shoved his arm at her. “I still have goosebumps. Look at my arm hair.” He rolled up his shirtsleeve.

“I'm not looking at your arm hair, Jesus.”

I shrugged at Smith as I stood up. “I don't actually care if you believe me or not. For the record.”

She had tried to intimidate me every single time we'd encountered each other and I was done. Let's see how she would react to having a conversation with a corpse. She might not be so impressed with herself then.

Okay, so not technically a corpse.

But the ghost as the person appeared at the time of their death, so close enough.

We stared each other down, waiting for the other to either shoot first with another barb or back down.

She broke eye contact and reached for her phone.

Haha! I felt an unholy triumph over my minor victory.

Jake walked out with me and we got on the elevator. "Nice work, Trouble."

And here I thought the nickname he'd given me a while back had disappeared for good. Lucky me, it was back. "Thanks." The elevator started moving. "Patricia had the bag on her head when she was talking to me."

His eyebrows shot up. "Seriously? Babe. That's...disturbing."

I nodded. "Yes. Yes, it is. Being a spiritual medium is in fact disturbing."

He reached out and pulled me up against his chest and smoothed back my hair. "I'm sorry. You don't have to do that again if you don't want to."

"I want to help though," I said, words muffled by his tie. "It's just not always easy."

"Okay, well, we'll just take it one case at a time." He kissed the top of my head. "I

won't ever let anything hurt you, I swear to you."

I knew he wouldn't if he could at all prevent it. "I know." I lifted my head up for a kiss.

Unfortunately, the elevator door popped open right then and two detectives eyed us.

Ruining all the chutzpah I had just gained by winning my silent showdown with Detective Debby Smith, I leaped away from Jake like a middle school girl caught by her mother playing spin the bottle in a closet.

Jake started laughing. "What was that?"

I rushed off the elevator, a little embarrassed. Okay, a lot embarrassed. We were barely touching and I had jumped three feet in the air. "I have no idea," I admitted. "I'm just emotionally tapped out. I'm not sure if I was helpful or not and Detective Smith clearly doesn't like me."

Jake took my hand and pulled me to a stop in the lobby. "She's just a skeptic. You were very helpful." He leaned in close to me and murmured in my ear. "I have something for you."

I shivered. "Oh, that sounds promising. What time are you coming home?"

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“I have it for you now.” He brushed a kiss over my ear then pulled back and held up his phone. “Autopsy report. I sent it to your email.”

Well. Not what I was thinking. “You say the most romantic things.”

“I try.”

SEVEN

It was amazing what I could accomplish when I was actively avoiding something unpleasant.

What had been a vague conversation between me and Jake about low cost ways to update our hall bathroom in our new house suddenly became a trip to the big box hardware store and ordering peel and stick wallpaper and bath towels for overnight delivery.

All because I didn't want to read James Kwaitkowski's autopsy report that Jake had given me.

I wasn't exactly sure why. Maybe it had to do with talking to Patricia Jackson's bagged ghost earlier that day. Maybe because I was tired of the changing rules from the afterlife (like seriously, what the heck was a Class A spirit?) or the fact that James couldn't even see me.

But whatever the reason, every time I thought about opening my email my stomach tightened and I got restless.

So I was dressed in one of Jake's old T-shirts that had grease stains on it and a pair of my ancient leggings. I was dipping a rag into a bucket of hot water to wash the bathroom walls in preparation for paint and wallpaper.

I had no idea what I was doing.

But I was armed with creative avoidance, YouTube videos, and a vision of what our burgundy and pink bathroom could become.

Jake's first reaction to the square pink tiles, pink toilet and sink, and pink and ivory floor was "we'll have to rip this out at some point" but I had immediately protested. This was an original nineteen-fifties "Mamie Pink" bathroom, inspired by President Eisenhower's wife Mamie and her pink White House bathroom. The heavy burgundy paint in full gloss on the walls above it was competing with the soft warmth of the pink and the wallpaper border at the ceiling was a nineties paisley clash, but otherwise I loved the actual tile. There was a built-in toothbrush holder that deserved to exist another seventy years.

In my opinion, anyway, and I dared anyone to fight me on it.

I just had to clean eighteen miles of grout and remove the wallpaper border.

In my previous house I had painted my kitchen and tackled some basic home maintenance but otherwise I had bought it fully renovated.

In my impatience to take on the bathroom project with next to no planning and zero experience, I had taken a bold and risky move—I'd called my mother over.

She had wallpapered and stenciled every single inch of my massive childhood home in her energetic thirties. She had faux painted and lime washed and schmeared brick and rag rolled her way from room to room until there was nothing left.

Then she'd moved on to handcrafted dried floral arrangements and tiling a backsplash and using a peacock feather and gold metallic spray paint to turn the powder room into a teal and gold wonder. Finally, my father had said enough when she had tried to do a full floor-to-ceiling wall of chintz drapery in our windowless basement.

It was his one last bastion of floral-free safety and he put his foot down at chintz.

The no-florals-in-the-man-cave rule hadn't extended to the laundry room though and she'd done a mosaic tile on the utility tub in the shape of orchids.

I figured I was in good hands.

"We could paint a stencil pattern on this tile," she said to me as she used an old toothbrush and cleaner to scrub the grout. "Since you can't tear it out."

I was a little surprised. Lately, since her divorce from my father, she'd been in a minimalist era, with a very beige on beige condo and eighties inspired sherpa barrel chairs.

"Hmm," I said, noncommittally because my answer was no. But you didn't just say no to my mother unless you were prepared to be cross-examined.

"Did I mention Alyssa got married?" I asked my mom, striving for casual as I scrubbed the walls and worked up a sweat.

"Married? To who? Not that jackass the two of you went to high school with that she was seeing for awhile, I hope."

"No, fortunately it's not Michael." Alyssa had briefly dated her high school bully after he'd expressed shock and awe at her adult transformation from chubby teen to pin up siren. My mother was right—definitely a jackass.

“No, it’s Lawson Hill. He’s the sheriff in Ashtabula County. It was, uh, a very quick courtship and Jake said you might know him. I’m just curious if I should suggest Alyssa get a quickie divorce or if I should let her ride this out.”

Mom paused in her scrubbing and eyed the bristles of the toothbrush. She gingerly picked a loose bristle off and tossed it in the sink. “I’ve met him a few times. He’s normal enough, as far as normal goes. I mean, what is really normal anymore? Goodlooking, well spoken. She could definitely do worse. It’s a mess out there.”

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Oh, no. This was my mother's way of hinting I should ask about her own dating life. Because she was helping me scrub grout, I had to give her something, even though I really didn't want to hear about her love life. I wanted her to be happy, of course, I just didn't want details.

I dutifully asked though, "Really? No good prospects on the senior singles site?"

She made a face. "I'm not a senior single. Good Lord, Bailey."

I was pretty sure the definition of senior was over fifty-five, but I didn't want to point that out to her. Age is a number, I do believe that. Look at Grandma Burke. She was willing to try anything as long as it was on land. She wasn't a fan of water.

"I thought that's what the site was called. I wasn't suggesting you date a ninety-year-old."

"Speaking of ninety-year-olds, I don't know if you should just drop Grandma off at that senior center. Are there any medical professionals on site?"

Being criticized for giving my grandmother autonomy was better than discussing Mom's love life, but not by much. "No, but there is staff there."

"Hmm."

Geez. She "hmm'd" me right back. I wasn't sure I liked that.

"I am seeing someone," my mother said. The scrubbing increased. "It's new and he's

a little younger than me, but he's not a total loser, so it's a start."

"Not a total loser" was actually a ringing endorsement from my mother.

"That's good." I wasn't sure what else I was to say. But then I paused. "How much younger?"

She shrugged. "He's forty-nine."

I was a little surprised but I decided I didn't really care. That really wasn't that big of an age gap and I just wanted her to enjoy herself. "As long as you like him I think that's great, Mom."

"It will probably end in total disaster but whatever."

Ever the optimist, my mom.

I finished scrubbing the wall and opened my step ladder so I could peel off the wallpaper border. It was a stretch even with the ladder and that stuff was stuck on there more thoroughly than I was expecting. I had envisioned just popping the corner and peeling it off in one fell swoop.

I really was the optimist.

Nothing sort of a sandblaster was getting that paper off.

"Good news," Mom said, cheerfully.

I eyed her in suspicion.

That was a trick.

She never announced good news.

“What’s that?”

“Your sister and the kids are coming from Texas for a visit. Can they stay with you? I don’t really have room in my new condo.”

Alarm bells went off. “Mom, no. We just moved in. We’re not even unpacked. Besides, we have three bedrooms and Grandma lives with us. I’m excited to see them all but they can stay with Dad. He’s living in that big house by himself and Jen has practically a newborn.”

Mom had walked away from the four thousand square foot house I had grown up in last year when she also walked away from my father.

She gave me an annoyed look. “He doesn’t live alone,” she sniffed. “He moved that woman in with him.”

Oh, boy. That woman was the other woman he’d been cheating on my mom with. I instantly felt bad for her.

“When did that happen?” I wasn’t surprised he hadn’t told me. Dad liked to avoid anything that might be uncomfortable.

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“The minute Grandma moved in with you.”

“Oh. Wow.”

“She covered my teal and gold powder room walls with shiplap and a sign that says, ‘I don’t remember eating corn’.”

I blanched. “Oh my God. Mom. That’s...”

“Horrifying. I know.”

Potty humor in home decor is not my thing. Or my mom’s. Apparently Nancy liked a good poop joke and now I felt really bad for my mother and was on the verge of offering her anything she wanted, including hosting my sister and her gaggle of children.

I was not going to give in, I was not going to give in...

“When is Jen coming?” I asked, feeling myself already giving in.

“In three weeks.”

“She’s bringing all the kids?”

Stay strong, stay strong.

“You say that like she has twelve offspring.”

“She has five. That’s a lot.”

“Okay, it is kind of a lot of kids,” my mother acknowledged. “I had to stop at two.”

To be honest, I had often thought I had reason to be grateful she’d even had two. It much more tracked with her personality to have stopped after my sister, realizing motherhood wasn’t exactly a natural fit for her.

“Jen doesn’t have a career like you did. Do.”

“True. But of course she’s bringing all her kids. What would she do with them if she didn’t?” My mother looked at me like I was suggesting she leave half her kids home alone with Alexa as a babysitter.

“I thought maybe she would just bring the baby and leave the other kids at home with her husband. You know, their father.”

“She’s not going to pick some of her children to bring and not the others.”

“Is Doug coming too then?” That was seven humans. There was no way ten of us could fit in this house for more than three hours.

My mother shook her head. “No. He’s staying at home in Dallas because he has to work. She can’t leave the kids with him. Think, Bailey, good grief.”

Well, this was fun.

I decided I was ready to read the autopsy report once she left.

That couldn’t possibly be any more annoying than this.

“They can’t stay here. I’m sorry. Even without Doug, there are still six of them, Mom. They’re at max capacity for a minivan.”

“You don’t have a minivan.”

I tried to pick at the wallpaper border again and gave up when it stayed one hundred percent stuck. It was feeling like a metaphor for this conversation. I climbed down off of the ladder. “I don’t even have a guest room set up. I’m being totally serious. They can’t stay here. Jake is already sharing the house with Grandma.”

And Ryan. And any other ghost who decided to pop in for a visit.

Add a newborn and four rowdy kids to that, plus my chirpy sister, and it would be total chaos.

“Jake knew what he was getting into.”

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“Jake agreed to have Grandma move in with us. Not Jen and her entire basketball team of children.”

“I don’t trust your father to have them stay with him.”

“What is he going to do to them?” I asked. “You trusted him with us when we were kids.”

“No, I didn’t.”

I sighed. “I’ll take Jasmine. She’s almost seven. I can handle a semi-independent child as a temporary roommate. And only if Jake agrees it’s okay. This is his house too.”

“We’re negotiating over loved ones?” Mom asked, shooting me a look of disapproval.

When I didn’t say anything further, she shrugged. “Fine. Though you have to tell your sister.”

“Tell her what? That she’s staying in your condo?”

“No, with Dad.”

I hated to break this to my mother, but I was pretty sure Jen would be fine with it. It was Mom and Grandma Burke who had an issue with Dad, not the rest of us. Though I wasn’t sure Jen knew Nancy and her wooden signs had moved in.

Since I really didn't want to have this conversation and I clearly needed additional tools and online video instructions on removing stubborn wallpaper, I decided having my mother here did have an additional advantage. This woman knew autopsies.

"Hey, can I ask you to look at an autopsy report?" I asked her.

My mother stopped scrubbing tile and gave me a look that honestly made me shake a little in my sneakers. "Bailey Margaret Burke. Why on earth would you ask me that? Also, I need a verbal agreement from you that you'll talk to your sister."

Wow. She drove a hard bargain.

I had always said I wouldn't want to face my mother in a courtroom as a defendant and this confirmed it. Along with a million other moments in my life.

"I will tell Jen. I promise." I pulled my phone out of the pocket of my leggings and scrolled to find the email from Jake. "The janitor at the senior center died the other day and his autopsy just came in."

Now she was really studying me. "Why do you have that and why do you care about this person's death?"

I might not have thought this all the way through. Because I didn't exactly have a valid reason and I could not tell my mother I was a spiritual medium. She didn't believe in ghosts or psychics or astrology or tarot. "His ex-wife is concerned as to what happened because they share a minor child."

"Ah. She's worried it's suicide and she won't collect the life insurance?"

I nodded, walking right through the door she'd opened. "Exactly."

She set the toothbrush down and held her hand out. “Give it to me.”

I handed her the phone, feeling very much like I’d just been grounded for looking at my phone at the dinner table. That might have happened once or twelve times when I was in high school.

She pulled her reading glasses out of her bra and put them on.

As she’d aged, her bra had become something of a wonderland. She kept everything in there from her phone to tissues to her debit card. She felt confident no wayward mugger would dig in her cleavage now that she was “old.” Which was of course completely untrue and illogical, especially considering she got angry if anyone other than her even so much as suggested she’s no longer thirty-five. But it all made sense to her.

She scrolled and read. “He died of ethylene glycol poisoning? Good Lord, that’s a rough way to go.”

“How do you get that?”

“You drink a shitload of antifreeze.” She shoved her glasses back up onto her head and handed me my phone back. “That’s the cause of death. Manner of death is undetermined because the medical examiner doesn’t have enough information to determine if it’s suicide or homicide. But it’s probably suicide.”

“How do you know that?”

She shrugged. “Real life isn’t like TV dramas.”

“But aren’t there easier ways to, uh, end your life?”

“Depends on what you consider easy.”

“Like, less painful? Isn’t that a painful way to go?”

“Oh, definitely.”

“And would you really drink antifreeze and then go to work?” That sounded...very unpleasant. I wasn’t exactly sure what that kind of poisoning would do but I was picturing lots of vomiting.

“He was at work?” My mother washed her hands in the bathroom sink. “Hmm. That does seem odd. Unless he lives alone and wanted to make sure someone found him. No note or anything?”

“No note. They seemed to think he had a heart attack.”

“Nope. Maybe he was an alcoholic and just thought he’d take a little swig.” She dried her hands on a hand towel. “Are we done here? You’re just standing around.”

I eyed the bathroom and sighed in defeat. “I think this is an entire weekend project, not the hour I was hoping for.”

“You always want immediate gratification.”

“Who doesn’t?” I protested.

“I do. I love immediate gratification.” Ryan appeared behind my mother in the

doorway and pretended to look down her shirt. “Anything in there for me?”

I did jump a little—I can’t help it, it’s still startling—but otherwise I managed to ignore him enough that my mother didn’t suspect anything was wrong.

“It’s freezing in this bathroom,” she complained. “How old is this HVAC?”

“It’s from the eighties.” Though the cold chill she was feeling was Ryan’s ghost hovering right behind her.

“That’s older than you,” she pointed out, as if I wasn’t aware of what decade I was born in.

“I don’t know about this house,” she said, sounding dubious at best.

“That’s what I keep saying, Mrs. B!” Ryan nodded in agreement. “Total turd.”

“I like this house,” I said, because I loved this house and I was going to defend him no matter what questionable design choices were lingering. Everything had a time and place when it was the latest and greatest in home decor, including shower doors with etched swans. “I feel like people who bought houses for five dollars at one percent interest shouldn’t have opinions about our purchase.”

I was actually directing that at Ryan, not my mother. He’d bought a starter house for less than a hundred grand when interest rates were so good they made you want to slap your mama.

Fortunately, she didn’t take offense. She actually gave a begrudging laugh. “Fair enough. I know you’ll make this house beautiful. You have amazing taste.”

Normally, I would ride that high for days. A compliment from my mother was rare.

Which was why it also made me a little concerned that she might be dying of cancer or something.

She even went so far as to give my upper arm a squeeze, which was heavy level affection for her.

It felt like more bad news was about to slung my way and she was buttering me up.

But she just smiled and I let my shoulders relax. “Thanks, Mom.”

Honestly, everyone seemed so grumpy lately it was a nice change.

Or maybe it was me who was grumpy.

“Your mom is stone cold,” Ryan said as the three of us left the bathroom. “She just shrugged off the idea of some dude swigging antifreeze like it’s mouthwash. I dig that about her.”

I didn’t react.

“If I was still walking around in a meat suit, I’d ask your mom out. I hear she dates younger guys now.”

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I would not react, I would not react...

“Plus, she has great ti?—

“Ahhh!” I screamed to get him to shut up.

My mom jumped. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I saw a spider. A hairy one.” I glared at Ryan.

He just laughed.

EIGHT

“Mary doesn’t even know her lines,” Grandma sniffed, as we entered the auditorium.

Her friend was on stage opposite Clifford Jackson, who was waving his hands dramatically and holding a knife.

“Thisbe!”

His voice was as shaky as his stance. I was a little concerned he was going to drop that knife on his foot.

“I think she’s supposed to be dead in this scene,” I said as I walked with Grandma to the front of the room.

She was completely capable of the hike solo, but I was a hoverer. I couldn't help myself. I lived in fear of her getting a broken hip.

"She's half-dead anyway," Grandma said unkindly.

I shot her a look of censure. "That's harsh." Though not inaccurate. Mary was slumped over in a chair.

"She's the one who does her makeup like a funeral home director had his way with her corpse."

I didn't know what was going on with Grandma lately, but she was in her feisty phase. It concerned me a little. Wasn't that a sign of dementia? I made a mental note to do some online research on increased crankiness in seniors.

Glancing behind me repeatedly, I kept expecting James Kwaitkowski to pop up and start shouting, "Demon!" but Ryan wasn't with me so maybe I would be spared.

Once I had waved to Sara Murphy, who wasn't particularly chipper today, and deposited Grandma in the front row of the auditorium seating next to her friend, Anne, I went back into the entrance of the senior center.

Given my lack of fashion lately, I had dressed with extra care that morning, leaning into the librarian academic trend. I had on a long plaid skirt, a blouse with a bow, and very smart and modestly sexy Mary Jane platform heels. It was an adorable look, let's be honest, but the shoes were loud. The click-click of my heels was echoing down the institutional-type hallway to the janitor's closet. It took me opening three random doors before I found one that was locked, which seemed like a good bet.

I pulled a pin out of my hair and did fast work with the lock. Over the past few months, I'd become something of an expert on picking locks after a hairy incident

where I'd been trapped in a hoarder's dining room and maybe gone a place or two I shouldn't have on other occasions. Legally speaking.

I didn't think this would be illegal. No one could say with any certainty that the door had been locked and it was a public place. I could argue I'd thought it was the restroom or the classroom where they taught GED classes to adults a couple of nights a week. I wasn't really worried about being caught by an instructor, a senior, or the janitorial replacement.

My biggest fear was that somehow Jake had sniffed out that my curiosity was in overdrive after the autopsy report and would magically know I was snooping around and he'd pop up from behind a broom.

I wasn't sure why I hadn't told him my concerns about James's death given that he had offered to give me the report and done so quickly, but it was probably because he was solidly in the let-the-police-handle-it camp and I was on the side of nobody-has-time-for that.

I'd done some quick research of antifreeze—let's hope no one ever looked at my browser history—and it said it could taste sweet, though manufacturers sometimes added chemicals to it to make it taste less desirable, presumably to prevent children from accidentally drinking it.

But mixed with something? It seemed possible that you could ingest a fatal amount if it was in something that would mask any bitterness.

Slipping inside the janitor's closet, I closed the door but not fully, because if it locked from the inside, I didn't trust myself not to panic.

It only took me three minutes of running my eyes over the shelves to discover a styrofoam cup resting on a higher shelf, with a straw stuck in it. I undid the bow on

my blouse and used the long loose ends to reach up and pull down the cup to take a look at it. I sniffed above the straw. Definitely something sweet.

The liquid dried on the straw was sticky and blue. I rattled the cup. Just liquid. But I suspected given the gas station name on the cup it was originally a slushie that had melted.

It would be an easy way to hide antifreeze in a sugary blue icy drink.

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Setting it back, I took a picture of it with my phone and wrinkled my nose. It wasn't like I could go to the gas station and demand to see video footage of the day James died.

It was a conundrum.

Opening the door and stepping back out into the hallway, I came face to face with James. Only he walked right through me into the closet, muttering to himself.

A shiver rolled over me and I shook like a wet dog.

There was no getting used to that. Ever.

But as I tossed my hair back and tied my bow there was a loud scream from the auditorium, followed by the screech of chairs shifting.

"Call 911! Someone call 911!"

I immediately started running, swiping on my phone to wake it up. I tried to do facial recognition but because I was jogging in heels I was bouncing around too much and it couldn't recognize my face.

"Dang it!" I almost paused to unlock my phone but then I realized I wouldn't know what to tell them on the call anyway, so I needed to see what was going on.

There was mass chaos in front of the stage. The screaming was coming from Sara Murphy who was holding the prop knife in her hand and jumping up and down with

ear-splitting shrieks. Prop blood was flying off the knife in her hand.

I slowed down, thinking this was part of the production.

But then I realized everyone else was waving their hands, talking loudly, shuffling walkers to get closer to the front.

Anne was on her phone, barking orders to the dispatcher. “I don’t know what happened but there is a man down. I repeat, man down! Send an ambulance now, young lady.”

I half-expected her to add a “do you know who I am?” to the end of that.

“What’s going on?” I asked Grandma, who was just sitting in her seat like there wasn’t a full-blown ruckus occurring all around her.

“Sara Murphy stabbed Clifford.”

“What?” My head whipped around and sure enough, Clifford was face down on the floor, blood trickling out from under his chest.

“It’s a prop knife!” Sara screamed, still hopping from one foot to the other. “It’s not supposed to penetrate skin! Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.”

“Zip it, girl,” Anne ordered, taking her phone away from her mouth to yell at Sara.

There were several elderly play participants attempting to kneel beside Clifford to render aid, but replacement knees and poor flexibility were deterrents. I flew to Clifford’s side, squatted down, and shook him gently.

“Clifford, can you hear me?”

He gave a low moan.

Relieved he was still alive, I added my own, “Oh my God” to the melee.

“Someone help Mary!” a shaky voice yelled out.

I was surprised I heard it over Sara’s incessant screaming.

As I attempted to roll Clifford over, I glanced back toward the stage and saw that Mary had slid off of her chair and was in a puddle on the floor. I couldn’t tell if she was in shock or having a medical emergency. Clifford was her long-time boyfriend so I imagine seeing him stabbed was quite a shock.

“Is the ambulance coming?” I asked Anne.

She gave me a thumbs-up.

Sweating from the effort of trying to tip Clifford, I blew my hair out of my eyes and shouted to Sara, “Shut up and check on Mary!”

Her mouth clapped shut. She stared at me, glassy-eyed. “What?” she asked.

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Miraculously, now her voice was a mere whisper. Her cheeks were devoid of all color and she swayed a little, staring down at the knife in her hand.

“There’s blood on my hand,” she managed, right before her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell to the gym floor.

That was helpful. Not.

Understandable, but still not helpful.

I finally got Clifford rolled onto his back and I saw there was a puncture wound in his right flank, blood spreading across his denim button-up shirt. I yanked his shirttail out of his pants and pressed a wad of fabric onto the wound.

“You’re going to be okay, Clifford,” I assured him.

He nodded. “I’ve had worse days,” he said, his voice gravelly.

“I’d hate to see that day.” I glanced toward the door, willing the EMTs to appear as I pressed with all my strength.

“Korea. Two years. Took shrapnel to the privates.”

Oh, Lord. “That is a bad day.”

“Tell Mary not to worry,” he said. “Can’t kill this old bird.”

I nodded so hard my teeth almost rattled. A glance over showed that Mary looked like she was still unconscious.

Sara had come around and was groaning on the floor, Anne waving a knit hat over her face.

Another woman was holding Mary's hand and praying over her.

Fortunately, the doors slammed open and the cavalry arrived in the form of two young and buff paramedics. For a second, it seemed like they were in slow motion, hair flowing, bags swinging. If a soundtrack started pumping out a party anthem, I wouldn't have been surprised.

I frantically waved my arms toward them. "Over here!"

"Help has arrived," I told Clifford.

I wanted to call Jake and tell him we needed the cops too but I didn't dare release the pressure on Clifford's wound. Besides, he had just looked over and realized that Mary wasn't moving.

"Tell them to see what's wrong with Mary first," he said. "I'm fine."

"I don't think you're fine. But there are two of them so they can divide and conquer."

He coughed and waved that off. "Mary first."

The praying had grown softer from the woman beside Mary.

I suddenly had a very bad feeling.

It seemed to roll over me like a dark shudder, rushing down my spine and oozing around to settle into my gut. I was scared to look over there and instead focused on Clifford's side. The bleeding had saturated the tail of his shirt but it seemed like it had slowed significantly.

A paramedic dropped to his knees beside me. "What happened?"

"I got stabbed," Clifford said baldly. "It was an accident. It was supposed to be a prop knife but it sank right in like my gut was butter. How's my girl?"

The paramedic didn't respond and instead told me, "You can release that."

Thank God.

I let go and watched him take over, his gloved hand removing the shirt from the wound.

Clifford was straining to see Mary.

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I took up with a rush of lightheadedness, hands trembling. There was blood all over them. Sara was leaning against a chair, still moaning.

“I’m going to throw up,” she said. “I need a bucket.”

“You need a smack upside the head,” Anne told her, plopping down in the chair next to Grandma with a heavy sigh. She picked up her purse and started digging into it.

I was too afraid to glance over at Mary so I sat down on Grandma’s other side. “Do you have a wet wipe?” I asked her.

She also started digging in her purse.

Anne produced a stick of gum and handed it to Sara. “Chew this. You need a jolt of sugar.”

Grandma yanked a packet of wipes out of her purse and ripped one out for me. My stomach was in my throat as I wiped my hands clean.

“I think Mary’s dead,” Anne murmured. “She looks gray.” She gave herself the sign of the cross.

Grandma did the same.

Biting my lip, I steeled my nerves and looked over at Mary. The EMT was giving her chest compressions but it didn’t look good.

That was confirmed when I realized that Mary's ghost was standing next to her body, looking very confused. Rightly so.

I stood up and walked as close as I could without interfering, still wiping my hands. "Mary?" I said softly, staring down at the floor so no one would question what I was doing.

Her ghost turned sharply in my direction. "Bailey? What's going on?"

I took a deep breath. "Just close your eyes and go to the light, Mary." I wasn't sure if that's how it worked but I couldn't stand the idea of her being stuck as a ghost when it was clearly an accident. A heart attack or stroke. I wanted her to find peace.

When I looked up, her ghost was gone.

Relieved, I saw that Clifford was being lifted onto a gurney and he was protesting loudly that he wanted to see Mary.

I felt horrible for him.

"What happened?" I asked Sara, who had managed to drag herself onto a chair.

"I have no idea. I was showing Clifford how I wanted him to really put some oomph into stabbing himself and the knife actually went in." She clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh God."

She turned and promptly threw up all over the floor.

"It's a shame the janitor died," Anne said, prosaically. "This place is a mess."

I guess when you're in your eighties, you get really damn practical.

“Do you think this will delay Opening Night?” Grandma asked her.

With that, I decided to stand up and go scrub the hell out of my hands, even though the wipe had gotten most of the blood off.

I kind of wanted to scrub this whole day off.

NINE

“How was play practice?” Jake asked, dipping a spoon in his sauce to taste it as we entered the kitchen from the attached garage.

The whole house smelled like tomatoes and basil and garlic and it was exactly what I needed.

“Should you tell him or should I?” Grandma asked me, setting her enormous purse down on the kitchen table.

It was a pet peeve of mine that she did that. Handbags and purses get rested on the floor sometimes if there’s nowhere to hang them, including bathroom stalls. It grossed me out. But all I could do was quickly move it to the hooks by the garage entrance door and spritz the table with cleaning spray under the guise of getting it ready to set the table.

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“You can tell him.” I was feeling a little deflated and weird about basically seeing Mary’s soul leave her body. That doesn’t happen every day, nor should it.

“Tell me what?”

“Mary is dead and Clifford got stabbed. So we need a new Thisbe for the play. I told Sara we needed an understudy but she didn’t listen.” Grandma settled down onto a kitchen chair.

Jake added more salt to his sauce and glanced over at me. “We’re talking metaphorically, right? Like that’s part of the play?”

“Nope. Clifford got stabbed by Sara Murphy and it made Mary have a heart attack and drop dead. Clifford is fine though.”

“Someone gotstabbedat the senior center? What the f—” Jake started to say but Grandma cut him off.

“Don’t you use that kind of language, young man.”

Apparently, snarking about Mary’s makeup was okay but swearing wasn’t. Grandma’s moral standards had some gray areas.

Jake clapped his mouth shut. “Sorry. But I don’t understand how that happened. Or honestly, what happened.”

“I was in the hallway so I didn’t see it happen but from what I was told, Sara thought

the knife was a prop knife and she was demonstrating how Clifford could kill himself on stage as part of the play with real gusto. Only it either wasn't a prop knife or even prop knives aren't meant to be so enthusiastically jabbed into someone's stomach."

"Clifford's got a beer gut, so I think that saved him," Grandma said. "The knife couldn't get through all that fat to hit anything important."

"Saved by beer," Jake said, shaking his head. "That's a first. Is he going to be okay?"

"It seemed like it, but he was distraught about Mary, obviously." I went to the sink to wash my hands yet again. It was then that I noticed there was blood on the sleeve of my blouse. I blanched. So much for my cute outfit.

"Bailey was a real trooper," Grandma said. "She jumped right in and put pressure on Clifford's wound. Sara Murphy passed out and then threw up. She was totally useless."

"Well, she was in shock," I said, running water under my bloody cuff. "She accidentally stabbed Clifford."

Grandma made a "pff" sound. "She'll make a lousy wife and mother if she can't handle a little blood."

"There's blood in marriage?" Jake asked, looking amused by that thought. He dropped his spoon into the sink.

The new old house had a dishwasher but I was starting to notice he always did that. He put dirty dishes and cutlery into the sink instead of directly into the dishwasher, which meant later he had to put up disgusting wet dirty dishes and transfer them to the dishwasher. It made no sense to me. But living with another person was full of little puzzles like that. Maybe it was how you were raised. Though Mrs. Marner

seemed very anti dishes-in-the-sink.

“What do you know about marriage?” Grandma asked Jake, sounding offended that he was amused.

“Nothing, that’s why I’m asking.”

Grandma sniffed. “Just take your garlic bread out of the oven. It smells like it’s burning.”

It didn’t. She was just miffed.

“I feel terrible for Mary’s family. Poor Clifford. Stabbed and then had to see his girlfriend die a few feet away from him.”

Grandma nodded. “Terrible. I hope Sara can pull it together for practice tomorrow. We need to reassign the roles.”

That didn’t sound overly sympathetic.

Jake and I exchanged a glance. “Hey, is Sara really the director because she has to do community service?” I asked Grandma.

“I have no idea.”

“Is that a thing?” I asked Jake. “Teaching seniors as restitution for a crime.”

“No. That is not a thing.”

“So why would she say that?” I mused.

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“Are you sure that’s what she said?” Grandma asked. “Maybe she just meant volunteer hours to look good on a school application or a resume.”

“Hmm. That could be.” Now I was doubting the actual wording Sara had used. “At any rate, I don’t feel like she could survive jail. She was more squeamish than me.”

“You’re not squeamish at all,” Grandma said. “Who says you’re squeamish?”

I was kind of squeamish. At least when it came to blood. “I don’t like blood.”

“No one likes blood but sociopaths,” Jake commented. “Some of us just get used to it.” He fished a few strands of pasta out of boiling water. “Here, taste these and see if they’re ready.”

He shoved the noodles into my mouth before I was ready so I was slurping and chewing. I tried to talk around them. “So you don’t think Sara meant to stab Clifford, do you?”

“I have no idea,” Jake said. “Why would she stab an old man and then freak out about it? Did anyone secure the scene and the knife?”

I looked over at Grandma as I swallowed. “Did you see what happened to the knife?”

“Anne washed it and put it in the prop box. That cop said she could.”

“Two patrolmen showed up,” I told Jake. “No detectives.”

He shrugged. “Suburban cops. They must have figured it was an accident. There were what, thirty witnesses that it was an accident?”

Something about the whole thing didn’t sit right with me. “What if someone changed out a prop knife for a real knife?”

“Now you’re just looking for murder,” Jake said. “Is the pasta good?”

I nodded. “It’s good. And I’m not looking for murder. But it’s just weird. Now does a prop knife malfunction like that? I think I should talk to Sara.”

No one said anything. I took that as they agreed that it was a brilliant idea. “I need to go change and use stain stick on this blouse. Blood is hard to get out.”

“It’s a real bitch,” Grandma agreed. “Soak it with hydrogen peroxide.”

Jake’s eyebrows went up. I knew what he was thinking. Grandma was allowed to swear but he wasn’t? Maybe there were just gradations to cursing.

I kissed his cheek. “Be right back, love you.”

“Love you too. Hey, what do you want to do for your birthday?”

I wrinkled my nose. “No surprises. That’s what I want.”

The corner of his mouth turned up. “Can’t put a bow on that.”

My life was already full of surprises. I didn’t need my friends and family popping out from behind furniture too.

“All I want is a very cute and chic cupcake.”

“What the hell is a chic cupcake?”

“Not one from the grocery store. Don’t worry, you’ll figure it out!” I went down the hall unbuttoning my top as I went.

Two days later I stared at Sara Murphy across a nicked up wooden table at a coffee shop that everyone seemed to love but me. The bathroom was always filthy, the tables had old crumbs collecting dust between the wooden slats of the farmhouse tables, and the baristas always acted like they were doing you a favor by fixing the drink you paid eight dollars for.

They were coasting on the fact that they were fair trade and people wanted to turn up for that. I wanted to turn up for that as well, but with clean tables and staff that could crack a smile once in a while.

It didn’t seem like a Sara Murphy coffee shop. She seemed like a Starbucks kind of girl with her hair extensions and her workout clothes.

“How are you doing?” I asked her, sympathetically.

“I’m a mess,” she said, raising her coffee mug to her full lips. “A total mess.”

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Definitely not physically. She had on contouring and false eyelashes at nine a.m. I was going to assume she meant emotionally. “It was such a shock. What do you think happened?”

“I think someone swapped out the knives,” she said without hesitation. “But that fat old cop said I was just being hysterical. That I “misunderstood” what a prop knife means.” She jabbed herself in the chest. “I did theater for a decade! I did theater in New York City! I know a prop knife from a kitchen knife.” Then she made a face. “I just didn’t look that closely because I’m the one who ordered the props and it was totally a collapsible knife in the box when I took it to the senior center last week. I just grabbed it out of Clifford’s hand to demonstrate, assuming it was the right knife. I never dreamed it would have been switched out.”

“That was my theory too,” I said.

“No one listens to women,” she muttered. “Especially women in their twenties. They look at us and just see a pair of boobs.”

Maybe her boobs. Not mine. But I definitely understood where she was coming from.

“Why would someone do that?”

“There’s a killer loose in the senior center! Who knows why? But that janitor died too.” She picked off a piece of her vegan and gluten free doughnut and shook her head. “I’m not going back there. I might be next.”

“Don’t you have to go for your community service?” I lifted my own coffee mug and

took a sip. I had a vegan and gluten free doughnut as well and it was quite tasty, with a sugar glaze.

“That’s just something my parents said I have to do if I want to live with them for free. Court ordered, because my parents are literally sitting in judgement of me.”

While it was good to know Sara Murphy hadn’t morphed into a criminal, I was now wondering why I was spending my precious pre-work time sitting here with her.

Sara shook her head. “Boomers. My parents act like I’m wasting all my money on coffee and avocado toast but rent is sky high right now. Didn’t you just buy a house? It’s ridiculous out there, isn’t it? And this is Cleveland. Like how does anyone in L.A. or Seattle or New York even exist? Next thing you know we’ll have to pay for water.”

We already did pay for water, both to drink and in our houses and apartments, but I didn’t think it would help to point that out. “It is insane right now. We had to buy an outdated house. We can’t afford a new build.”

I don’t know why I felt like I had to downplay our financial status. Must have been a Midwestern thing. We can’t take a compliment on an outfit without mentioning we got it on sale either.

“I can’t even afford life. But I can’t afford to die either so I can’t go back to the senior center. Hey, what happens to your student loans when you die?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have any loans. I went to community college.” Again, I almost sounded like I was apologizing for not having debt. I needed to work on that.

“So I guess you’re the director of the play now,” Sara said, popping another bite in her mouth.

I almost choked on my coffee. “What?”

“Yeah. I can’t do it, so that leaves you.”

“Why me? I don’t have any theater experience. I didn’t even understand Shakespeare in high school. I still don’t.”

Also, why is it she couldn’t die but she was willing to let me suffer a brutal fate?

“You don’t want to let them down, do you? They’ve been working really hard.”

“I’ll have to think about it. They might not even want to do it, considering what happened to Mary. There is no Thisbe.”

“Please. All those women hated Mary for being the one to snag Clifford.”

We both realized what she said at the exact same time.

“Oh my God!” Sara leaned forward and hissed at me. “Do you think one of them switched the knives to kill Clifford because he didn’t pick them?” She lifted up her doughnut. “Women competing for a man is a tale as old as time.”

“That is true. But wouldn’t they want to kill Mary, not Clifford?”

“Hmm. Good point. Let’s noodle on this. I have to go to pilates now. I’ll text you later.” She stood up, leaving her dishes on the table and said, “Kisses, bye!”

Were Sara Murphy and I best friends now?

Maybe. I had to admit, she was shockingly fun to discuss potential murder with.

I stood up, gathered up all of our plates and mugs and put them in the serving tub so that I didn't get stink eye from the staff. Lost in thought, I stepped outside.

“Hey! You!”

I turned around to see who was yelling at who and realized immediately they were yelling at me.

It was the guy from Danny O’s with the fresh tattoo.

I jumped and started walking in the opposite direction.

“Don’t walk away from me!”

I didn’t.

Instead, I ran.

TEN

Running away would have been a great strategy except my car was in the opposite direction.

Science said we had a fight or flight response in stressful situations.

It was safe to say that my body always reacted with flight.

But it also had me turning off the main road and running down a side street of residential homes that was probably forty houses long. It was the road to nowhere and I’d panicked and taken it.

I didn't have to look behind me to know the guy was still following me.

He made it very clear by yelling, "Hey, stop! You're not going to get away with this."

His voice sounded harsh and irritated.

Why was he annoyed? I was the one being forced to run down the sidewalk in kitten heels. I cut down someone's driveway, hoping they had already left for work as I went straight into their backyard.

Unfortunately, they had a fence blocking access to the yard abutting theirs.

Fortunately, it was chain link.

Taking a deep breath, I stuck my foot into the links and hauled myself up.

"Are you serious?" the guy yelled from the bottom of the driveway. "You're trespassing!"

The man chasing me was worried about trespassing? Apparently, he was very layered. "I am not. I'm looking for my cat," I said, in case the homeowner was listening or had a camera pointed at their backyard. "Come help me."

"What? No way. I have charges on me right now. I can't be on someone's property."

"Good to know." Especially since I was stuck. I had one leg over and one leg was left behind. I couldn't sit on the fence because of the rust and some random spiked bits sticking up and I couldn't seem to figure out how to get the lingering leg over and where it needed to be.

"Do you need help?" he asked.

Thank goodness I was wearing pants. This would be downright dangerous in a skirt. I debated. The tattooed bad guy boyfriend of the aggressive blonde seemed genuinely concerned I might injure myself. Yet at the same time, he was the one chasing me in the first place.

Right? Hewaschasing me. I think.

Maybe not.

Huh. That would be embarrassing if he wasn't.

“I thought you can't come on someone's property.”

“I will if you're stuck. I can't just leave you hanging like that.”

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Was he being chivalrous or trying to lull me into complacency?

Maybe I was just paranoid.

“I need help. Just give me a hand.”

He was a big man and the closer he got the more I regretted my decision. Or really, all of my decisions.

I decided it was best to continue with the original plan of going into the yard behind me, putting a fence between us. Not that it would stop him if he wanted to attack me, but it would give me a few precious seconds to run and use my phone to call for help.

“Look,” he said, as he offered me his hand so I could balance better on the fence. “I don’t know who you are or what you think you’re doing, but it was really uncool of you to tell Joy that James was dead.”

James’s ex-wife/girlfriend’s name was Joy? Talk about an oxymoron.

Then again, in all the bar photos she had looked plenty happy. She just wasn’t happy with me. Or Alyssa.

“I thought she knew. I didn’t mean to be the one to deliver bad news.” I was huffing and puffing a little as I dropped down over the opposite side of the fence, squeezing the guy’s hand for support harder than I would have liked to.

That was a very me thing to have to do—lean on my attacker for support.

I looked up at the guy as I released his hand. “You knew, didn’t you? I mean, the date is tattooed on your arm.”

“What are you talking about?”

Wait. Maybe that was the other guy. Now I wasn’t even sure which scary man belonged to which scary woman. “Who is your girlfriend?”

“Joy.”

So that meant he wasn’t the guy with the tattoo. Because he belonged to Mean Blonde.

But...

“I thought Joy was with James.” I brushed off my butt and checked my crossbody bag to make sure it was still zipped. It was, so I was confident my phone was where it should be, tucked inside.

“She is. Was. She’s cheating on him with me. Was.” He rubbed his beard. “Look, it’s complicated. Because of the kid and their history and...” He frowned. “I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“You really don’t. And I don’t have to explain to you either.”

“Just leave Joy alone.”

“I have no intention of ever seeing Joy again. But ask your friend about his tattoo.”

With that, I backed up and promptly tripped over a tree root. I didn’t fall but I did stumble and my great parting statement was ruined. At least in my mind. This guy

probably wasn't the least bit interested in my mysterious vibe I was trying to pull off.

"This is messed up," he muttered.

"Tell me about it." I backed up. "Hey, do you like slushies? Do you and James go for slushies together?"

"What?" He looked at me blankly. "Is that some kind of kink? Or a drug nickname I don't know about?"

"No. I mean slushies." I made a gesture like I was sipping from a straw but then I realized that could be misinterpreted.

His face turned red. He makes a growling sound.

Definitely misinterpreted.

"Bye!" I took off down the driveway, clinging to the fence line in case the homeowner had a security camera.

By the time I got back to my car, glancing over my shoulder repeatedly, I was out of breath. The man didn't come over the fence after me and he hasn't even tried to cut me off back at the coffee shop where we started. I didn't even know what that meant.

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Hopefully it meant he was not a killer, just somehow caught up in Joy and James's domestic drama.

It had to be exhausting living in that kind of relationship turmoil. I wasn't cut out for that. I liked my very stable and ordinary relationship.

Unlike Ryan when he had been alive.

I wondered if I had accidentally conjured him, because the second that thought popped into my head, he appeared in the passenger seat of my car.

"Hey, Red. Running late?"

"Yes." I was radiating anxiety and muttering about the fact that no one would let me pull out into traffic. "Why won't anyone let me out? So rude."

"No one has to let you pull out. It's active traffic. Just wait until there's a gap."

"I need to be at work in six minutes. I shouldn't have met up with Sara this morning."

"Sara? Is that the hot but crazy one?"

"I don't think she's crazy. Just a little stressed out." I strained my neck to see how many cars were coming down the road. "Come on, come on."

"You'd know something about stress. Or creating stress that doesn't need to exist."

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have bills to pay.” There was finally a gap so I turned the wheel and hit the gas.

Ryan mimed holding out for dear life. “Slow down there, Nascar.”

“Haha, you’re so funny. But seriously, Sara Murphy is just going through a transition. She had to leave New York because she ran out of money and she’s living with her parents. That’s stressful.”

“I honestly don’t care about Sara Murphy.”

I turned left on a side street, hoping to avoid hitting red lights on my way to work. I picked the street that had a school on it, so suddenly I was down to twenty miles an hour and stuck in a carpool line.

I said something I wasn’t proud of.

“I don’t really like you having a job,” Ryan said. “You’re much more tense now and that’s saying a lot.”

“One, I’ve always had a job. I just had more flexibility before. Two, you’re mean.”

Ryan laughed.

“Sara wants me to direct the play at the senior center.”

“That sounds boring.”

“It sounds stressful.”

“You don’t need more stress.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.”

“You’re really not very emotionally capable of handling much.”

I shot a glare at him.

“Eyes on the road! There’s kids everywhere!”

He startled me so much, I slammed on my brakes automatically. “Where?”

Both of our heads jerked forward when the car suddenly stopped. The car behind me tapped my bumper.

Well, that was just great.

“Get out and see if there’s any damage,” I told Ryan.

I kept my head resolutely forward, not wanting to get into a confrontation with a Karen when I was already late for work.

“Now I’m your errand boy?” he asked.

But he did poof out of the car and reappeared a few seconds later. “There’s no damage. Not even a scratch.”

“Good. Then I’m going to pretend it didn’t happen.”

“She was looking at her phone so I’m not sure she even noticed.”

“That seems safe.” I rolled my eyes.

Once I was finally out of the log jam of grade school kids, while listening to Ryan complain that his parents never once drove him to school, I was five minutes late to work, which meant I only had ten minutes before my first client appointment.

Ryan was strolling next to me, talking the entire time.

“Hi,” I said to my boss, Claudia. “Sorry I’m late. I went down a street that has a school zone in it, not thinking.”

Claudia just smiled, briefly glancing up from her phone. “No worries. You ready for the Fishers?”

Ryan was standing behind Claudia looking down at her phone. “She’s reading TMZ,” he told me.

“Yes, yes, I am,” I said with assurance. “New kitchen. It’s going to be amazing. I’m going to go pull their samples now.”

“Great. Let me know if you need anything. We have a team meeting at two. It should be on your calendar.”

“Excellent. I’ll be there.” I rolled my eyes at myself as I walked away. “You’re very distracting,” I murmured to Ryan.

“What’s that?” Claudia asked.

“Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself.”

As I went into the showroom, I opened my notes on my phone and started pulling out samples based on the Fishers questionnaire they had filled out. “Have you seen James?” I asked Ryan as I worked.

“No. I don’t go anywhere without you. I’m either with you and I’m there.” He pointed vaguely in the direction of up.

Whatever that meant. “I thought maybe he was there too, in one of your afterlife classes or something.”

Ryan made death sound like community college and working for minimum wage all wrapped up in one. He didn’t paint a pretty picture. But he hadn’t been granted access

to the upper level yet because he wasn't finished doing whatever it was he was supposed to do, which was always vague and ever changing.

I thought it was reasonable to assume James might be hanging around with him, a couple of afterlife underachievers.

Ryan didn't say anything. He just wandered around one of the showroom kitchens, rubbing his jaw. He looked pensive.

I didn't like his vibe. I had a feeling he was withholding information from me.

He'd been weird ever since James had shown up.

"Why are you gracing me with your presence today then?" I asked. "If you don't know anything about James?"

I was in dangerous territory talking to him at work. I ran the risk of looking like I had an invisible friend at twenty-eight, which would cast doubts on my professionalism.

"I don't think I should tell you."

Way to drive me insane. "You have to tell me."

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“There are people coming in,” he said.

Great. Now I was going to have Ryan’s caginess in the back of my mind throughout this whole appointment.

“We’re not done with this conversation,” I hissed. “Meet me at my house at four.”

Jake wouldn’t be home yet and Grandma would be napping.

This was what my life had come to—talking to a dead guy in secret when my boyfriend was at work and my grandmother was sleeping.

Maybe I was a little dull.

Then again, I’d spent the morning hopping a fence.

ELEVEN

I spent the entire day worrying over what Ryan was thinking or doing or not doing.

So much so that I showed the Fishers bespoke inlay cabinets that were out of their price range and of course they fell in love with them. It was a major screw up. It’s like showing a bride a wedding gown thousands of dollars over her budget and then nothing in her price range will ever make her happy ever again.

Claudia wasn’t exactly happy with me and I felt terrible.

It left me stressed and staring at Ryan with my hand on my hip. I was shocked that he actually showed up at the appointed time since I appointed it and he didn't like to be told what to do.

"What is going on?" I asked Ryan, who had an indecipherable look on his face as we stood in my kitchen. "You need to tell me."

"See, that's where you're wrong because if I tell you you'll be mad at me for telling you."

That was not improving my mood.

"I'm getting mad at you for not telling me."

"Then this is a lose-lose situation because I'm telling you, you'll be mad if I tell you. More than if I don't tell you."

"Just tell me!"

Ryan sighed. "I saw Marner hiding an engagement ring."

That brought my irritation to a screeching halt. "What?"

"And before you get all pissy about me hanging around when I'm not supposed to be, it wasn't my fault. I was waiting for you to get home yesterday and he was supposed to be at work and...I saw the ring."

"Oh my God," I breathed, excited and thrilled and suddenly nervous. "You know what this means, right?"

"Uh...I think so? He's going to ask you to marry him. That seems kind of obvious."

“No! It means that I have to look cute every single minute from now until P Day.”

“What the hell is P Day?”

“Proposal Day. It could happen at any time so I have to be ready 24/7. Nails done, hair can’t be frizzy.” I glanced down at my outfit. “I can’t wear yoga pants or sweats ever again! I’m not the kind of girl who can handle getting proposed to while wearing workout clothes when I don’t even workout!”

“What the hell are you even talking about? You sound nuts. See, this is why I didn’t want to tell you.”

“Oh my God, he’s not going to propose on my birthday, is he? I don’t want that. That doesn’t feel special to me. It’s my birthday, not the day I got engaged. Get engaged. Did he say when he’s doing it?”

“Out loud to himself in an empty room? No. Of course not.”

My head was spinning. Another thought occurred to me. “Is it a good ring? Something I would like?”

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“I have no idea if you would like it. It’s a ring. A diamond. Looked expensive.”

“Where is it? Where did Jake hide it?” I half wanted to see it, half didn’t. I didn’t want to spoil the surprise but I was also dying of curiosity. And slightly concerned that I might not like it. Jake was a fan of leg lamps and sports blankets and I was super picky when it came to anything related to fashion. If I didn’t like it, my face would be too loud during the proposal. I had been told I have the world’s worst poker face.

Worry started to mix with excitement and I yanked open the nearest kitchen drawer. “In here?”

The problem with an old kitchen was there was nothing to stop the drawer. When I yanked it ferociously it came all the way out and hit the floor, the drawer front popping off and splintering as spatulas and a potato masher went flying.

Ryan backed away from me and held his hands out. “Okay, let’s take it down a notch.”

It wasn’t like anything could hurt him. But I did stare at the damaged drawer. “Whoops.”

“Why are you freaking out? Is this because you don’t want Marner to propose to you?”

I picked the drawer up and shoved it back in place. “What? No, of course not. I mean, yes, I want him to propose to me. One hundred percent I want to marry him. That’s

why I'm freaking out. This is a big deal. This is exciting. I want to react right when he does and now I know and I'm scared I'm going to be weird."

My heart was racing in the best way possible.

Ryan didn't respond and after I scooped up a handful of utensils and tossed them in the sink to wash I eyed him. He looked troubled. Morose. Irritated. A sneaking suspicion turned into a full blown belief.

"You don't want him to propose to me," I said, astonished.

"You guys have been dating for five minutes," he said, avoiding directly answering me. "Don't you think you're rushing this?"

I stared at him. "No. I don't. We've been living together for months. We just bought a house together. I think it's pretty obvious our intention is to be together forever."

"Hmm. It's just fast."

"It's not fast. We've known each other for years. We know each other."

"Exactly. You've known each other for years and never wanted to get married to him before. What changed?"

I set the drawer front on the counter carefully and thought about how I wanted to have this conversation with Ryan. Because this was about more than me and Jake getting married. It was about Ryan feeling stuck while everyone else was moving forward.

"What changed is that I lost someone important to me."

He wrinkled his nose, clearly uncomfortable. “Did you find them?” he joked.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. I needed to be delicate whether he wanted me to be or not.

“I did find him,” I said. “He’s standing in my kitchen acting like he doesn’t care. When I know he does. But it’s okay because it’s complicated.”

“Don’t get weird on me.”

“I’m not getting weird. But I actually believe that Jake and I came back into each other’s lives at the perfect time and we fell in love and you can think that’s gross all you want but it’s reality. And you’re right—I’m mad you told me.”

Ryan threw up his hands in the air. “Damn it, Bai, I told you. You’re just like a squirrel with a nut.” He made a gesture where his fingers were pinching together. “Peck, peck, peck.”

“That’s a bird, not a squirrel.”

“You really are incredibly annoying. I can’t believe that a guy as cool as Jake wants to marry you.”

That made me laugh. “Be quiet.”

“At least I don’t have to wear a monkey suit and be his best man. Though I would have enjoyed hitting on the bridesmaids.”

“My sister is married and so is Alyssa. You can’t hit on my bridesmaids.”

“I could have still hit on them. They can choose to respond or not. What about your

cousin? Isn't she single?"

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I knew exactly which cousin he was talking about and I could guarantee that if Ryan were not a ghost, he and Maeve would have in some way embarrassed me with inappropriate behavior at the wedding.

The wedding.

My insides all fluttered at the thought of planning a wedding and then actually getting married.

“Maeve hates men in uniform.”

“I don’t have a uniform, just a badge. And all women love a man in uniform. It’s a fact.”

“She doesn’t.”

She did. I just wasn’t going to admit that unless it was under actual torture. I didn’t want him to pine for anything beyond what he already was.

“You’re going to be a bridezilla.”

“Probably.” There was no point in denying it. I worried about everything, I loved details, and I wanted pure perfection. No recipe for disaster there.

“Did you say Alyssa’s married? When did that happen?”

“Oh, she got drunk at the FOP party and married a sheriff that she knew for about

three hours.”

Ryan nodded. “That’s fair.”

“How is that fair? I’ve known Jake for eight years and you think it’s nuts I’m marrying him but Alyssa can spontaneously marry a stranger?”

“You’re very different people.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

I couldn’t argue with Alyssa apparently, which was how Jake and I wound up having dinner with her and Lawson Hill on Friday.

Jake couldn’t argue with me, so in spite of his earlier protests he didn’t want to go to dinner on a double date he accepted his fate.

We were in a restaurant downtown, which in no way was the halfway between Alyssa and Lawson like she had told me she’d promised him. It way leaned in her favor, by about thirty miles, which was in our favor as well, so I wasn’t going to butt into her “marriage.” It seemed Lawson couldn’t argue with Alyssa either.

She was a force.

Once upon a time, I had wanted to be a force as well, but like Jake, I’d accepted my fate.

I was beige coordinates and stress sweat.

Much to Jake’s obvious relief, Alyssa and Lawson weren’t being lovey-dovey or touchy-feely. They seemed like a normal new couple, very much into each other, but

still learning about each other.

Now Jake and Lawson were talking home renovation, which normally interested me, but I was worrying about both Ryan and the fact that James hadn't shown up in days.

"I've had my house for about ten years," Lawson said. "I redid the kitchen and the bathroom and some serious exterior work. It was a pain in the butt, but it's really damn rewarding."

"We're at the stage where everything needs to be done so we're not sure what to tackle first. Bailey started pulling down wallpaper and then stopped."

"I didn't know what I was getting into. I'll get back to it after the play."

"Play?" Lawson asked, lifting his beer halfway to his mouth. "Are you an actress?"

Lawson still didn't trust me since the one and only time we'd met I had called him to report a corpse and then when he'd arrived it hadn't been there. I think he was implying that liars are actresses and vice versa.

"No. I'm directing a production at the senior center where my grandmother hangs out. I inherited this project under duress."

"If you need help I'll jump in on costumes with you," Alyssa said.

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She was dressed demurely tonight for her. She had on a chambray swing dress with a ruffled neckline. No cleavage. Which didn't stop Lawson from eyeing her chest anyway. When he wasn't being skeptical of me and when he thought no one was looking, he was checking out Alyssa in a way that made me think maybe this relationship had legs.

"Thanks, that would be great. Tomorrow is Mary's funeral so I think the seniors would appreciate it if we threw in something a little extra special for them. Kick their costumes up a notch."

"One of her actresses died," Alyssa told Lawson. "Heart attack on stage."

"Damn. I'm sorry to hear that."

"I guess that's a risk when you're working with seniors."

Our first practice had been a mixed bag. The mood had been melancholy because of Mary, but much to my surprise Clifford had returned to his role of Pyramus, looking no worse for the wear.

"Or when you're stabbing people with knives," Jake said wryly. He flipped his menu over for the third time like it was going to present him with different options.

We were at a wine bar with tapas offerings and I knew him well enough to recognize he felt ripped off. He'd been expecting a steak in return for being forced to sit through this double date and instead the menu was all small plates. A stuffed date on a plate was just going to piss him off.

“I think I missed something,” Lawson said easily. “Sounds like a story someone needs to tell.”

“You tell him, Bailey,” Alyssa said.

She was sucking on the lime from her cocktail.

Lawson cleared his throat, his eyes narrowing as he watched her.

No one was going to listen to me if I told this story. That was clear to me.

But I went for it anyway, giving the whole breakdown, hand gestures and all. It sounded almost as shocking in the retelling as it did when it was actually happening.

It was also wasted breath.

“So would you just assume that was an accident with all those witnesses?” Jake asked Lawson.

“Sounds like an accident to me.” Lawson shrugged.

“That’s what I thought. Bailey isn’t so convinced.”

“There’s been a lot of death at the senior center,” I protested. “It’s alarming.”

“It’s a senior center. They’re elderly,” Alyssa pointed out.

“Okay, so three against one. No one thinks it’s odd. I get it. But I’m entitled to my opinion.” I picked up my wine and took a sip that was too big for a lightweight like me.

Jake's eyebrows lifted, but he didn't say anything.

My phone was sitting on the table next to my plate. I had put it there because I'd brought a small cute purse that was no match for a phone, lip gloss, wallet, sunglasses, and car keys. The keys were Jake's but whenever we went out together he asked me to put them in my purse. Tonight that meant there was no room for my phone so it was on the table and it was lighting up with notifications from Sara Murphy.

I ignored them until it went off for the fifth time.

"Who's texting you?" Alyssa asked.

"Sara."

"Your new best friend."

That made me roll my eyes. "She's probably asking about the funeral for Mary."

But there was also clearly a photo attached.

Curious, I opened it.

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It was a photo of James looking rather cozy with a man I thought was the guy with the fresh tattoo.

Did a deep dive into socials. Found this. Besties? Brothers? Lovers?

At least someone took my concerns seriously.

I showed the photo to Alyssa. “Isn’t this the tattoo guy?”

She glanced at my screen. “Yep. That’s him.”

“Tattoo guy?” Lawson asked.

“He was friends with the janitor and he had a memorial tattoo with the date of his death before James’s ex-wife slash girlfriend seemed to know. She did look genuinely shocked to hear he was dead so we believed her. But that guy had to know. Unless someone else close to him just happened to die the same day.”

It was very coincidental to me.

Alyssa was perusing the menu and didn’t seem to agree with me. Or just didn’t care.

Neither did Lawson. He tapped Alyssa’s menu. “Want to share the oysters?”

“No. Get your own.” She gave him a flirty smile. “The description says it’s only two oysters.”

I put my phone back on the table and flipped it so the screen was face down.

“You’re so cute,” Lawson said, leaning over and kissing Alyssa on the temple.

She giggled.

Jake squeezed my knee under the table. I gave him an “oh boy” smile in return. Alyssa never giggled. She was definitely a smitten kitten. I was genuinely happy for her. I had always held out hope that someday she would get off the dating app merry-go-round and find a guy who understood how incredible she was.

It would be great if Lawson Hill was that guy.

“So is this your thing?” Lawson asked. “Doing this Nancy Drew thing?”

Or maybe it would be great if Alyssa fell in love with someone other than Lawson Hill.

“Nancy Drew thing?” I asked. “Can you define that? There were different variations of Nancy Drew over the years. There was the original book series, then the movie, and a TV show. I think it’s even an interactive game now. But at any rate, in most versions she’s blonde and sixteen to eighteen years old.”

Alyssa frowned at me. “Stop being a smart ass.”

“I think he was being a smart ass first.”

Or dismissive and patronizing. One of the two.

Jake squeezed my knee again.

“Bailey has a background in criminal justice,” he said. “She’s currently working with our department as a consultant.”

I was grateful that he had my back and made me sound way more professional than I actually was. I was also annoyed that his explanation was so readily accepted by Lawson.

“Oh, understood,” Lawson said.

I didn’t know what he understood exactly.

But when Alyssa shot me a pleading please-be-nice look, I let it go with a bright smile.

“I have better shoes than Nancy Drew. In the original series she seems to be wearing very practical shoes all the time.”

He had seen me screaming about a corpse that hadn’t existed. Maybe he had the right to wonder about me. Whatever.

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Jake had been right. We could have been doing much better things tonight.

“Are you all ready to order?” the server asked.

“I’m good with my drink,” Jake said.

That meant he was refusing to eat anything on this menu and we would be stopping at McDonald’s on the way home. It made no sense to me, but he was who he was.

He hated small plates and he would starve to prove it.

“I’ll have the scallops,” I said.

She turned her attention to Lawson and Alyssa and I smiled at my boyfriend. “Not hungry?”

He leaned in so only I could hear him. “You owe me big time for this.”

“I think I owe myself too.”

He laughed. “You’re cute,” he said, echoing Lawson’s words.

That made me laugh too.

My phone buzzed. It was a text from Sara.

Had a thought. Call me!!!!

I'm at dinner, call you tomorrow.

Kk, see you at the funeral!

There were multiple smiley emojis after that.

Which seemed like an odd choice, but we all grieve differently.

TWELVE

"How do I look?" Grandma asked.

"Like you're going to a funeral," I told her as I stepped into nude pumps.

"You look very put together," Jake said.

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Jake."

I got a glare and a sniff.

She was wearing a black skirt that fell at a random location between her knees and ankles, a black sweater, a cross necklace, and black Nike sneakers. She had just had her hair permed and she was wearing two pops of aggressive blush on her cheeks but no other makeup.

I stood by what I said. But I knew better than to repeat it.

Jake got Grandma's winter coat out of the closet and helped her into it.

"You're a nice boy," she told him, patting his arm. Then she glared at me again.

"Don't screw it up."

“Yeah,” Jake said with a grin. “Don’t screw it up.”

Odds were if any screwing up was going to happen it would be me so I didn’t really have a leg to stand on.

It reminded me that Ryan had seen Jake hiding a ring.

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That made me feel pretty sure Jake wasn't going anywhere.

"Do you want a coat?" he asked me.

"No, I'm good with just my blazer. It's kind of balmy today."

Jake lifted his suit jacket off of the back of the kitchen chair and shrugged into it.

"Then we're good to go."

Mary's service was at Chambers Funeral Home and just a few minutes drive from our house. There was a hefty turnout and Jake had to drop me and Grandma off at the entrance before going off in search of a far away parking spot. He was attending with us because Clifford had been his baseball coach in middle school and he had also had a lot of mutual acquaintances with Mary in the neighborhood.

I was obviously prepared for there to be a lot of people inside. I wasn't prepared for the vast quantity of dead people that were hanging around.

It just about smacked me in the face as soon as we walked in.

I saw dead people.

Since my newfound spiritual mediumship had commenced, this was my first funeral and I really hoped it would be the last for a very long time.

There was no rhyme or reason to who was in attendance.

It was like an accumulation of ghosts going back to the funeral home's inception. There were elderly men in slim fitting suits with skinny ties, men with toupees and leisure suits, and one man even in an eighties velvet tracksuit. The women were like a parade of fashion from the last seventy years as well, with swing skirts giving way to polyester suits and shoulder pads. Most disturbing of all was a young teen girl in an early two thousands pink sparkly prom dress, her hair in coils and her eyebrows razor thin.

"I feel like I'm going to be sick," I murmured to Grandma. "It's like breathing in the afterlife in here."

She patted my hand. "Just don't make eye contact."

I had no idea what I would do if I didn't at least have her trust and belief in what I was seeing because there was no way a nonbeliever wouldn't think I was completely and totally insane.

The overall vibe I was getting was heavy and oppressive, like a blanket of sadness smothering me. Grandma was greeting her friends and they were all shuffling around the room to look at the photos of Mary and the guest book, which didn't help my mood either. Shuffling can be creepy under the wrong circumstances. Most circumstances.

"You think we're going to be ready for Opening Night?" Anne barked at me.

I had learned over the past week and a half that Anne barked instead of simply speaking.

"Well, considering that I have no idea what I'm doing and Thisbe is terrified to hold any sort of knife, we won't be ready to go pro, but we'll be okay."

Grandma had gotten, while not her dream role, a bigger part taking over for poor Mary, but she refused to hold a knife, so we were going with a plastic knife compliments of the kid's toy department at Target. I didn't blame her. I looked at our kitchen knives at home with a whole new light when I was chopping vegetables for Jake to sauté.

Anne just grunted and stomped away, presumably to bark at someone else.

"She's trying to get her hooks into Clifford now that he's single but she has stiff competition. No pun intended," Grandma said.

That almost made me laugh. "We're at Mary's service. I feel like maybe the ladies should leave Clifford alone."

"You can't let the grass grow under your feet if you want to hook a man in his eighties. I'm not sure which is coming at him faster—death or a dozen widows. There's no time to let him grieve. Besides, he's loaded. Tons of money. He'll have a sweetheart by next week, mark my words."

"There's nothing wrong with being single."

"How happy were you single?" she scoffed.

"I was fine," I protested. "You're single. You're fine."

"I'm built different from most women."

I had no idea what that meant and I wasn't asking.

"Oh, crap, here comes Sara Murphy." Grandma moved faster than she had since they closed Kmart and marked everything ninety percent off fifteen years ago. She

disappeared into a crowd of mourners and left me to take the brunt of Sara's hugging and sobbing.

"It's just so awful!" she said, squeezing me tightly. "I'm so glad you're here."

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When she finally released me and drew back, I saw she was dressed like she was a Victorian heiress in deep mourning. She was in head to toe black, her dress ankle length with balloon sleeves and a lace inset to the bodice and neck. She also had on lace up boots and a mother of pearl brooch.

“Wow,” I said. “You look great.”

“Thanks. I stole the brooch and the shoes from a show I was in last year.” She put her finger to her lips. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“I don’t know who I would tell.”

She gave a watery laugh, a tissue appearing from under her sleeve and delicately dabbed her eyes. That was a hell of a grandma trick right there. I was impressed. After she wiped her tears, the tissue disappeared again.

“Is Clifford here? I need to go apologize.”

“You’ve already apologized enough,” I told her, alarmed she might make a scene. She had already visited Clifford in the hospital and cried on him. The word on the senior street was she’d also sent him a fruit basket large enough to feed the entire thespian troupe.

Considering Sara was always saying she was strapped for cash, she’d probably slapped down a credit card for that fruit.

“I’ll just say hi real quick.”

Grandma reappeared by my side. “I bet she’s worried Clifford will sue her. I bet he could sue the senior center and they could sue Sara.”

“I feel like your generation is obsessed with suing people. It was an accident. It’s not anyone’s fault.”

“Sue first before they sue you.”

I was not going to request that to be stitched on a sampler by her.

The back of my neck was suddenly cold and I turned to see the man in the tracksuit was leaning in to sniff my hair. “What the hell? Stop it!” I said automatically.

Then immediately realized my error when his eyes went wide.

“You can see me?”

“Nope. Not at all.” I turned, sighing at my very large and obvious error. “Christ,” I muttered.

Grandma smacked my arm. “Watch your mouth.”

“Sorry,” I said, automatically. “Where is Jake? Did he have to park down the street at the school? It’s been fifteen minutes.”

“You don’t need to keep that man on a short lease.”

“I’m not trying to stop a guys’ night out. I’m just worried he got hit by a car or something.”

“He’s a thirty-year-old man.”

“Thirty-year-old men get hit by cars too.” I could still feel the cool breeze of the man behind me so I was willing to engage in whatever nonsensical conversation my grandmother wanted to as long as tracksuit man left me alone.

That was wishful thinking.

He came around the front of me and he looked very agitated. “I know you saw me.”

I pretended to look through him as if I couldn’t see him.

“Hey, Tina,” he said, snapping his fingers at a woman who had an equally eighties outfit on.

She had a popped collar sticking up from underneath a pale pink sweatshirt that was paired with matching pink sweatpants and leg warmers. Her hair was the color of a cherry popsicle and the permed curls were held back by a sweatband. Blood trickled down the side of her face and half her head was caved in. If she wasn’t slightly misty I would have thought I’d fallen onto the movie set of a classic eighties horror flick.

“This broad can see us,” he said to her.

Why did men in tracksuits also sound so rude?

“Who can see us?”

I studiously looked over at the casket and made a point of saying to Grandma, “Is that Mary’s son in from Florida?”

“That’s him. Surprised he came. He thinks he’s a big shot.”

“He’s dressed very casually for a big shot.” Mary’s son, who appeared to be in his sixties, was wearing cargo shorts and a T-shirt. “The Keys?”

“Yes. He looks like he smokes the wacky weed, doesn’t he?”

“That he does.”

“I don’t think she can see us, Dan. She’s not reacting at all.”

“She told me to back off. I’m telling you she can see us.”

“Let’s go pay our respects,” I told Grandma, determined to walk, not run, away from Dan and Tina.

Unfortunately, when I did my casual one footed pivot, I made eye contact with the girl in the prom dress. Her eyes narrowed. “Are you, like, dead too?”

It was easy to ignore rude men in tracksuits, but a teenager? I instantly felt guilty.

“No,” I whispered. “But I’m sorry you are.”

I wasn't sure what else to say to a girl who couldn't be more than seventeen and who passed away before the return of eyebrows.

"If you're sorry, you'd help me," she said, crossing her arms across her dress front. It sagged down in the bodice. She did not have proper support. I felt like her mother had probably told her that and she'd dismissed her mother with a "whatever."

"I can't help you," I murmured. "You have to just let go." That had worked with Mary, so why not try it here? "Close your eyes and wish yourself out of here."

"That's super stupid," she said, rolling her eyes.

Well, that was charming. Teen attitude even in death. "I get it, but that's the best I can offer you."

"Boo. You suck."

"That seems to be the general consensus."

"Which one of these stiffs are you talking to?" Grandma asked.

That made the prom queen gasp in disgust and throw her hands up and turned on her heel with an, "Argh!"

"I need to revisit my spiritual education again," I told my grandmother. "I do not enjoy being trash talked by random dead people."

"Dying pisses people off. It takes a light hand."

Said the woman who just referred to them as "stiffs."

Sara came over to me again. “Is Alyssa here?” she asked.

“No. She didn’t know Mary.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. I’d love to reconnect with her again. She was so brave in high school.”

I assumed by brave she meant that Alyssa hadn’t backed down in the face of frequent body shaming. I couldn’t remember if Sara had participated or stood up for Alyssa. I didn’t think she had done either one. I didn’t even really remember her knowing Alyssa, but then again, I’d been very wrapped up in major concerns over my frizzy hair and my freckles and my lack of male attention. Alyssa and I hadn’t shared a lot of classes either. Maybe Sara was just feeling reflective and felt bad about how Alyssa had been treated.

“I’ll tell Alyssa you said hi.”

“Please do.”

“Sara!” Anne barked.

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Sara panicked. “Oh, crap, I need to hide. Anne scares me.”

With that, she took off.

“Why is she scared of Anne? Anne is so sweet,” Grandma said.

Why my grandmother thought that was beyond me.

Mary’s funeral was providing more mysteries than answers.

Or maybe I was just in a constant state of overthinking.

Maybe Lawson Hill was right. I was Nancy Drew-ing everything and didn’t need to be.

“I have a headache. I should have eaten before we came.”

“Let’s do the pretty and then we can leave,” Grandma said. “I’m bored.”

“That sounds good to me.”

“It’s probably the spooks giving you a headache. They can do that.”

That was definitely true.

“And where the hell is Jake?”

It turned out he was drinking beer in the parking lot with Clifford and half a dozen other men.

“Want one?” Clifford asked, reaching in and flipping the lid of a cooler up.

“No, I’m good, thanks. I have a rule not to drink anything that comes out of a trunk.”

“Don’t you put your groceries in the trunk?” a man smoking a cigar asked.

They all cackled.

“We’re ready to go,” I told Jake. “Unless you want to go in.”

“No, I gave Clifford my condolences.”

Clifford put his hand on his heart. “He did. My sweet, sweet Mary. God rest her soul. Thank you all for coming. It means a lot to an old buzzard like me.”

“I’m so sorry, really.”

“Thank you for putting all that pressure on my gut, too, Bailey. You were a trooper.” He flipped open his suit jacket. “Almost as good as new.”

Clifford sounded slightly drunk, which made me think there was harder stuff than beer in that trunk. Or maybe he was on painkillers.

We finished up our goodbyes, Grandma giving Clifford a sympathetic pat on the arm, and then I pulled the keys out of my purse.

Jake held his hand out for them.

“You’ve been drinking.”

“I had half a beer.”

“You can’t get pulled over. I can’t afford the house if you lose your job.” I eyed the parking lot. “Where is the car?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I have a headache.”

“I’ll get the car.”

“You’re not driving!”

He went still. “Okay.” He got the look of a man who is trying to coax a stray dog over to him. “It’s next door in the parking lot of the restaurant that caught on fire.”

“Thank you. Wait here,” I told him and my grandmother.

“Was it the trunk beer?” he asked her as I stomped away.

“Nah. It was the dead people.”

That pretty much summed it up.

Especially considering tracksuit guy appeared beside me.

“You’re going to listen to me.”

If this dude followed me home like heartburn after bottomless margaritas I was going to lose it.

“Go away! I forbid you to follow me.”

It worked. He swore at me. But it worked. He misted out.

That would be a nice trick. Poof. Just exit from awkward situations.

THIRTEEN

“I think I’ve been approaching this all wrong,” I said to Alyssa as we walked along the Towpath, a biking and hiking trail through the heart of my old neighborhood, Ohio City, and where Alyssa currently lived.

“You finally realized that you need a keratin treatment?” Alyssa asked, huffing and puffing as she walked beside me.

“That was truly hateful. I was born with this hair. I can’t help it.”

“I’m sorry. I hate working out.”

I wasn’t exactly enjoying our power walk either, but that was no excuse for hating on my hair. “We can slow down, you know. No one is chasing us.” For once.

“I want to tighten my thighs. Can’t do that taking a leisurely stroll and you know I hate the gym.”

“Are you doing this for you or because you want to impress Lawson Hill?”

“What? Ew. No. Of course not! Lawson loves my body exactly the way it is. I feel like he would actually be sad if I lost my curves because he very much enjoys them. No, this is for me because we’re coming up on summer and I am tired of excessive thigh rub. I just want to tighten up some loose ends, so to speak.”

“I would say count on me to do this twice a week, because I could use increased lung capacity, but not if you’re going to be mean.”

Alyssa, who was sweating in her sports bra and zip up hoodie, her forehead dewy, slowed down a fraction. “I said I was sorry. Okay, so what have you been approaching all wrong?”

“Now I don’t want to tell you.” Not because I was being childish, but because she didn’t like it when I brought up Ryan.

“Oh my God, stop. Just tell me. Unless you’d rather tell Sara Murphy.”

It kind of made me happy that Alyssa felt threatened by Sara Murphy after that hair comment. She should want to clearly stake her claim as my best friend, because I was a pretty darn good best friend.

“Okay. So I’ve been fixating on trying to find out about James the janitor and what’s going on with Ryan when the real thing I should be focusing on is what Jake had me do—go down to the station and help the detectives if I can. They caught the ex-boyfriend of the woman who was asphyxiated. They told him they had an eyewitness, meaning me, and he just caved and confessed. His girlfriend at the time also admitted she lied about his alibi.”

“Why would she lie to cover up his crime?”

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“She was afraid of him. She only told the truth when he was in county jail for unrelated charges.” I stopped walking for a second and bent over to catch my breath. “I appreciate this spring weather but is it hot out here or what?”

“I’m boiling. Also, those birds chirping are getting on my nerves. Maybe power walking isn’t for me if spring birds singing in delight has me feeling rage.”

It was a gorgeous spring day. The kind you dream about in February. The sun was shining, the trees were budding, the tulips were standing tall and proud.

“I don’t think we’re outdoor girls. We want to be. But maybe we need to stick to shopping in boutiques and going to the art museum.” I tightened my ponytail and did some bending stretches. I swore my calves were cramping up.

Alyssa had slowed her walk almost to a crawl. “That’s fair. Lawson asked me to go for a bike ride and I laughed myself silly. I explained to him that I look amazing lounging next to a pool but he will never see me on a bike unless it’s a motorcycle.”

“It’s good to be upfront about who you are at the beginning of a relationship. How is it going with Lawson?”

“We’re taking it slow. I guess as slow as you can when you’re already married.” She made a crazy face. “But seriously, I like him. He’s easy to be around. No real red flags so far.”

“Aside from the fact that he thinks I’m crazy.”

“He’s just pragmatic about police work and it’s hard for him to wrap his head around you being involved. You know I love you, but you also know sometimes I struggle with the woo woo. It’s not a reflection on you. It says more about me than you. You and Lawson will be fine once you get to know each other.”

“That’s fair. Let’s just stroll leisurely.”

When we weren’t trying to break a speed record, it was a nice walk. The highway was on one side, which created a buzz of background noise, but otherwise it was very bucolic for being in the heart of the city. A man zipped by on a bike and Alyssa acted like she’d been buzzed by a fighter jet. She actually jumped.

Then we both started laughing.

“We’re ridiculous.” Alyssa looked at me. “But you know that I support you, right? Just because I don’t always understand doesn’t mean I don’t believe you. And you know I would never lie to you.”

“I do know that. There are three people I can guarantee will never lie to me—you, Jake, and my grandmother.”

“That’s a good crew to have around you.”

“It is.” It also didn’t escape my attention that I didn’t include Ryan in that group. “Who’s in your group?”

“You and my parents. I trust my brother to have my back, but I don’t trust him not to lie.”

“Very solid. I feel the same way about my sister. She likes to fluff the truth. My mother would never lie to me but she might omit the truth. My father would one

hundred percent lie.”

“Isn’t your sister coming to town soon?”

“Yes. Sometime soon. I didn’t get exact dates. Hey, did Jake talk to you about my birthday? I feel like he’s planning some kind of surprise and you know I don’t like to be surprised.”

“No, he hasn’t said anything to me.”

“Ryan said he saw Jake hiding an engagement ring.”

Alyssa stopped walking. “Shut. Up.”

“I don’t want it to be on my birthday. But something feels off anyway. Jake isn’t acting different at all. Nothing cagey about his behavior.”

“Is Ryan someone you can believe?” she asked, sounding skeptical.

My jaw dropped. “Oh my God. You’re right. I think he’s messing with me,” I exclaim. “There’s no ring. He’s trying to sabotage my relationship with Jake!”

“Why would he do that?”

“He’s jealous. Not of me marrying Jake. But that we’re alive.”

“He’s going dark? That’s so...dark.”

“I know. But it makes sense, right? Because if he tells me that Jake is proposing and Jake isn’t proposing then when I am acting weird waiting for him to propose, he doesn’t know I’m acting weird waiting for him to propose because he isn’t going to

propose so all he knows is that I'm being weird. When I'm weird, then he'll get suspicious and start acting weird and then we have a wedge in our relationship. It's genius, really."

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“I have no idea what the hell you just said. But if that’s what’s going on, that’s not good.”

Maybe Ryan wasn’t even Ryan. Maybe James Kwaitkowski was right and Ryan was a demon. Did I believe in demons?

I wasn’t sure. I was sure that something was rotten in Denmark and its name was Ryan Conroy.

“It’s not. I’m not sure what to do about it. But if Jake does say anything to you about a birthday party, please let me know.”

“I’ve got you.”

“I’m going to go on the assumption the engagement is not a thing.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“I’m fine with that for now. We’re together and we have plenty of work to do on the house. Planning a wedding sounds exciting but also overwhelming right now. I’m brand new at this job and I already screwed up with a client. I need to focus on doing well and moving up the ladder.”

“Very mature. Very rational.”

“That’s me.” I grinned.

“Hey, can we go get ice cream?” Alyssa waved her hand in front of her face. “These bugs are driving me insane.”

“It’s almost full blown mayfly season.” Because spring couldn’t just arrive in all its pleasantries it also came with mayflies clinging to every screen and door on your house. “And yes, we can get ice cream. Do you want to walk to Mason’s? They have unique flavors.”

“That seems kind of far.”

“It’s like two blocks.”

“How do you define a block?” she asked, sounding outraged. “That’s like a mile, seriously.”

“Isn’t a block the distance from one major street to the next?”

“No. A block is a block. One street.”

“Fine. We can drive.” I was tired anyway. I glanced at my watch. “We did seven hundred steps.”

“That’s it?” Alyssa moaned. “I bet people a thousand years ago didn’t have to just walk around in circles to stay healthy.”

“No, they were moving from sunup to sundown just to survive, had poor dental hygiene, no understanding of medical science, and no antibiotics.”

“You should have been a lawyer.”

“That’s what my mother always said. She was wrong and so are you.”

“You want me to stay at my dad’s for the entire weekend?” I stared at Jake, questioning any and everything I’d ever known about him.

“Or a hotel if you don’t want to stay there.”

“We don’t have the money for a hotel. Where is Grandma supposed to stay?”

Jake rubbed my upper arms and gave me a reassuring smile. “Your mom already said she could stay there.”

Now I was immediately suspicious. “You already talked to my mother about this? What is going on?”

“I told you. We need to have the asbestos tiles in the basement remediated. The minute we start doing work on my man cave we’re going to disrupt it and that’s super dangerous.”

“Why this week? We’re not working on the man cave yet. I thought you wanted to do that next winter.”

I was all for a man cave. It kept the leg lamp and the sports blankets in their appropriate place—away from me. I fully supported his plans to clean up the paneling, restore the built-in bar and decorate with banners and memorabilia. Plus, he wanted to add a workout room, because unlike me and Alyssa, he did actually exercise regularly.

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But I couldn't wrap my head around why the asbestos removal needed to happen over the next three days. It was very suspicious to me.

"These trades are impossible to book. This is when my guy is free to do it."

"Your guy?"

"I have a guy." He shrugged.

"You have a guy for everything."

"I have a very long resume for the job of great boyfriend."

That made me laugh. "Yes, you do. I can't argue with that. Fine. I'll go to my dad's. I don't want to spend money on a hotel when we have all these recent house expenses." I eyed him. "Do not plan a surprise birthday party for me."

"I'm not! I promise."

Ryan appeared behind him. "He's planning a surprise party for your birthday."

"Ryan says you are."

"Ryan is a damn liar. I'm not." Jake turned around in multiple directions. "Don't pull this shit, Conroy. That is not cool."

It made me uneasy to look at Ryan right now.

What was he doing?

What was with all his vague and changing explanations?

Plus, it seemed very obvious to me that Ryan didn't want me and Jake to be happy together.

"Go away," I ordered Ryan. "Now."

"Are you serious?" He pushed himself off of the doorframe. "Don't do that. Not cool, Bai."

"What's not cool is you trying to start crap between me and Jake. So yes, you need to go right now so I can have dinner with my boyfriend."

Ryan disappeared without saying goodbye.

"He's gone," I told Jake.

My boyfriend sighed. "I really don't like him in and out of here."

"I need to go to spiritual medium school so I can cast a bubble around our house."

"If any of that is real, do it as soon as possible." He patted my backside. "Now go pack a bag."

"Remind me again where you're going to be staying? And why can't you stay at my dad's house with me?"

"I'm staying at my parent's so I can help my dad repair his fence. You can come with me if you want."

“Your parents or my dad’s? That’s Sophie’s choice right there.”

FOURTEEN

If there was a narrator describing my life, he would say, “You have chosen poorly,” in a deep ominous voice.

I knew it immediately the second I stepped into Dad’s and was enveloped in a giant hug by Nancy, his girlfriend. I didn’t know Nancy from Adam, so it seemed overly familiar to me and was wildly uncomfortable. It also felt like I was betraying my mother.

My father gave me a one-armed hug once Nancy finally released me.

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“Why are you here again?” he asked, sounding very confused by the whole thing.

That made two of us. “They’re removing asbestos from our basement.”

“You don’t need to remove asbestos,” Dad said with a very thorough and very confident older man scoff. “Every house has it.”

“I don’t think they do. Not anymore. They say it gives you cancer.”

“Everything gives you cancer.”

Help me.

“I don’t think that’s true either.” I set my bag down. “Am I staying in my old room?”

Nancy bit her bottom lip. “Well...” She looked to my father for help.

“That room is off-limits. You can stay in the den.”

“The den? There are five bedrooms!”

“We’re using them all. Just stay downstairs.”

“Using them for what?”

Okay, that was a dangerous question to ask, but it just came out before I could stop it.

Nancy looked embarrassed and guilty.

My father looked like he was about to hand down a it's-none-of-your-business speech.

This was fun.

“Fine. I’ll stay in the den. Thanks for letting me stay here.” I had half a mind to snoop around upstairs after they went to bed but I was afraid of getting caught. I was also afraid of what I might find.

I also was afraid to think about the fact that my dad and Nancy were going to bed together.

Sure, I knew that in theory, but seeing it for myself was another thing altogether.

I might have to call my sister on the way to work tomorrow and spill the tea. This also messed up my plan to have my sister stay here when she came to town. There was no way I was subjecting my nieces and nephew to this nonsense. I hadn’t even encountered the corn sign yet for myself.

“Put your bag down and come into the kitchen and have a drink with us,” my dad said.

Everything in my father’s life came with a drink.

“I got one of those shark coochie boards,” Nancy said. “Your dad said you like those.”

I blinked.

It took me a second to even grasp what she meant and then I wasn't sure if she was being serious or making a joke so I just smiled. "Oh, wow, that was thoughtful." I eyed my father. "I'll take a glass of wine."

I needed one to get through this social hour.

Unfortunately, Nancy didn't eat any of her shark coochie board and drank four glasses of wine faster than I had ever seen anyone ever. At which point she blurted out that she and my father had turned my old bedroom into a "playroom" and not for kids.

I choked on an almond and saw my life flash before my eyes before my dad whomped me on the back and dislodged the nut.

"Holy crap," I managed, sucking down half a glass of water.

"Spicy?" Nancy asked, her words slurring.

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“Not as spicy as you two, apparently.”

“Bailey Margaret, knock it off,” my father said.

“Oh, it’s okay, pookie,” Nancy told him, massaging his arm. “This is all new for her.”

Nothing about my father screamed “pookie” but I supposed there was no nickname to suggest alcoholic-on-the-golf-course either.

I would have gone to my room except I didn’t have one.

Nancy and Dad had no such issues.

“We’re heading upstairs,” Dad said. “Gotta get up early.”

“No, you don’t,” Nancy said, sounding confused. “You said you don’t have anything until noon.”

My father gave her a look. A heated look.

“Oh!” she said. “Oh, oh, right. Of course. That thing you have to do. You definitely need your rest, pookie.”

Nancy wasn’t the brightest bulb in the pack. She also had no acting skills. Bud Miller, who kept falling asleep during our Midsummer rehearsals, and occasionally yelled out, “Take your marks!” for no reason was a better actor than Nancy.

My father shook his head, as if even he was mystified as to what he saw in his girlfriend.

Nancy slurped the last of her wine and said, “Pookie, your little blue pills are in the top drawer of the island. You’d better grab one.”

I would rather breathe in a vat of asbestos than endure this for one more second.

My father’s cheeks and nose were always red because he drank too much, but they were noticeably darker. He looked like an overripe tomato.

That didn’t stop him from digging out a pill bottle from the drawer. “Blood pressure meds,” he told me.

Because blood pressure medication was always blue. Not. But I allowed him his bad cover up because I never, ever wanted to discuss any of this ever again.

Mrs. Marner’s comments about me not cooking and taking advantage of Jake were nothing compared to this. I would welcome them in comparison.

“Goodnight,” I said, taking a sip of wine from my glass and not making eye contact.

I’d only had a third of a glass, which should enter me into the hall of fame for Incredible Restraint. But I couldn’t afford a headache or a hangover. I had to be at work early tomorrow, looking professional and prepped for my appointments.

I was covering up the charcuterie board with plastic wrap so the cheeses didn’t dry out when I got a text from Sara.

Been DMing with James’s friend and he has some interesting info. Meeting him in ten minutes. You should come up to Danny O’s.

That was a phenomenally bad idea.

For many reasons. Starting with the fact that I had to be on point at work tomorrow and ending with the fact that everyone at that bar hated me.

There was a thump from above my head.

Then the distinct sound of Nancy moaning.

No. No and no.

Be there in twenty.

I had no idea what Sara thought any conversation was going to accomplish, but she reminded me of myself a few months ago. Digging, digging. I respected that she felt something was off and wanted to right a wrong.

These days I was a little preoccupied and getting the message loud and clear from everyone in my life that slinking around alleyways and meeting up with strangers was neither smart nor effective.

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But I would anywhere that wasn't here right now.

I shoved the charcuterie into the fridge and got the hell out of Dad's den of iniquity.

Sara Murphy didn't looklike she belonged in Danny O's any more than I did, and yet when I walked in she was the center of a group of four or five men and they were all laughing and taking a shot together.

"Bailey, hi!" She waved enthusiastically. "Come over and meet the guys!"

At that moment, it occurred to me that I should tell my boyfriend where I was so I waved back and then shot off a text to Jake that Dad's was terrible and I was out with Sara for an hour or two. I couldn't bring myself to type out that I was at Danny O's but we shared locations with each other so if I disappeared he could figure out from where.

But no one seemed ready to attack me, so that was a good start. I was wearing leggings and a sweatshirt, which should help me blend, but didn't. I actually stood out as underdressed next to Sara's very sexy crop top and denim shorts.

"This is Brian," Sara said, pointing to the man immediately next to her.

"Hi," he said. It was tattoo guy.

My shoulders tensed.

But he was smiling so I didn't feel in danger. Not yet anyway.

“Let’s go over here!” Sara said, grabbing her drink and hopping down off of the stool. “No, no guys, not another shot right now,” she said with a laugh when the other men all protested her departure. “I’m going to have a chat with my friends and then I’ll be back and we’ll see how drunk you can get me.”

That resulted in a loud cheer of approval.

Sara Murphy was feeling some kind of way. I was a little concerned for her safety.

“I don’t think you should do multiple shots with random men,” I told her. “And yes, I’m that girl, but that doesn’t seem safe.”

“Oh, I’m not actually going to do that.” She waved her hand. “I paid the bartender twenty bucks to make my shots non-alcoholic. But it gets the guys to open up to me if I seem like a party girl.”

Wow. That was impressive. “Bartenders will do that?”

“Hell, yeah, they will. They keep the bribe, and up charge the other customer for a shot that is dirt cheap because there’s no alcohol in it.”

I needed to get out more or watch more crime TV. That would have never occurred to me.

She rattled her straw. “This is just club soda with a lime.” She looked over. “Brian, come join us for a second.”

“Coming.” Brian grabbed his beer and followed us.

Once the three of us were seated at a high top table, Sara smiled at me. “Brian is James’s brother. It’s been so great talking to him and getting to hear about what an

intriguing life James has led.”

“Oh, wow, I didn’t know. I’m sorry for your loss,” I told Brian.

He nodded. “Thanks. I’m sorry about what happened last week when you came in here. Emotions were just raw for all of us and that was the first Joy heard about James’s death so she was obviously upset.”

“But you knew.”

He gave another nod. “Yes. My mother was notified and she called me the day it happened. I was in shock. I didn’t even tell my girlfriend because she’s tight with Joy and well, Joy and James were toxic together. I can’t stand that bitch for what she’s put my brother through.”

“Custody issues,” Sara said, nodding sympathetically. “Joy was basically blackmailing James into staying with her.”

“But she has a boyfriend. Why did she want to hold onto James?”

“Control.” Brian sighed and sipped his beer. “I like her boyfriend, Don. He’s nice enough but he’s under Joy’s spell too.”

Don was the guy who had helped me off the fence, clearly. “He did seem nice.”

I wasn’t sure what this mysterious power was that Joy had over men. Then again, Brian’s own girlfriend was mean, so this group of guys had bad taste in women. Who was I to judge?

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“I just don’t think James would have killed himself.”

“We’re all thinking that way,” Sara assured him. “Do you think Joy could have done it?”

Brian rubbed his forehead. “I don’t know. I guess she’s capable of anything, really. She both loved and hated James. They fought constantly. She’s the whole reason he had pending domestic charges against him. She was always drinking and then attacking him. Last time it was a pair of scissors. Got him in the arm. But then James would push her away and she’d call the cops and they’d both get arrested. He wasn’t even supposed to see her because of the charges but they couldn’t stay away from each other.”

“Classic,” Sara said, with a nod. “Addicted to the drama.”

“So you found out he passed away, got a tattoo, and didn’t tell your girlfriend or Joy?”

Brian nodded. He was a nodder. “I guess it doesn’t even matter how he died. He’s dead.” He lifted his beer bottle.

“I don’t think anyone should be allowed to get away with murder,” Sara said.

“I agree.”

But I wasn’t sure what any of us could do about it.

The police hadn't deemed it suspicious and the medical examiner had labeled the manner of death undetermined. I doubted the medical examiner was going to let me waltz into his office and give an argument as to why it should be homicide. I had no proof. I actually had no reason to even think it was homicide.

Other than James's ghost, who couldn't even interact with me.

"Sometimes it's just better to leave things alone," Brian said. "No good ever came from stirring the pot. That's what my mother always says."

"My mother says we should leave it to the proper authorities," Sara said.

"My mother says we have to speak for those who can't speak for themselves," I said. "And that mandatory sentencing for drug related convictions is stupid." I shrugged. "She's a prosecutor."

Brian's demeanor immediately changed. His expression became guarded. "I'll let you two catch up," he said, and slipped off of his stool and returned to the men at the bar.

Heads swiveled and I got a bad feeling.

Now they were all eyeing me with the same suspicion. "Time to go!" I told Sara with forced cheerfulness. "You'll be at the play, right?"

The seniors kept referring to it as opening night, but they were only performing the play once so I wasn't sure if that was meant to be ironic or just elderly confusion. At any rate, our rehearsals had been going about as well as expected—muddled and ineffective.

Sara had sworn she wouldn't step foot back in the senior center until there was a whole crowd there for the play. I found it hard to believe she actually considered

herself in danger. It seemed like a convenient excuse to just dip out on being the play's director.

I couldn't blame her.

"I'm not sure I can make it," she said noncommittally, before sipping her soda water. "I'll look at my schedule."

"It's in four days."

"Hmm."

One of the men had gotten up off of his stool and was coming our way.

"Bye," I said, gave a wave, and got the heck out of there.

The house was quiet when I got back and I made myself a makeshift bed on the sofa in the den with some blankets and throw pillows. A cat appeared out of nowhere and jumped on my lap.

"You scared me," I whispered to him.

It was a tabby, chubby and purring as he kneaded the fabric of the blanket.

"Do you belong to Nancy?"

Dad had never been a cat lover, but Nancy had clearly opened up his eyes to a whole new world of shark coochie and cats.

And little blue pills.

I rolled onto my side and tried to remember I was an adult and it didn't matter.

When I fell asleep I had a dream where a shark was emerging from a bright blue slushie.

Pookie, the shark said. Everyone take their marks.

It was not a restful night's sleep. I went to work the next morning grateful I no longer worked remotely and I could go to a beautiful showroom and disappear inside sourcing chandeliers.

With people who were all alive.

FIFTEEN

"It was so bad," I told Jake with a groan. "I'm never going to recover from hearing that my childhood bedroom has been turned into a, you know." I couldn't even say it out loud. I actually shook out my arms and stuck my tongue out as I got out of my car in our driveway. "Argh, if I think about it I'll start gagging."

Jake was appropriately sympathetic. He pulled me into a hug. "Baby, I don't even know what to say. That's...rough. I'm sorry. I should have gotten you a hotel room. I promise I won't ever ask you to stay there again."

Being hugged by Jake was a balm for any horror. He was strong and comforting and

smelled amazing. I sighed into his hold. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too. But when you see inside the house maybe you can forgive me for the last couple of days?” He stepped back and kissed me. “Please? I just wanted it to be a fun surprise. I didn’t know it would be a peek into your father’s personal life.”

I barely refrained from gagging again. “You know I have a long history of hating surprises.”

“This is a good one.”

I opened my mouth to protest. I wasn’t dressed for a party.

“And no, there aren’t people hiding in the house for a surprise party. I promise.”

Skeptical, but very curious I started toward the interior garage door.

He stopped me by grabbing my hand. “Come through the front door.”

Now I was just scared. “Just tell me what is going on.”

“Just go inside.” Jake reached around me and threw open the front door.

I shot him a suspicious look before stepping inside.

And stopped dead (probably shouldn’t say that) in my tracks.

“What in the world...” I stared in awe at the transformation in front of me. “Jake. How...what...”

He was smiling. It wasn’t a grin. It was a smug smirk.

In three days he had completely redone our main living and dining spaces. The dingy bright green carpet was gone and the yellow accent wall was a thing of the past. We had gleaming hardwood floors and neutral walls in a soft white that was obviously pulled from my mood board I had created online for the house.

It looked incredible. Brighter, lighter, airier.

“Wow, this is amazing.”

But I had assumed we would get to this later.

Instead, I reached down and ran my hand over the floors. “These are original?”

“Yep. They didn’t even need to be refinished. Just cleaned.”

“How did you paint all of this?” I turned in a circle and held my arms out. “I feel like I can breathe in here and our furniture looks fantastic. I think the house is happy. This is probably what it originally looked like.”

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“You can add drapes and art or whatever makes sense to you.”

“I love it.” Then a thought occurred to me. “You didn’t really remediate asbestos, did you?”

“No. We can do that later as long as we don’t disturb the tiles.”

Since that was always the plan, I wasn’t going to worry about it.

“This was worth staying at Dad’s. Despite the trauma.”

He laughed. “I’m glad you like it. I know the kitchen is still a disaster, but maybe in six months. Oh, and I got the wallpaper down in the hall bathroom that you started but I just painted the walls white because I didn’t know if you had any other plans for it.”

“How did you do this all in such a short amount of time?”

“I had help.”

“Well, tell them thank you.”

Then I caught a peek of the kitchen. He hadn’t redone the kitchen, because that would be impossible in three days, but there was food everywhere. Party trays and pasta and a beverage station.

And the chicest cupcakes I had ever seen on multiple cake and cupcake stands. They

each had a dusty rose on top with pearl edible beading adorning them. In the middle was a mother-of-pearl looking giant “29.”

“You can tell them yourself in an hour.”

My jaw dropped. “A birthday party?”

“But not a surprise, because I’m telling you. A housewarming birthday party combination too, so really, you can’t be mad.”

My heart swelled. “You are pretty incredible.”

“I try.”

I hugged him. “And I’m a very lucky girl. What time is everyone coming?”

“Seven. Why?”

“Because you’re about to be a very lucky guy.”

“I already am. But why don’t you just go change in case someone arrives early?”

“You’re a very practical man.”

He winced. “That doesn’t sound sexy at all.”

“It’s very sexy. It’s called competence porn. Women want a man who handles things.”

“I’ll be handling all the things after everyone goes home.”

I laughed. “Who did you invite?”

“Alyssa, my parents, your parents, my brother. Just a few people.”

“My father is coming?” It was my turn to wince a little. “And my mother? Oh God. I don’t think that’s a good idea considering the recent history between them. My mother will skewer Nancy.”

“Don’t worry. I spoke to him and he agreed it would be better if he didn’t bring Nancy.”

“He agreed to that?” I was genuinely astonished. My father did not like to be told what to do.

“Yes. He didn’t want to make things awkward.”

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“There is no way being considerate was his idea.”

He shrugged. “I suggested it and he agreed.”

“How do you do that? Both of my parents love you. You must be the Burke whisperer.”

He whispered in my ear. “Is it working with you?”

I shivered. “Definitely.”

My parents were on their best behavior. So was Jake’s mother. She was sweet and chatty and gave me a big hug and a gift certificate for a spa day.

“This is lovely, thank you so much.”

“Let me know your schedule so we can book our appointment together.” She smiled at me. “Then lunch?”

So we were doing facials at the same time and bonding. I could live with that. It was a small price to pay for glowing skin, and truthfully, I needed to spend more time with her outside of Jake so we could establish our own relationship dynamic. “That sounds amazing. I’m excited.”

My parents mostly avoided each other and my mother kept her snarky comments to one.

When my father was wishing me a happy birthday, he said, “The light of my life for twenty-nine years. When you were born I took one look at those dimples and rosy cheeks and realized I was staring down at a mini-me.”

I didn’t have dimples. And no girl or woman wants to be told she looks like her father. But I knew he just meant that he’d looked at me and thought I was precious so that was heartwarming.

My mother, flicking her tongue over the icing of a cupcake like a cat, said, “At least she didn’t get your honkin’ nose.”

I braced myself for a retort from Dad but he just laughed and tweaked my nose. “That is a very good thing.”

Ryan, however, was not on his best behavior.

He had shown up in the middle of the guests arriving, adding to the chaos.

Typical Ryan, he kept doing things like sitting on people’s laps or pretending to take a bite off of their plate. I ignored him, but it was still distracting.

His vibe felt wrong and I didn’t like it at all.

Especially since he didn’t even bother to say happy birthday to me.

I was getting obsessed with the idea that Ryan wasn’t even Ryan. Which wasn’t logical, but heck, was any of this logical?

Otherwise, I was enjoying myself. I got to show off Jake’s refinished floors and freshly painted walls, and catch up with some of my favorite people.

“Where’s your new husband?” my mother asked Alyssa.

“Oh, he’s working.”

“Well, congratulations.”

My mother didn’t even smirk when she said that. I was impressed.

“Thank you.”

“If you want a background check run on him, I’m happy to help.”

There it was.

“Well, he’s a sheriff, so I think I can pass on that.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.” My mother sipped out of a Diet Coke can with a straw. “What’s his family like? Who are his people?”

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“Um...I haven’t met his family yet. They live in Pennsylvania.”

“Interesting. How old is he?”

“Thirty-nine.”

“Divorced? Kids?”

“No and no.”

“Never married? I wonder why that is? Gambling debt? Selfish? A man child?”

“Maybe he just never found the right woman,” I said, trying to save Alyssa.

“I guess it was love at first sight then. If you believe in that sort of thing.”

It was clear she did not.

Alyssa sighed in relief when Mom excused herself to get another cupcake.

“I always feel like your mom is interrogating me like I’m on the witness stand. This is why I never wanted to sleepover at your house in high school.”

“I understand. I almost wanted to be the hangout house, you know that, but it was never going to happen.” Even watching her now, I could see she was eyeing our ancient stove with pure disdain.

“No way. Your mom was scary and your house was so clean I was afraid to touch anything.”

“Your parents were chill. Plus, your house had all the good snacks too.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Alyssa said, squeezing her hips. “Thanks for the chips and cookies, Mom and Dad.”

Alyssa’s parents had a theory that you shouldn’t say no to kids at all.

That setting a positive example would allow their kids' internal compass to guide them in the right direction. It had been semi-successful, depending on how you gauged success.

“You’re not afraid of anything and I’m a worrier, so whose method worked better?” I asked wryly.

“How do you see yourself as a parent?”

That made me immediately anxious. “Well. Not as a mom who sees ghosts, that’s for sure,” I said, keeping my voice low so no one else would hear.

Alyssa laughed. “Yes. You should probably work on that.”

Speaking of ghosts...

Ryan was sitting at the kitchen table having a major discussion with my grandmother and my mother had noticed. Grandma was telling Ryan, “They say life is a journey.”

“Mine wasn’t a journey so much as a quick bus ride,” Ryan said.

“Your mother is talking to air,” my mother said to my dad. “Aren’t you at all concerned?”

He didn’t appear to be concerned. “She’s old. What do you expect?”

“It’s a whole conversation.”

“I can hear both of you, you know,” Grandma said. “I’m talking to a ghost, so mind your beeswax. I’m not losing my mind or my hearing.”

My mother gave my dad a told-you-so look.

The truth was, Grandma was losing her hearing. Not totally, but enough that Jake and I could watch TV after she went to bed at high volumes and it didn’t bother her. She definitely was not losing her mind.

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“She really is,” I said. “I’ve seen the ghost too.”

“Christ,” my mother said. “You are definitely a Burke, Bailey, through and through.”

“What kind of ghost?” my father asked. “It’s not my father, is it? That would give me the willies.”

“No, it’s not Grandpa.”

“He did show up one night,” Grandma said. “At the foot of my bed. I thought he was coming to take me to the other side, so I told him to get the hell away from me.”

My dad guffawed. He turned to my mom. “What would you do if my ghost came to the foot of your bed?”

“I’d tell you to lay down at my feet like the dog that you are.” The words were harsh, but to my surprise, she was smiling.

He laughed even harder. “That’s my girl,” he said, putting his hand on her back.

She didn’t pull away. I had no idea what that was or what it meant.

Jake glanced over at me. I lifted my shoulders and shook my head slightly.

I was just happy that Grandma didn’t mention Ryan by name as the ghost she was hanging out with.

Mrs. Marner, who preferred to get her digs in with a smile and a backhanded compliment, found my mother too direct. She intervened now and changed the subject. “Are you ready for the play? That’s so sweet of you to direct it for the seniors.”

“I’m nervous,” I admitted. “I just want all the participants to have fun. I inherited this play and I don’t actually know what I’m doing.”

“You did theater in high school,” my mother said. “I’m sure you’re doing a wonderful job.”

“Will you be there?” I asked her.

She nodded.

I turned to Dad. “And you’ll be there.” I didn’t pose it as a question. If I had to publicly shame him to be involved in his mother’s life, I would.

To my shock, he said, “Absolutely. Wouldn’t miss it.”

No blustering. No excuses. Now that was a birthday gift.

Two hours later everyone was gone and I smiled at Jake. “Thank you. That was a wonderful birthday, even if it was a surprise.”

“It wasn’t a surprise. I gave you a whole hour of warning.”

“That was a loophole. I don’t normally associate you with those. You’re getting tricky. I’ll have to keep my eye on you.”

“You can watch me load the dishwasher.”

That made me laugh. “I’ll take the trash out. I love having an attached garage. I can do trash disposal in my socks.”

I bundled up the bag from the large kitchen can and tied off the strings. I went into the garage and jumped when I saw Ryan sitting on the hood of my car.

“Hey,” I said. “What are you doing?”

“I just needed a minute. That was a lot of people.”

It was nine people. Not a lot by any stretch of the imagination. “Far cry from your rager days back in college.”

“Don’t say rager. That’s just embarrassing.” He smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“What’s going on with you?” I tossed the trash into the bin. “You don’t seem like yourself.”

“I’m not myself. I’m dead.”

Well, that was putting it baldly.

The way he was sitting he looked like a calendar shot for working men. He had his boots on the fender, his forearms on his thighs. He had always been good looking and fit and girls had thrown themselves at him. But he’d also always been emotionally unavailable, joked at inappropriate times, and moody as hell.

None of that had changed.

Here he was being morose on my birthday and I felt bad about it.

This was why we had a toxic friendship.

He never really considered my feelings.

“Can you explain to me what you’re really doing here,” I said. “Big picture. What’s the goal?”

“I don’t know the goal. I screwed up and did something I wasn’t supposed to and now I’m back to the beginning, I guess you could say. Like a game board. You pull the wrong card and they send you straight back to start.”

I had known that but it still sounded ominous. “What did you do?”

“I looked at some paperwork that was classified.”

That told me nothing. “What did you see?”

“I can’t tell you.”

I sighed. This was going nowhere.

“Is this about James? Because I’m starting to think he took his own life.” I dug my phone out of my back pocket and scrolled through social media. “Look. Joy, his ex-wife, who I thought might be the kind to get angry and poison his drink, was in Hocking Hills the day he was killed. That’s three hours away, so she couldn’t have killed him.”

I tried to show him the pictures of Joy sitting in an Adirondack chair on the deck of a cabin but Ryan barely glanced at them.

“Ryan. You’re freaking me out.”

He climbed down off of the car hood and reached out like he was going to hug me before he realized he couldn’t. “Happy Birthday, Red. I’ll catch you on the flip side.”

That gave me pause. “Are you disappearing forever on me on my birthday? Because that would really annoy me.”

“Nope. I’m just giving you and Marner a break from me.”

“Look me in the eye and promise,” I demanded.

That got a reaction finally. His head finally snapped up. “What? Don’t be weird.”

His reaction made me feel better. He sounded more like himself. “You don’t be weird.”

“Weirdo.”

“Jerk.”

“Go back to your boyfriend.”

“Go back to your paperwork.”

He started laughing. “Glad to see some things never change.”

Then he was gone.

I didn’t think I was ever going to get used to that.

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The garage door opened. “Did you fall in the garbage bin?” Jake asked, sticking his head out.

“No. I’m short, but not that short.”

“You’re definitely bin size. Are you vaping?”

“No.” I had quit but now that he mentioned it, the urge came creeping back in. “I’m going to stay strong, I swear.”

“I’m not judging.”

“I know. But I need to process my emotions.”

“What emotion are you feeling right now?”

I smiled at him. “Grateful. That’s what I’m feeling.”

I was. Life was a little chaotic, but nothing too crazy, by recent standards anyway.

It was all good.

SIXTEEN

I tried to hold onto the feeling as I tried to corral a dozen elderly adults.

“Opening Night” had arrived.

The actors were all backstage, getting dressed in makeshift costumes with Alyssa's help. Even though the costumes were basically aprons and tunics and things that pulled over their heads, or wrapped around them, we were still getting a ton of complaints.

"This isn't my color," Sharon said, picking at the blue tunic she had on. "I'm an autumn."

"Well, mine is scratchy," Anne said, "so quit your whining."

Alyssa gave me a long look.

"How's yours Clifford?" she asked. He was resting in a chair, still recovering from his stab wound but quite the trooper.

"Huh?" he asked, before dragging his eyes away from Alyssa's cleavage to meet her stare. "Oh, yes, I'm fine. Absolutely wonderful, truth be told."

I rubbed my forehead. "Let's just stay focused."

The auditorium was filling up with family members and I just wanted to get this over with and end my directorial debut as soon as possible.

"Alyssa, do you have a water bottle?" My throat was dry and I was having a hard time swallowing. I felt a cough coming on.

"No, you know I don't take hydration seriously." Alyssa attempted to fuss with Anne's hair and got a hand slap for her efforts.

"I'm going to get something from the vending machine."

“That thing will steal your money,” Sharon told me. “It never works.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

I went into the hallway and almost ran into Sara Murphy.

“Hey, girl!” she said, reaching out and giving me a big hug. “Ready to break a leg?”

Sara was dressed like she was going to brunch on a yacht. She had a sundress on, wedge sandals, and a giant floppy hat and sunglasses. Both her hat and the fact that she was here, but not directing this show, irritated me. If she could be here to watch the show, remind me again why wasn’t she directing it?

“Hi, how are you? I’m just running to get myself a drink real quick. My throat is so dry I think I’m about to have a coughing fit.”

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“Want a sip?” Sara shook her giant pink tumbler in my direction.

“Yes, actually, thanks.” Normally I’m not a fan of sharing food or drink with people, but I wanted to avoid coughing. Once I cough, it never seems to stop, and I couldn’t be hacking in the wings, nor did I want to delay the start of this debacle masquerading as Shakespeare.

I took the tumbler from her expecting it would be water or boba. When a blast of cold sugary sweetness hit my palate my eyes nearly crossed.

“Whoa. That’s sweet.” I was still puckering a little.

“I like it sweet.” She sailed on down the hallway.

I watched her go, frowning. What was that flavor...

Then I realized exactly what it was. Blue slushie.

Just like the cup in the janitor’s room.

Did that mean Sara was just in the janitor’s closet for some random reason and left her drink behind? Or did she poison James? I didn’t even have confirmation there was poison in that cup I found because no one had it tested.

It also just occurred to me then that if I had thought there was poison in there, I shouldn’t have just left it on the shelf.

My investigation skills were rusty. Or more likely, I'd never had them.

Clifford came out of the makeshift dressing area.

"Clifford, where are you going? We're almost ready to start."

"Just got to hit the head real quick. My prostate isn't what it used to be."

File that under too much information.

"Try not to take too long." I peeked my head into the dressing area and debated if I had time to go to the janitor's closet and toss that drink if it was still there. It was clear there wasn't going to be any investigation and if there was, they would probably still conclude it was a suicide. So I didn't want to risk anyone else being parched and taking a sip of that drink. Was that likely? Probably not. But I didn't want to take that chance.

I checked my phone to see what time it was. Five minutes to curtain.

Then I went backstage and looked out at the audience. It was more people than I was expecting, which added to my anxiety. This was probably going to go down as one of my top ten most embarrassing life events.

It wasn't the cast's fault. It was mine, for not knowing what I was doing and being ill prepared to direct them. But ultimately it was Sara's for choosing such a difficult piece and for disappearing in the face of a tragedy like Mary's death. We could have canceled the show, but the cast had worked hard on it.

Biting my lip, I decided to make a run for the janitor's closet and alleviate at least one source of anxiety—the potentially deadly slushie.

What I saw when I opened the janitor's closet, was so shocking I almost pulled a Sara Murphy and passed out before throwing up.

Because what I was seeing was Sara Murphy, in the janitor's closet, kissing Clifford.

Not a granddaughterly cheek peck.

Not a good-to-see-you kiss.

But a dark closet passionate precursor to naked kiss.

Clifford's hand was gripping her backside and I didn't think it was for stability.

Sara didn't jump away from Clifford. She just blinked at the sudden light from the hallway, her sunglasses no longer on. She smiled at me brightly.

"Whoops. You caught us."

Then to compound my complete and total shock she lifted her left hand and announced, "Cliffie and I got married!"

My jaw dropped like a cartoon character. I had no idea what to say so I said, "I don't know what to say."

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“How about congratulations?” Clifford said, reaching out and clapping me on the shoulder far harder than an eighty-year-old who had just been stabbed by his now wife should be able to.

“Congratulations,” I parroted weakly.

It might have been the most insincere thing I’d ever said in my entire life.

“We’re ready for the curtain,” I said, too stunned to ask any questions.

But I did reach behind Sara and grab the cup that was still sitting there off the shelf. The replacement janitor obviously wasn’t top notch to have left it there this long. I ripped the lid off, dumped the contents in the rolling garbage can in the closet and tossed the cup in after. It was useless as evidence at this point and I didn’t want anyone drinking it.

“What the heck was that all about?” Clifford asked Sara, sounding more amused than anything else as I turned and exited the closet. “Always thought that girl was an odd bird.”

That made me bristle a little.

What was odd was a twenty-nine year old woman marrying an eighty-year old man and him not recognizing it for what it was, but hey, I wasn’t judging Clifford.

“Don’t be mean, pookie.”

Pookie?

Was this a cosmic joke?

Two pookies?

Shudders ran up my spine.

I didn't have a whole lot of time to reflect on it though because it was time to get this show rolling.

Twenty minutes later, I was in the wings, staring at the stage.

"You have got to be kidding me," I mumbled. "I am failing at all of this so much."

There had already been a couple of forgotten lines, a missed cue, and a wardrobe malfunction when Sharon's walker got caught in the hem on her tunic and tore it.

Now Mary's ghost was onstage reciting all of her lines as Thisbe right over top of Grandma, who was alive and delivering the lines. Mary was all in, even if she was a ghost, using hand gestures and a stronger voice than had ever been present at rehearsals when she was alive.

I had been one hundred percent convinced I had sent Mary to the other side and now here she was giving the performance of her life.

Her life.

Lord help me.

Fortunately, no one but me could see her so presumably the audience was enjoying

the play, such as it was.

We'd all seen Mary have a heart attack and by all accounts her life to that point had been uneventful. Why was she still hanging around?

There was a sudden slurping in my ear.

I turned to see Sara standing next to me, sucking down her slushie from her giant tumbler.

The hair on the back of my neck went up.

Was Sara actually a murderer?

No. There was no way. What reason would she have to kill James?

Besides, she had been eager to solve his murder when the cops didn't even think it was a murder. She'd gone to talk to James's brother.

She had also stabbed Clifford though.

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Who was now her husband. And who was rich. And had been with Mary before her death.

“How long have you and Clifford been together?” I murmured.

“Since I came on board as director.”

“Why?” I asked, because why not? She was eccentric so I could be impolite, right?

“Because life is disappointing, Bailey. I had my shot. I was supposed to be a star. I failed. It all slipped through my fingers. I’ve got my own Wikipedia page and here I am, back in Cleveland, living with my parents and broke as a joke.”

Everyone had a Wikipedia page. Even my mother had a Wikipedia page.

“So it’s about his money?”

“Of course. He has, what, maybe five years left in him? I’m an amazing actress. I can pretend to love him. I can pretend anything, really.”

I decided to shoot my shot. “Even pretend that you were trying to solve James’s murder when you’re the one who killed him?”

“You’re much more clever than I gave you credit for. You didn’t really seem all that smart in high school.”

That was unnecessary. “We had a competitive class,” I protested.

“Though you did fall for my acting skills.” She sipped again, looking calmly out onto the stage.

“Why would you kill James?”

“Because he got the antifreeze for me. I couldn’t risk buying that with cameras and receipts and whatnot. Then I couldn’t risk him telling anyone.”

I thought maybe I was caught up on her plan. “So you were going to poison Mary originally.”

“Yes, but then I couldn’t get Clifford to agree to marry me while he was still with Mary. Because I thought if she dies, people think he did it, he goes to prison, and I am his wife so I get all his money. But he didn’t want to be disloyal to her.”

“Well, that’s odd, considering he was already cheating on her with you.”

Sara smacked my arm. “Right? That’s what I thought! Men.”

This confession was a little too casual and detailed for my comfort. But I couldn’t resist the urge to ask about the stabbing. “You could have killed Clifford, you know.”

“Oh, well, that truly was an accident. He was supposed to stab himself. He’d just given me a hundred grand as a gift, free and clear, and I decided that was all I was going to get out of this, so I’d better just have him gone. I switched the knives. I was demonstrating, he moved, I don’t know what happened. But that was gross.”

Slurp, slurp.

I was getting a really bad feeling about all of this. “You know I’m not recording you,” I said. “My phone is in the dressing room.”

“That’s good.”

“And everything will just think I’m crazy if I tell them any of this. You know that, right?”

Pyramus was onstage right then finding Thisbe’s torn cloak and going wild with grief. Clifford was nailing it tonight.

“I don’t believe in taking chances,” she said.

Then she hit me on the back of the head with her steel tumbler.

SEVENTEEN

It wasn’t a hard enough blow to knock me unconscious.

But it did send me sprawling onto the stage, landing on my knees and my palms, the cell phone I had in fact been used to record Sara spinning across the stage.

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She wasn't the only actress.

There was a gasp from the audience. Then even more frantic cries.

I tried to stand up but I got knocked down again. This time when I hit the stage I saw Ryan above me. "Wh?—

Then excruciating pain shot through my ankle as I got clipped with a stage light falling from the rafters above.

I realized immediately if Ryan hadn't managed to shove me that would have landed on my head. In shock and pain, I collapsed back onto the stage floor, moaning.

A man appeared in front of me, staring down at me in concern.

Oh, my God. I knew this guy. It was the coroner from when James had died.

I was dead.

I had died at the hands of a bad actress in front of my parents and my grandmother and my boyfriend.

"Why?" I begged God and the universe and the coroner. "I didn't even get to see my engagement ring!" Then because I was me and I had to qualify everything, even dead, I added, "If there is one."

"What ring?" the coroner asked, lifted the bottom of my pants to look at my ankle.

I almost passed out from the pain.

Should death hurt this bad? I blinked and turned my head. That hurt too. Maybe I was still alive.

Grandma leaned over me. “Should we keep going with the play? She’s okay?”

Jake’s face appeared next to the other two. He looked worried, but not horrified. He took my hand and squeezed it.

“She may have broken her ankle. She certainly has a significant laceration. She’ll probably need stitches.”

“Does that mean I’m not dead?” I asked.

“Of course you’re not dead, Margaret.”

“Then why is the coroner here?” I groaned.

“This guy?” Grandma asked, thumbing her finger at the man tending to my ankle.
“He came with your mother.”

That had me sitting straight up. I realized the entire audience was staring at the stage, murmuring and looking uncertain what to do. Though some people had their phones up and were recording my suffering. Nothing was sacred anymore.

My mother was marching right up the stairs on the side of the stage. The cast of the play were staring at me wide-eyed, though Mary’s ghost continued to act out her lines.

Maybe I was in hell. Maybe I was actually dead.

“We should sue the senior center,” Grandma said. “That light just fell out of nowhere.”

I was pretty damn certain it was Sara Murphy who had made that happen. “I’m not suing anyone. Quick, grab my phone.”

An old nursery rhyme from childhood popped into my head.

Call the doctor. Call the nurse. Call the lady with the alligator purse.

I needed them all right now.

But Clifford was holding my phone. What the heck?

“Bailey, are you okay?” my mother demanded. “Dave, how is she?”

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“Mom, why is the coroner at Grandma’s play with you?” I had a sneaking suspicion why but I wanted confirmation.

“We’re dating. He came with me.”

“That was really nice of you,” I told Dave, the coroner. I was impressed.

He shrugged, looking a little sheepish. “It seemed important to your mother so sure, why not? But we need to get you off for an X-ray and some stitches.”

“Thanks, Dave.” I looked at Jake and said, “Clifford has my phone.”

“You kids, always so worried about your darn phones,” Grandma said.

“Can you get it and tell the audience the play will resume in five minutes?”

“We’re finishing the play?” Grandma asked.

“The show must go on,” I told her, channeling my inner actress. “I don’t want to disappoint anyone.”

“This show has been really entertaining so far,” Jake said, giving me a smile.

It didn’t reach his eyes though. He looked worried about me.

I was a little worried about me too. The pain was making it difficult to think. But he did go and retrieve my phone from Clifford, who didn’t appear to be an accomplice in

my attempted murder. Or his own.

But there was honestly no telling at this point.

My father appeared and he looked worried as well. “You okay, Ginger?”

I hated that nickname but because he looked genuinely concerned it actually dredged up nostalgia for me. It reminded me of being a little girl and crawling into his lap.

“Dave says I’m going to live,” I told him.

“Who the hell is Dave?”

“Me,” the coroner said.

“He’s dating Mom.”

My father’s cheeks turned redder than usual. My mother looked smug.

Jake smoothed my hair back and kissed my forehead before leaning up and picking me up in the most incredible display of strength and sexiness yet.

The whole auditorium suddenly started clapping.

“This could be romantic.” I flung my arms around his neck. “Except I’m trying not to throw up.”

I also didn’t know where the hell Sara had gone but I felt safe with Jake.

“I wouldn’t even care if you did,” he said.

And I believed him.

Five hours later I was comfortably ensconced on our sofa in our newly redone and serene living room. Jake had propped my ankle on pillows and gently placed an ice pack on it. I had refused the painkillers but I was given four ibuprofen at the hospital, which had dulled the pain. I had six stitches from the laceration and the verdict was a sprain.

Considering it was the same ankle I had sprained when I got hit (intentionally) by a car in the fall, it wasn't surprising that I'd reinjured it in my fall. The light had caused the cut, not the sprain, according to the general consensus of Dave, the ER doctor, Jake, and my opinionated mother.

My father had no opinion, had just offered me a drink when he had driven Grandma home after the play.

She was sitting across from me now in an easy chair watching *The Bachelor* with me.

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“I don’t think this man is ready to get married,” she said, pointing to the screen. “He doesn’t even wear socks with his shoes.”

I had no idea how that made a man marriage worthy or not but it reminded me of the bombshell earlier today. “Sara Murphy told me that she and Clifford are married.”

“What? That’s absurd.”

My thoughts exactly. “He didn’t deny it and I saw them kissing in the janitor’s closet.” Which now that I thought about it, was extra disgusting because James had died in there.

“That little hussy.”

I wasn’t normally a fan of calling other women names but in this case it might be warranted. “I think Clifford was cheating on Mary.”

“That bastard. He deserved to be filleted like a fish. There’s too much competition for these men as it is. None of my friends need to compete with hot-to-trot thirty-year olds.”

“I wouldn’t call Sara Murphy hot-to-trot,” Jake said, bringing me a smoothie for my dinner.

My stomach was still upset so he’d blended up fruit and a protein shake.

“You better not,” I said. “But we should warn Clifford. I mean, Sara told me straight

to my face that her plan was to kill Mary in a really horrific way.”

“Is there a good way to be killed?” Jake asked.

“Don’t joke around,” Grandma said. “But listen, I agree we should tell Clifford. Not that he’ll listen.”

“Why wouldn’t he listen to that?” I asked.

Grandma gestured to her chest. “Because of Sara.”

Jake actually let out a laugh and then stopped himself mid-chuckle.

“I’ll call him,” Grandma said. “We go way back.”

What followed was a convoluted conversation with Clifford on her cell on speaker that made me wonder if I was in fact on painkillers and completely high.

It went like this after they exchanged pleasantries and he asked about my injury:

Grandma: “That little Sara told my Bailey she is only with you for the money.”

Clifford: “I’m no idiot. Of course she’s with me for the money. Which is why I gave her a hundred grand and locked up the rest of my money with a prenup that she signed, but that she thought was a life insurance policy on me. She signs contracts without reading them, can you believe it?”

Grandma: “These kids today. They’ll read anything on their phone but hand them a legal document and they just sign their life away.”

Clifford: “It’s bananas. That’s why I put my money into a trust too for the grandkids.

They'll spend it all on crypto and trying to be social media influencers if they just get a big wad of cash."

Grandma: "Bailey makes a living picking out kitchen cabinets for people. Who needs help with that?"

Clifford: "Indecisive generation."

I glanced over at Jake and tried really, really hard not to roll my eyes.

Grandma: "Anyhoo. Turns out Sara tried to poison Mary and then couldn't pull it off."

Clifford: "Mary had a heart attack, God rest her soul."

Grandma: "I know, because Sara couldn't pull it off. But she wanted her claws in you."

Clifford: "They're in me. But at least I'll die happy."

Grandma: "What if she tries to kill you?"

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Clifford: "At least I'll die happy."

Jake just shook his head.

Grandma: "I'll be at your funeral."

Clifford: "Oh, listen, I need to go. Sara's choking on her slushie."

The call went dead.

I stiffened and looked over at them. "She's choking on herslushie? That's...weird."

Grandma shrugged. "Everything is weird."

EIGHTEEN

I debated attending Sara Murphy's funeral.

In the end I went, hobbling on crutches, because it felt like the end point needed to my story with the high school It girl turned wanna-be actress turned murderer.

I took a seat in the back of the funeral home between Alyssa and Grandma. Jake had to work so he wasn't with us. Not that he needed to be. He didn't exactly have warm feelings toward the woman who had tried to kill me with theatrical lighting.

"I can't believe she hit her head on the toilet and died," Alyssa murmured to me. "Like woof. What a lousy way to go out."

“Once she realized she’d sipped from the wrong slushie she went to make herself throw up and slipped on the polished granite floors.”

“That’s what I call karma,” Grandma said. “Tried to kill Clifford, wound up killing herself.”

James’s ghost took a seat next to Grandma. He turned to her and spoke. “Definitely karma.”

“See? You can rest easy now,” Grandma told him.

His eyes widened in that way ghosts always did when they finally caught the attention of the living. “You can see me?”

“Sure can, James. Thanks for being so nice whenever I saw you at the senior center. You’re a good man.”

“Thank you. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do now though.”

“I think it will sort itself out. You won’t be stuck hanging around.” She patted his ghostly knee.

“Thank you.” He gave her a smile and stood up and walked away.

Clifford was standing in front by the casket, looking remarkably unconcerned about having buried a girlfriend and a wife just a few weeks apart from each other. He had a beer in his hand.

Sara’s parents looked stunned and were not shedding any tears. Some of our high school classmates were there, including the guy Alyssa had recently dated. She’d gotten a great deal of pleasure out of telling him she was recently married.

Which again, I didn't think she really was, but she and Lawson were still dating and I wasn't going to begrudge her petty revenge with a high school bully.

I had chosen to wear a flowing black dress in a nod to Sara's over the top look at Mary's funeral. "I guess she actually was a pretty good actress," I said. "She had me fooled for a minute."

"You were ready to jet off to Cabo with her on a girls' weekend," Alyssa said. "I'd say she had you fooled."

"She had me fooled too," Anne barked, dropping down into the seat James had vacated. "I can usually read people better than that. It was the passing out and the throwing up when she stabbed Clifford. That seemed real."

"Maybe it was. Some people don't like blood."

"That's why women usually chose poison as their weapon of choice," Grandma said. "It's not so personal."

"I'd say dosing someone with antifreeze is pretty personal," Alyssa said wryly.

We all reflected on that.

“Whatta say we get out of here and go get some lunch?” Anne said. “I could use a margarita after this nonsense.”

“I will never turn down tacos and tequila,” Alyssa said.

“I’m in. Grandma?”

“Got nowhere else to be.”

When we stood up, me adjusting myself on my crutches, she grabbed my arm.

“You know Ryan saved you, right? That light was headed straight for your head.”

I nodded. “I know.” Ryan was fifteen feet away right now, watching us. He’d been in and out the last few days, but he only watched me from a distance. We hadn’t spoken.

But I understood what had happened. He’d looked at paperwork he wasn’t supposed to and he’d seen that I was scheduled to die that night. It was why he’d been so strange on my birthday. He’d intervened and saved my life.

Neither one of us were ready to say that out loud or discuss it in any way.

But I knew the truth. He was written all over his face every time he looked at me.

He’d sacrificed the next step in his afterlife journey for me.

There was nothing I could do to repay him for that.

Except maybe name my firstborn after him and I had a hard time seeing Jake agreeing to that.

“There’s an Irish proverb,” Grandma said.

“Of course there is.”

“Shush. Listen to me. It’s “May the hinges of our friendship never grow rusty.” That’s you and Ryan. It’s stood the test of time and death. That’s a beautiful thing, Margaret.”

“It really is.”

I looked over at Ryan and gave him a wink.

Except I suck at winking and only managed to just squint really hard and look like I had a hair in my eye.

Ryan laughed.

And I knew everything was okay.

“There’s another one,” Anne said, having overheard Grandma. “It’s a lonely washing that has no man’s shirt in it.” Think there will be cute guys at the taco joint?”

“If there is, they won’t be looking at you,” Grandma retorted.

“A girl can dream.”

“A midsummer night’s dream?” I asked, feeling cheeky.

“Margaret, it’s only May.”

“May is the month of expectation, the month of wishes, the month of hope,” Anne said. “That’s Emily Brontë.”

“Or in this case, the month of funerals.”

“Let’s hope that’s the last one,” Alyssa said. “Though it is almost June.”

With that, we headed to get tacos.

And it wasn’t even a Tuesday.