



Transatlantic Terror Cruise

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Category: Crime And Mafia, Suspense, Mystery

Description: Ransom and I are finally setting sail on our much-anticipated post-wedding getaway, and I've promised myself no distractions. Just sun, sea, and some solid alone time with the man of my dreams. But when fate—and by fate, I mean my husband—has to step back into vessel security duty, that plan sinks faster than a badly constructed sandcastle.

With Ransom otherwise occupied, I decide to spend my days sipping mocktails and lounging with my octogenarian besties, Bess and Nettie. At least that's the plan until I hear about the true crime podcast enthusiast group onboard—an entire crowd of amateur sleuths just like me, solving mysteries for fun. You better believe I'm chomping at the bit to join their merry band of clue-chasers.

But when Bess, Nettie, and I stumble upon a real-life murder victim, the ship's carefree vibes take a hard turn into dangerous waters.

Suddenly, the true crime junkies are trading theories like poker chips, everyone's a suspect, and the killer might be hiding in plain sight—blending in with the group that ironically lives for murder.

The stakes have never been higher, the suspects never wilder, and if I don't solve this case fast, "happily ever after" might turn into "til death do us part" sooner than I'd like.

Because love may be in the air... but so is a killer.

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CHAPTER1

The Killer

Two hours from now....

TheWhispers of the Wickedpodcast gathering fills the lounge with laughter and lies.

Such a perfect audience, a room full of true crime enthusiasts who would soon have a mystery of their own to solve—one that I’m about to hand-deliver.

The irony is almost too good to fathom.

And there he stands in the center of it all, the king of his well-curated kingdom. Holding court, sharing stories about other people’s tragedies while creating fresh ones with each breath. Every smile, every touch, every promise he has ever made has been broken—and they have all led to this delicious moment.

Bile rises in the back of my throat as I watch him work the crowd. His every smile and handshake stoke a rage inside me that has been simmering for months. Each laugh he expels feels personal, as if he’s outright mocking me. Each gesture is a stark reminder of the power he’s wielded over me without mercy. A reminder of all the dreams he’s turned to dust. Not to mention the thought of freedom that he’s dangled like bait, and then yanked away with a cruel,cruelsmile.

No more.

It all ends tonight.

He ends tonight.

The party swirls around us as ice clinks in glasses, as incessant laughter floats to the ceiling, as the mindless chatter about other people's grisly endings titillates the masses.

These true crime groupies are far too distracted to see the true crime coming their way.

A case of a lifetime is about to be gifted right to their feet.

Just a few more minutes of pretending.

A few more moments of being exactly who everyone expects of me, of wearing the mask that's become second nature.

Then everything changes.

The king of this castle is about to star in the final episode of his own podcast.

And I'm going to make sure it's a cold case for the ages.

CHAPTER 2

Emerald Queen of the Seas, Royal Lineage Cruise Lines

Transatlantic Cruise

Itinerary

10 Day Cruise

Day One = Departure from Manhattan Cruise Terminal

Day Two = At Sea

Day Three = At Sea

Day Four = At Sea

Day Five = At Sea

Day Six = At Sea

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Day Seven = At Sea

Day Eight = At Sea

Day Nine = At Sea

Day Ten = Southampton, England

While Trixie's Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Greetings, you yummy little minxes! Elodie Abernathy here (the ship's resident expert in all things deliciously inappropriate). I'll be taking over Trixie's blog while the new Mrs. Baxter is busy with her own personal ship inspection with our hunky head of security. Don't worry, she'll be back once she's thoroughly examined every inch of her honeymoon suite. In the meantime, you're stuck with me and my expertise in all things nautically naughty.

So please, write in and tell me how I can make your life more delicious.

Don't worry, I'll be gentle.

I always am.

At least the first time.

XOXO Elodie

Trixie

People think cruise ships are all about leisure, but the real magic happens in those few frantic hours between bon voyage and welcome aboard.

It's like watching an entire city pack up, move out, restock, clean, and welcome new residents—all while floating on glistening seas. The moment the last passenger waddles down the gangway (still digesting that farewell breakfast buffet), an army of crew members descends on the ship like a highly choreographed SWAT team armed with vacuum cleaners and fresh linens.

While housekeeping performs what can only be described as an all-out sprint through two thousand staterooms, the loading dock transforms into organized chaos. Fresh produce arrives by the truckload—enough to feed a small country or one very determined midnight buffet enthusiast.

The liquor supply gets restocked (because nothing depletes a ship's rum reserves quite like a conga line of first-time cruisers), mountains of fresh towels appear, and every surface gets sanitized enough to meet surgical standards.

Meanwhile, new passengers begin to stream aboard with enough luggage to sink a battleship—although not this quasi-battleship—all while crew members smile and do their best to pretend they haven't just turned over an entire floating resort in less time than it takes most people to decide what to eat for breakfast in the morning.

But it's not morning, it's late afternoon, and I'm not at the buffet trying to decide between French toast or pancakes—or in my case, both. I'm in one of the ship's opulent honeymoon suites, and lucky, lucky me, I just so happen to be on my honeymoon as well.

“A little to the right.” I grunt, shifting my weight.

“I’m trying,” Ransom mutters with his breath hot against my ear.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, just stick it in, would you?” I pant, just about losing all of my patience with the man.

“Believe me, I’m giving it one hundred percent, but it doesn’t seem to fit.” He grunts twice as hard, and I can feel his muscles tense.

“I wish Wes were here so he could see this catastrophe firsthand,” I say with a sigh. “I bet he’d be livid.”

“Well, he is the captain. Everything that goes wrong on this ship is technically his fault,” Ransom growls out the words regarding his quasi-nemesis. “Trixie, I think we need to give up.” He blows out a hard breath. “This is clearly a lost cause. I wish we would have known what we were getting into from the beginning. I would have never agreed to any of this.”

“You and me both. What a disappointment.”

“Hey”—he pulls me close and nuzzles my neck as his five o’clock shadow tickles my skin. “Don’t let this disappoint you. We’ll have fun blaming Wes together. Just remember our motto, anything that goes wrong in this stateroom is all his fault. After all, he’s the one who gifted it to us.”

A dark laugh rumbles through the both of us as we stare up at the broken curtain rod.

It fell down with a crash last night—during the first night of our honeymoon and we promptly ignored it. But as morning came, far too much daylight poured into our cabin and we promptly ignored that, too. After all, we had much more important things to tend to—like each other.

And, oh my word, I always knew that Ransom was a beast when it came to justice, but now I know without a doubt that he's twice the beast in the bedroom. It's safe to say he's also brought justice to the rumors of his sexual prowess, and he's made sure to right all the wrongs I've ever had behind closed doors.

But I digress. Ransom and I squint at the window as the late afternoon sun reflects off the endless expanse of ocean, turning our honeymoon suite into a spotlight-drenched stage. The salt-tinged breeze sneaks through the open gap of the sliding door, carrying with it the distant sounds of passengers already enjoying their vacation.

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Ransom and I started our honeymoon last night as the leaf peeping tour up the Eastern Seaboard ended, and this cruise, the transatlantic adventure, began (both occurring within hours of each other) and we've yet to leave our cabin.

My eyes flit back to that window where I stare up at the orange glowing sky. "But I swear I saw someone," I insist, squinting against the glare. "There was a woman, peering right in."

It's true. Right in the middle of getting hot and heavy with my new husband, I happened to open my eyes in that direction and spotted what I thought was a redhead peering in at us.

The horror! I've never been more mortified in my life.

Ransom's hands slide down to my waist as he turns me to face him. His touch leaves a trail of warmth that makes me forget about any mysterious redheaded peeping Toms.

"It's impossible," he says just above a whisper as we snuggle close underneath the sheets. "Unless she sprouted wings or learned to walk on water. We're facing the open sea."

"I know, that's what's so strange. Maybe she's a mermaid?" I tease, running my fingers along his chest. Before we met, Ransom had quite the reputation as a ladies' man. And now? Well, let's just say I'm the only lady in his orbit. "Heaven knows that all the females on dry land aren't happy that you're off the market. I'd venture to guess the girls below the waterline aren't too thrilled either."

“A mermaid?” A gentle laugh rumbles from his chest to mine. “I don’t think you need to be worried about competition from on land or the sea.”

“Good,” I say, dotting his lips with a kiss. “Because I don’t like to share my toys.”

Ransom growls out a laugh as he runs heated kisses up and down my neck, garnering a growl of a laugh from me, too.

The Emerald Queen of the Seas set sail yesterday for a ten-day transatlantic cruise.

Ten glorious days I plan to spend right here in this deluxe honeymoon suite with my shiny, new, far too delicious husband. Nothing but room service, ocean views, and Ransom Courtland Baxter on an endless loop.

The thought makes me giddy—or maybe that’s just the gentle roll of the ship beneath us. Most likely both.

I lean back to admire him—tall, jet-black hair, with a body that could turn any and every saint into a sinner. And those blue eyes of his are enough to make all the cobalt on the planet green with envy. But boy, how they have the power to melt me. Every ounce of Ransom has the power to do just that.

“You’re staring again,” he murmurs, nuzzling his kisses up toward my ear.

“Can you blame me? I did just marry the most eligible bachelor on the high seas.” I trace a finger down his chest once again. “Although I suppose you’re not eligible anymore.”

“Oh honey.” A low growl of a laugh emits from him. “I haven’t been on the eligible list since the day I met you,” he says, and my heart does a little flip.

Even after all this time, he still has that effect on me. And I don't see that stopping anytime soon.

It's still surreal how we got here. A year ago, I was just another jilted wife who escaped to the high seas after catching my ex in a compromising position—or three. Come to think of it, there were probably more. Now I'm living my second chance at happily ever after, complete with three of the best friends a girl could ask for who just so happen to live on this ship as well. Sure, there were a few bumps along the way—including the fact the captain, our good friend Wes, had thrown his hat into the romantic ring—but my heart knew where it belonged.

A glint from the sun catches my wedding ring and sends rainbow prisms glittering across the walls. I'm still getting used to the weight of it, the way it catches the light, and the heartfelt promise it represents.

“Have I mentioned how beautiful you look in the morning?” Ransom's voice drops to a lower register, which makes my knees weak. “And in the late afternoon? And I can't forget the evening.”

A round of giggles bubbles from me. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“Is that so, Mrs. Baxter?” His lips find that tender spot below my ear. “Nothing is going to tear me away from you,” he murmurs, and my toes curl just hearing it.

The scent of his cologne mingles with the ocean breeze, and just like that, I forget about the broken curtain rod entirely when an ornery chirp that sounds like a woodpecker cuts through the silence—aka his phone.

Ransom pauses for a moment and I can feel his muscles tense against me before he resumes his attention right where it belongs—on my neck.

The phone trills again—or pecks for that matter—and this time it sounds twice as insistent as it was before.

His arm moves back and I do my best to reel it in.

“Don’t,” I warn as his body tenses once again. “Whatever it is, it can’t be important.”

“I’m sure it’s not.” He winces. “But that’s the security desk trying to get ahold of me. It’s the only one I’ve dedicated that annoying sound to.”

“I guess if duty calls.” A heavy sigh escapes me as I pat his chest. “I bet it’s Quinn asking where you put the stapler.”

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Quinn Riddle is Ransom's counterpart down in vessel security, the exact counterpart who solemnly vowed to take care of the ship while we were on our honeymoon.

She also happens to have the hots for Ransom, and so help me, if she's trying to sabotage my honeymoon—or more to the point, so helper. I would like to think she wouldn't dare, but honestly, I don't think it's beneath her either.

The phone chirps again, and for reasons unknown, it manages to sound more urgent this time, so he scoops it up in haste.

Ransom glances at the screen and his expression shifts ever so slightly—and I have a feeling that subtle change means duty is about to win over desire.

“Let me guess,” I sigh. “Something is about to tear you away from me.”

He lands a kiss to my forehead. “I'm quickly learning you are always right.”

“Okay, I'm resigned to the fact you have to go, but just promise me you'll come back in one piece.”

“I'll do my best.” He flexes a dry smile. “I love you, Mrs. Baxter.”

“I love you, too.” I give him a kiss and it's long, hot, and lingering. “Even if you did marry me under false pretenses regarding your curtain-hanging abilities.”

“If I hung those curtains, I can assure you they wouldn't have fallen down to begin with.” He lands another heated kiss to my lips before pulling back and frowning at his

phone. “Tell you what—I’ll make it up to you with room service when I get back. The works. How does breakfast for dinner sound? Chocolate chip pancakes, extra bacon?—”

“Now you’re just trying to butter me up.” I try to peek at his phone screen, but he’s already replaced it on the nightstand.

“Is it working?”

“Almost. You will make it up to me,” I tease, running my fingers through his thick hair. “But it won’t be by way of a breakfast buffet. Perhaps a buffet of another variety. Although you’re not off the hook for those chocolate chip pancakes either. I’m a sucker for breakfast for dinner.”

“Another reason we’re a perfect fit.” He kisses me once again—quick, but thorough enough to make me wish we could ignore that phone completely, or toss it into the sea. Maybe that redheaded mermaid needs to make a call?

“Save my spot?” he murmurs hot into my ear.

“Always.” I watch as he pulls back, already shifting from honeymoon mode to the head of vessel security.

“Hey, if you want, why don’t you run around the ship?” he offers. “See the new blood on board, maybe catch up with Bess and Nettie?”

I nod at the thought. “Maybe I will.”

“Good.” He lands another kiss to my cheek. “Try not to let any major catastrophes get in the way of some fun.”

“Major catastrophes?” I tease, shooting him a look for even going there. “Like running out of room on my plate after I hit the mac and cheese at the buffet?”

We both know what kinds of catastrophes I specialize in, and they have less to do with cheese-riddled carbohydrates and more to do with murder.

His phone chirps again, and this time he shakes his head as he stares at the screen.

“Ransom, what is it?” I gasp.

“It’s Quinn. She’s in trouble.”

CHAPTER3

While Trixie’s Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Welcome again to your new cruise life guru! While Trixie explores the finer points of ship security—extensively, I might add—I’ll be your guide to all things deliciously inappropriate at sea. Consider me your compass to nautical naughtiness.

Dear Elodie,

My boyfriend and I just booked our first cruise, and I’m nervous about the small cabin size. Any tips for making the most of the limited space?

Cramped Quarters Carrie

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Dear Carrie,

Who said small spaces can't be exciting? Think of it as an opportunity to get creative with your storage solutions. Those cabin walls are surprisingly sturdy (trust me), and the shower? Let's just say it's designed for thorough cleanliness. As for the bed, well, they don't call it a king-size for nothing.

Remember—it's not about the size of the cabin, it's about how you use it. Although I do recommend keeping your voice down. These walls aren't quite as thick as some couples wish they would be.

Happy sailing (and other activities),

XOXO Elodie

P.S. The balcony furniture is far more versatile than you'd think.

Trixie

“Okay, so he had to work,” I mumble to myself as I merge with a crowd of anxious passengers. “It's not like it's the end of the world.” A small group of women breezes by chattering a mile a minute and I scoot to the edge of the wall. “Although it might be the end of my honeymoon.” And perhaps my sanity, considering the fact I'm talking to myself in public.

The crowds buzzing around with electric energy, the light scent of cleanser in the air, and the sparkle and shine of any and every surface my eye can see assures me that

this is indeed the first official day of a brand-new voyage.

With fifteen decks available to the public, close to three thousand staterooms, and a passenger capacity that edges toward seven thousand, the Emerald Queen of the Seas is a city on the water. A city built for entertainment, that is. And with a waterpark, a quasi-amusement park—complete with a midway, an IMAX movie theater, in addition to a Broadway-worthy theater, an entire gaggle of comedy clubs, bars, dance clubs, and a casino—this ship can keep even the most captive audience entertained for weeks. And good thing, since every last soul on this ship will be a captive audience for the next ten days. That's actually one of the reasons it makes for such a great honeymoon cruise—except for now. But that's not the ship's fault—just one of the ship's employees who goes by the name Quinn Riddle.

But I try not to think about her. Instead, I take a look around at the glorious structure that I call my floating home and I can't help but smile.

The Emerald Queen's interior deck shimmers with opulence with its brass fixtures gleaming and an army of crystal chandeliers throwing iridescent rainbows across the polished floors. The excited chatter of fresh passengers mingles with the soft ding of slot machines from the nearby casino, and for some reason, I find it the most comforting sound in the world.

My comfy gray sweats and hoodie feel outright rebellious against all this grandeur, but I don't care. I'm intoxicated by it all—the fresh-start energy of a new cruise and the promise of adventures ahead.

Someone lets out a sharp whistle and I stop shy of the casino entrance. Before I can fully turn around, I'm ambushed by two of my favorite octogenarians—Bess and Nettie.

Bess Chatterley is a smart and confident redhead who looks put together, per usual,

with a sensible teal cardigan and matching slacks, but she's added a crimson scarf for a splash of contrast.

Bess used to work as a teacher back in Vermont before she tossed her cheating ex to the curb and claimed her spot on the high seas. Our origin stories are nearly identical, save for about twenty years.

And Nettie Butterworth bops dutifully by her side, sporting her trademark gray tumbleweed of hair and a kaftan that could double as a paint sample for the entire color wheel.

Nettie had a similar experience with men, but her desire to live on the ship had more to do with eschewing traditional society so she could live out her carefree hippie dreams. Not to mention the endless supply of chocolate had more than a little to do with it, too.

"I told you it was her!" Nettie leaps and claps with the enthusiasm of a trained seal as she points my way.

Bess shakes her head and gags. "And here I thought I was the one seeing a ghost for a change. Although let's face it, Trixie, if I was seeing your ghost, that would be a strong indication that your honeymoon went sideways."

"Slippery when wet comes to mind," Nettie says, nodding my way and both Bess and I open our mouths, but not a single sound comes out.

"Well, great news," I say. "I'm not a ghost. Not yet, at least."

Both Bess and Nettie know that I can see clear to the other side. It's sort of a new thing with me.

It turns out, I'm something called transmundane, further classified as supersensual—an otherworldly gift that wasn't initiated in me until these two sweet ladies bonked me over the head with a rogue bottle of liquor. There was a struggle between the two of them and, well, I got in the way. Fast-forward—not only do they know all about my supernatural quirk, but so do Ransom and the captain.

And I'm not saying a word about my supernatural abilities to another living soul on this ship—not even the dead ones. Not that there are any. Thank goodness. And knock on—well, there's no wood for me to knock on at the moment, but you get the point.

A tall tornado of a woman whizzes by before backtracking, and it's none other than Tinsley Thornton, my on-ship nemesis—aka the cruise director.

She's dressed in the requisite uniform of a crisp white shirt and navy pencil skirt, accessorized with her trademark frown that never seems to leave her face.

Tinsley is a stunner, though, with those long chestnut locks of hers, perennially tan skin, and dark glowing eyes that sort of give her that I-belong-to-the-dark-side appeal. And I so believe she does.

I don't have anything against Tinsley per se, but she certainly has a beef with me—namely that she thinks I stole both Ransom and Wes away from her. While it's true that their romantic interests may have floated in my direction, I had nothing to do with swaying either of them away from her. Aside from the fact of just being me.

“What in the world is going on?” Tinsley gasps as she rakes her eyes up and down my body. “Did you escape Ransom's lair, or did he finally come to his senses and give you the boot?”

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Before I can answer, a sharp gasp punctuates the air as a saucy blonde bounces into our midst.

It's my other on-ship bestie, Elodie Abernathy.

Elodie is about my age—midlife and loving it—and she originally hails from South Africa with the cute accent to prove it. She's as thin as a rail and ironically a self-proclaimed maneater. She also happens to manage all of the shops here in the Queen's Mall.

"Mother Earth," she practically gags as she inspects my clothes. And why is gagging upon inspection of me suddenly a running theme?

Elodie sniffs. "I guess we know the answer to Tinsley's question. Clearly, Ransom kicked you out for your flagrant fashion offense. Leave it to you to send your newly minted nuptials to heck in aschlubbyhandbasket."

"I am not schlubby," I say, glancing down at my less than stellar, ratherschlubbyattire. Okay, so the sweats were a questionable move. But I gasp in mock offense nonetheless. "Elodie, and here I thought we were friends."

"Oh, we're the best of friends," she muses as she taps something into her phone. "That's exactly why I'll be replacing your wardrobe with something a little more appropriate for a woman on her honeymoon."

"Elodie." I wrinkle my nose at her. "You've already stocked my cabin with enough naughty nighties to outfit the Moulin Rouge."

“The Moulin Rouge?” Nettie rubs her hands together. “Now we’re getting to the good part. Tell us, Trix, what’s Handsome Ransom like beneath the sheets? Is he a rocker or a roller?”

“My money is on both,” Bess says under her breath.

All three of them lean in at once, but that only makes me press my lips tight in response. I’m not one to kiss and tell. Or do a myriad of other sexual shenanigans and spill a single word.

“Iknewit,” Tinsley hisses. “He didn’t touch you! I bet he’s off to get an annulment, right as we speak.”

“He didntouch me,” I hiss right back, and the three of them lean in even closer. “But that’s as much as I’m willing to divulge. Ransom had some emergency he had to deal with. I just thought I’d pop out and see how the beginning of the cruise is going. The first full day is always one of my favorites.”

A large crowd of rather dapper looking men and women in pantsuits walk by with purpose and they manage to draw the attention of the other passengers—us included.

“Looks as if there’s a conference of some sort on board,” I say. “Let me guess. A dental convention?”

“Guess again.” Bess shakes her head, and if I’m not mistaken, there’s a twinkle in her eyes as if she’s in the know. “Here’s a hint, I have a feeling you’re going to want to join in on the fun.”

“Then it’s for sure not a dental convention,” I’m quick to tell her.

“You better believe your bridal britches,” Nettie says. “If those people are interested

in teeth, it's purely for identification purposes. And speaking in on joining the fun, Bess and I were on our way to do just that. If you have a second, you should join us."

"You're not keeping me away," Tinsley says, craning her neck as the crowd flows toward one of the lounges in the back. "I've been counting down the days for this trip."

"I'm going as well," Elodie says, running her fingers through her blonde locks. "There are some real lookers on board, and the Queen's Mall isn't open for duty-free shopping just yet. I've got some time to kill." She winks as she links her arm with mine. "And trust me when I say, we're going to have a murderously good time."

A shiver runs up my spine as she says it while Bess and Nettie lead the way.

I glance back at the casino, and for a brief second a redhead blinks into view just shy of one of the slot machines.

I pause for a moment because she looks startlingly familiar and a breath hitches in my throat as it comes back to me.

It's the lady in the window! The so-called mermaid who was outright spying on Ransom and me for far too long earlier this afternoon.

I'm about to redirect Elodie and head in the direction of the casino and give that peeping Tom a piece of my mind when the redhead up and disappears—seemingly into thin air.

A crowd pushes through and now I can't find her anywhere.

"Oh wow," I mutter, still staring in that direction.

“What’s the matter?” Elodie asks as she pulls me along to catch up with the rest of our group. “You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

I suck in quick breath.

I had better not have seen a ghost.

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We fall into step and I cast another quick glance in the direction of the casino.

But something tells me that's exactly what I just saw.

And if I did, well, that means a very sinister event is afoot.

And that sinister event would bemurder.

CHAPTER4

The double doors of the Neptune Lounge stand wide open, exposing the rows and rows of crystal chandeliers inside as they cast a warm glow over the blooming crowd.

A metallic sign propped on an easel readsWelcome to Whispers of the Wicked Podcast Cruise—where murder meets martinis on the high seas!And there's a Post-it note slapped onto the sign that readsKillers not included!

“Famous last words,” Bess mutters while adjusting her crimson silk scarf. “Nothing attracts a killer like a no killers allowed sign. They're essentially tempting fate.”

“Honey, on this ship?” Nettie's gray hair wobbles as she shakes her head. “Fate doesn't need any tempting. It's got Trixie here to do its dirty work.”

“Hey, I resent that.” A partial laugh bubbles up my throat. “The bodies find me, not the other way around.”

“Same difference,” Elodie says, pulling me closer to her as if she were trying to

protect me from myself—or more to the point, protect others from me. Now that I think about it, it's probably the latter. "Face it, Trixie, you attract killers like moths to a flame. Or in your case, corpses to a cruise."

Tinsley's eyes widen in horror my way. "You had better not attract so much as a fly." A loud yelp goes off by the door as a crowd amasses and Tinsley's attention is quickly hijacked. "Oh, it's him!" Her enthusiasm spikes to never before seen heights and her demeanor changes on a dime. Gone is that sourpuss she reserves just for me, and it's quickly replaced with an unbridled—joy?

Tinsley waves enthusiastically at an older couple standing at the door as they busy themselves by greeting the throngs of people pouring into the lounge.

"That's Brad Whipple and his wife, Elvie—the podcast power duo themselves," Tinsley hums out the words, mostly to herself. "Elvie helps him run the podcast, but it's basically Brad's show. He's the true crime junkie of the two. And she likes to call herself the true crime junkie widow because of all the time he spends researching cases."

"Interesting," I say as I examine the couple in a whole new light.

They look pleasant enough as they greet each guest with a handshake and a smile.

I'm about to step over to get a better look at them when a heavier woman in a purple knit cardigan barrels between us. That cardigan of hers hangs past her knees and reminds me more of a robe than a sweater, but despite the fact, she's holding a tray with tiny shot glasses filled with a bright pink cocktail of some sort. Two larger glasses stand apart from the sea of shot glasses and they both have a picture of a crown on them, and just above those crowns it reads Killer King and the other Killer Queen.

It's Brad and Elvie who scoop up the drinks fit for royalty and quickly thank the woman as well.

"Salute," Elvie calls out to the crowd and the tiny shot glasses are all scooped up as we make our way to the front. "Just remember, Pink Primrose Punch can also be an invaluable part of your beauty routine when added to your bubble bath!"

"Or you can use it as a foot soak," Brad quips, and a raucous laugh circles through the crowd.

If looks could kill, Elvie just eviscerated him.

I'm guessing the pink potion is directly related to her heart or her ego somehow. Probably both. Heck, I've got a favorite strawberry banana smoothie that the ship serves, and trust me when I say, I wouldn't mind bathing in it sometime.

Hey? That sounds like a delightful honeymoon idea if ever there was one.

Both Brad and Elvie look somewhere in their mid-fifties, tired from a long day of travel, but seem rather determined to let their crime-fighting hair down despite the fact.

Brad is handsome enough. His good looks probably peaked during the Reagan administration, but he's continued to age like expensive whiskey. He's a silver fox who's oozing charm in his Italian wool suit and a burgundy Hermes silk tie. I can spot a knockoff a mile away, and that's not one of them. It's safe to say the man has more than two nickels to rub together.

His teeth gleam impossibly white against his tan leathered skin, and yet there's not a wrinkle in sight. My guess is he has an excellent plastic surgeon. I should know, I was married to an excellent plastic surgeon for twenty-five years. I can spot their

work in the wild every single time. And thus, my impeccable knowledge of Hermes scarfs, fake and genuine alike.

Elvie, however, looks as if she stepped out of the society pages—the true crime edition, of course. Her auburn hair is styled in perfect waves that let you know she’s logged some serious time at the salon. It’s short and feathered and frames the rather camera-ready grimace she’s sporting.

She’s donned a fitted crimson dress, that in keeping with the theme most likely has a fancy name like Murdered by Merlot. Nonetheless, it hugs her every curve as if it understood the assignment. There’s a diamond-encrusted brooch in the shape of a bright red lipstick pinned to her lapel and it catches the light every time she moves, and for some reason, it feels as out of place as a disco ball at a funeral.

Elodie purrs by my side like the lioness huntress she is. The man might be married, but that has never stopped Elodie from giving a handsome man his due.

“That man is a walking, talking temptation,” she purrs while fanning herself. Case in point. “Although his poor wife looks like she’d rather be getting a root canal than standing next to him.”

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I shoot another look their way. I wouldn't have noticed, but Elodie is a master at picking up on things like marital discord. She should know, she's caused enough of it herself.

Tinsley groans as she continues to ogle the couple like a woman obsessed. "I've listened to every one of their episodes—threetimes," she gushes as she practically lunges onto the couple as we come upon them. She extends her hand to Brad without hesitation. "The Basement Butcher Series? Pure genius. The way you built tension in episode four with that recording of the dripping pipe? I couldn't sleep for days!"

Thankfully, both Brad and his wife manage to chuckle and refrain from calling security. Although considering that I'm married to the chief of vessel security, I wouldn't mind if they made that call. I am desperately missing the lips of that handsome man I married.

Ransom can arrest me anytime. Now would be nice.

"She's seen each episode three times?" Elodie leans my way. "Well, that explains a lot. Nothing like studying up on your future career as a psychopath."

Nettie nods. "I've always sensed that our little cruise director had some serious serial killer energy."

Bess shrugs. "At least she's found her people."

"Listen up, you three"—Tinsley's voice rises an octave as she turns our way— "I'd like for you to meet Brad and Elvie Whipple—the best of the best when it comes to

tracking down killers. They not only report on cold cases, they help solve them.” She makes a face at me. “Not even you could best their record.”

“Oh?” Brad perks up as he looks my way. “What’s this? Don’t tell me this beautiful young woman is my competition?”

“Did you say young?” I mutter, mostly to myself.

“Our Trixie is looking rather youthful these days.” Elodie nods his way. “It’s that I’ve just been bedded by Handsome Ransom dewy glow,” she says rather shamelessly as she turns my way. “I know it well from the myriad of women he bedded before you. I’ve never seen anything like it. You may have been married to a plastic surgeon in the past, but you’re married to the fountain of youth now.” She leans in my way and whispers, “The sexual fountain of youth.”

“I knew I traded up,” I whisper right back.

Tinsley squints my way. “I wouldn’t call her your competition,” she’s quick to correct him. “Although Trixie Troublefield is our resident ship sleuth.” She offers a snide smile my way after omitting my shiny new surname. “You might even say she’s a regular body magnet,” she continues. “In fact, don’t be surprised if you get some fresh material for your podcast before this cruise is over no thanks to her deadly luck.”

A dark laugh ripples through our little circle and I shoot Bess and Nettie a look for participating.

But Brad’s eyes linger a beat too long in my direction.

“A body magnet, you say?” He leans my way. “Now that is fascinating. We should talk about your cases sometime. Over dinner, perhaps?”

Elodie pulls back her shoulders and thrusts forward two of her best assets by proxy. “Trixie is on her honeymoon,” she tells him without hesitation. “But I’d be happy to step in for her. I’m just as good, if not better.” She winks my way. “Better at certain things that are best done in private. But I’d like to think she’s catching up.”

Good grief.

Elvie doesn’t look all that amused either. “Hear that, Brad?” She honks at him. “The woman is on her honeymoon. That means she’s married.” Her lips curve north, but her smile could freeze hellfire. “As are you,” she’s quick to remind him. “Although that little detail seems to slip your mind more often these days.” She lifts a cold shoulder his way. “Along with other parts of your anatomy that tend to wander.”

A small crowd presses in to shake their hands, and just like that, we’ve been momentarily separated.

Bess lets out a low whistle as she leans toward Elodie and me. “Looks as if someone is sleeping on the couch tonight.”

Nettie huffs out a laugh. “Bold of you to assume he’s sleeping anywhere near her cabin.”

The crowd clears again and we’re about to step inside the lounge when Nettie stops short in front of Elvie.

“Oh, my sparkling stars,” Nettie coos while pointing at the glittering brooch on Elvie’s collar. “That lipstick has more ice than the Titanic’s last night out.”

The entire lot of us groans.

Number one—you never joke about the Titanic on a cruise ship; it’s all sorts of bad

juju. And number two—see number one.

“Do you like it?” Elvie’s expression brightens with what looks like a sincere smile. “It’s a part of my Luscious and Delicious Cosmetics collections. I’m thinking about branching out into jewelry, too.” She preens while giving the brooch a quick pat of appreciation. “Each piece is hand-set with Swarovski crystals.”

Brad snorts. “The one venture of hers I can actually be proud of. When she’s not bankrupting us with product recalls and lawsuit settlements.” He belts out a laugh before winking her way. “Just kidding, dear.”

“Always the supportive husband,” Elvie shoots back and her voice could cut diamonds—or in this case Swarovski crystals.

But dig or no dig, Elodie’s eyes light up, ignoring the marital warfare like only she can.

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“Did you say cosmetics?” Elodie comes to life at the thought.

Elodie is a girl’s girl through and through. I’m pretty sure cosmetics is one of her love languages.

“That’s right.” Elvie nods her way. “They’re not only beautiful to look at, they’re delicious to eat. I specialize in edible cosmetics as well as edible lotions and potions.”

Elodie gasps—at the carnal implications, no doubt.

“I need your entire line,” she practically shouts. “Likeyesterday. The ship’s boutique is always looking for new luxury brands, and I just know these will sell out fast.” Her gaze shifts to Brad. “I can spot a sexy winner a mile away.”

Again, good grief.

At this rate, Elodie will be lucky if Elvie doesn’t poison her by way of those lotions and potions for so brazenly admiring her husband.

Although if I poisoned all the women who so brazenly admire my brand-new husband, half the female population would be dead overnight. And once the women on the other side of the world woke up, I’d be forced to do away them as well. That would leave me as the last female standing. And I’m far past the age of propagating humanity, so the human takeover of the planet would be officially over.

“Well, it’s your lucky day,” Elvie says to Elodie as her smile turns predatory—to be fair, both Elvie and Elodie are sporting rather predatory grins. “I brought a trunk full

of products,” Elvie tells us. “I figured it would be like fishing with dynamite on this ship—wealthy women trapped at sea with nothing but time and credit cards.”

“Ooh,” Elodie purrs once again. “That’s exactly how I conduct business. It’s a dream every single time my shop doors open.”

The lights in the lounge flicker and we all turn in that direction.

“Well, well, ladies”—Brad gives a slight bow our way—“it’s time to head inside and have a killergood time.”

A chill runs up my spine. Something tells me he means it in the literal sense.

And if that woman I saw earlier is indeed a ghost, then that means someone is about to have a killer time indeed.

CHAPTER 5

Inside, the Neptune Lounge has been transformed from a nautical haven to a true crime shrine.

Rows of chairs have been set out, all facing front for what I’m guessing will be a welcome presentation. To the left, there’s a refreshment table brimming with donuts of every shape, size, and color, along with a coffee bar whose scent is quickly putting me into a hypnotic trance.

Displays of authentic serial killer memorabilia line the tables near the front and Bess, Nettie, and I quickly migrate in that direction.

The tables are laden with letters, photographs, and what appears to be a vintage microphone cord labeled *The Strangler’s Choice*, circa 1962. There’s also a hunter’s

knife with a jagged serrated edge that looks as if it could do some real damage with not much effort. And judging by the fact it's on that table, I think it already has. There's a note next to it that suggests it was a part of the Butcher of Baker Street's private collection of weaponry.

"Geez." I clutch at my chest as we inspect the killer goods. "Morbid much?"

"Says the woman who chats with ghosts," Bess whispers my way along with a wink.

A stocky woman with prematurely gray hair bumps into me, juggling her knitting needles and a stack of true crime-themed tote bags. The one on top reads *My Favorite Hobby is Murder... Podcasts* in elegant script. It's then I note her long purple knit cardigan and recognize her as the woman handing out the drinks earlier.

"Oh! I'm so sorry," she says with a mournful laugh. "I didn't mean to attack you. These bags have a mind of their own." She juggles her supplies as if to prove her point. "I'm Becky Lee Darling—I do some of the merchandise for the show. I was just setting these out for display. You must be Trixie. I heard Tinsley mention that you're a detective of sorts yourself."

"More like an accidental sleuth," I'm slow to admit. "Things just tend to, well, happen around me."

And the things that happen just so happen to have a deadly ring to them.

Speaking of rings, my thumb twirls that rock on my finger and I cast a quick glance at the door.

Where is that handsome husband of mine, anyway? I was hoping he'd pop in regardless of the fact he's on duty once again.

I sigh at the thought. Leave it to Quinn to find some way to take down our honeymoon. If I wasn't sure if she had it out for me before, I'm positive of it now.

"Things just tend to happen around you?" Becky Lee gives a little laugh at the thought. "Well, sometimes those are the best kind of mysteries," she says with a shrug. "The ones you least expect."

The lights flicker again, and this time everyone finds their seats. Brad Whipple waves in an effort to garner everyone's attention as he stands near the front next to the makeshift stage with a set of crimson velvet curtains hanging on either side of the slightly raised platform.

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“Welcome, my fellow murder aficionados,” he calls out, commanding the room with a confidence that looks as if it comes far too easy for him. “Before we dive into tonight’s gruesome tales, I want to thank you all for joining Whispers of the Wicked on this grand oceanic adventure aboard the Emerald Queen of the Seas. I look forward to getting to know each and every one of you. But before we get to know each other, or even a few serial killers a little better, I’d like to thank my amazing team.” He grins with more than a little killer charm. “First, I’d like to thank my partner in crime—pun intended—my business partner in what I like to call my real-world job. He’s a true friend—my best friend, Reed Williams.” He points to a man standing near the bar with dark hair and deep dimples as he toasts Brad with the drink in his hand. “Without him, our haunted house empire would be just another real estate venture.”

A polite applause circles the room as the two men exchange looks that seem more loaded than friendly, and I can’t help but think that Reed’s smile seems a touch manufactured.

I lean in toward Bess and Nettie who are seated to my right. “Did he say haunted house empire?”

Nettie nods. “And you can bet I’m going to find out all of the haunted deets. If I can’t find me a good man in this life, I’m determined to find him in the next—and I’m going to do it while I’ve still got breath in my lungs, too.”

Bess grunts. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

Nettie elbows her bestie. “Who says I was talking to you? I’m talking to Trixie. She

can vet the ghosts for me and give me the 411 on who's a hottie and who's extra naughty." She nods my way. "I'm especially interested in the latter."

Bess ticks her head to the side. "Knowing the type of dead men you're interested in, I'd venture to say they're all feeling a little hot right about now, especially considering which holding tank they're stuck in."

The microphone squeals and our attention is relegated to the front once again.

"I would also like to thank the technical wizards among us." Brad points to a man in the corner who raises his hand briefly. "The man who makes me sound much smarter than I am. And, of course, sweet Becky Lee Darling, whose crafty hands have bestowed endless treasures upon us." His voice softens as he says her name, and to my surprise, it's the woman in the purple knit cardigan he's looking at. "And lastly, my wife Elvie, who"—he pauses for a moment—"well, let's just say she's given me endless material for future episodes. Some might even say she's skillin' it in the cosmetics game."

A bout of awkward laughter filters through the room.

At least he's consistent with highlighting the tension in his marriage.

Soon enough, Brad launches into his greatest hits collection of cold cases, and the room lights up as if it's story time at a particularly murderous family reunion.

"And who remembers the Bakery Butcher of '92?" he asks, and hands shoot up faster than alibis at a police lineup. The crowd trades theories and timelines with the cozy enthusiasm of a book club—if your book club happens to specialize in blood spatter analysis and suspicious insurance claims.

Brad begins to cough, slow and subtle at first before it picks up to something that

garners far more of his attention. He downs the rest of his drink then holds up a hand.

“How about a quick break?” he calls out. His cheeks are flushed and beads of sweat line his forehead.

“Donuts are in the back,” Reed announces, coming to the aid of his friend. “And we all know donuts are tantamount to a true crime junkie’s daily bread. Please indulge.”

“Don’t forget the coffee,” someone shouts. “We need to keep the armchair detectives in us happy—and awake for those three a.m. research sessions.”

A laugh rumbles through the room as the crowd disperses into clusters as everyone begins mingling at once.

We stretch our legs and turn our attention to the donut buffet set up along the back wall as well as a table housing enough coffee to keep the entire state of New York awake for a year.

“Speaking of keeping ourselves happy”—Nettie links arms with Bess—“those maple bars are calling our names. Come on, girls. Let’s get the goods while the goods are still there to get.”

“Ooh”—Bess moans—“I hope they have one with caramel and sea salt sprinkled on top.”

“You would,” Nettie grouches. “Because you’re a weirdo.”

“Yeah, but I’m your weirdo,” Bess shoots back. “Come on, Trixie. You, of all people, need to refuel with sugar and carbs.”

“Amen to that, sister,” I mutter just as Tinsley cuts in front of me.

“No donuts for me,” Tinsley announces as she scuttles past us. “I’m making a beeline for Brad.” She nods toward the bar and I spot him speaking with his friend Reed, the older man with adorable dimples. “Here’s hoping they have room for one more in that haunted conversation.”

Elodie snorts as Tinsley takes off. “Now there’s your classic Tinsley move. Nothing says one-night stand like throwing yourself at married men with money—and apparently haunted houses, too.”

“How do you know Reed is married?” I ask.

Elodie sucks in a quick breath. “My goodness, if that man is single, he’ll be landing in my bed tonight.” She speeds in their direction like a bullet train in heels and somehow manages to beat Tinsley to the punch by a naughty nautical mile.

But in no time, Bess, Nettie, and I are at the donut buffet and I load my plate with an assortment of deadly sins—maple bars, chocolate-filled eclairs, and one suspiciously pink-frosted creation that screams murder by sugar rush. And it’s one that I wouldn’t mind dying for.

“Hey, look,” Bess says, nodding to the pink wonder on her plate—it’s one of three. “I got one of those pink treats, too. It’s got death by sprinkles written all over it.”

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“And what a way to go,” I say, taking a bite and moaning. “At least we’ll die happy.”

Nettie snorts. “You’ll be happy and in heaven as soon as Handsome Ransom ravishes you in that honeymoon suite once again.”

“How about we check out that killer collection again before we lose Trixie?” Bess suggests, eyeing the display at the front of the room. “I’m really interested in learning more about that morbid microphone.”

“I’m interested in the knife,” Nettie says. “You know what they say, keep your friends close and your knives closer or you might end up with one in your back.”

My phone buzzes and I pull it out of my purse. It’s a text.

“Speaking of the handsome devil,” I say, wagging my phone their way. “Why don’t you two go on ahead. I’ll meet up with you in a second.”

They take off and I step to the side to look at the message my brand-new husband sent.

Ransom: Quinn broke her arm chasing a pickpocket. She needs surgery. I’ll have to arrange for her to be medevacked off the ship.

“Oh no.” I groan hard just reading it.

I text right back

Trixie: I'm so sorry. How long will you be tied up?

Ransom: Not to worry. Unless catastrophe strikes, the crew can handle things. We will resume our honeymoon protocol shortly.

A light laugh escapes me at the naughty thought.

I quickly scan the room, and as I'm about to step into the crowd, Becky Lee darts past as if she's being chased by her own shadow with that knitting bag of hers clutched tight to her chest.

"Geez," I say with a laugh caught in my throat, feeling pretty lucky that I wasn't scalped by a knitting needle in the process.

I step into the flow of the crowd and spot Brad and Elvie just shy of the bar. I'm about to pass them by but slow down a notch once I notice they seem to be having what looks like a nuclear-grade argument as both of their faces turn a shade of red that matches the curtains next to them.

"I know what you've been doing," Elvie hisses the words and they carry right to my ears. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Not stupid, honey," Brad gravels out. "Just convenient."

Convenient? I balk at the odd and potentially awful comeback.

What is that supposed to mean?

I drift toward the table laden with memorabilia, losing myself in the macabre display.

Twenty minutes disappear like smoke until I decide it's time to find my favorite

wayward octogenarians once again.

I scour the front of the lounge and all along the nooks and crannies, but they're nowhere to be found.

The makeshift stage catches my eye. It's just a wooden stage on the same level as the rest of the room, but those floor-to-ceiling crimson curtains on either side afford at least ten feet of clearance on either side behind them.

We've had performances in this lounge before and the cast and crew have utilized the space behind the curtains as a dressing area and staging area for any and everything. I check behind the curtains on the right side and come upon a couple making out hot and heavy.

I won't lie, I'm a bit envious.

But there's no sign of Bess and Nettie.

I head for the opposite side of the stage and delve into the dimly lit expanse.

"Bess?Nettie?" I call out and my voice sounds muffled by all the fabric hanging before me. I wouldn't put it past Nettie to head back here in hopes of trying out that knife she had her eye on. And, well, Bess would definitely try to stop her. Or more to the point, strangle her bestie with that ominous microphone cord. It's been used as a weapon of destruction before, thus the cord's entry into the morbid display in the first place.

But there's no sign of them here either. And for that, I'm much relieved.

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My foot catches on something soft and I stumble, catching myself on a chair before turning to see what tripped me.

It looks like a discarded coat.

I pull out my phone, point the flashlight at the ground, and gasp.

It's not a discarded coat.

It's the guest of honor, sprawled on the ground, lying on his stomach with his eyes staring vacantly to the side.

And judging by that knife sticking out of his back—Brad Whipple is dead.

CHAPTER6

A scream rips from my throat before I can stop it, echoing off the lounge walls like a soprano practicing her vocal scales.

Brad Whipple lies face-down on the cold hardwood floor with that vintage serial killer's knife jutting from his back at a hard angle. The smell of coffee and donuts mingles with something metallic and my stomach churns because of it.

“Bravo!” Nettie claps as both she and Bess suddenly materialize in this dimly lit space behind the makeshift stage.

The Neptune Lounge is filled to the gills with fans from far and near, anxious to hear

everything Brad Whipple has to say regarding killers and homicides alike. And, well, now, it doesn't look like he'll be saying a word to anyone ever again.

"That's some grade-A screaming right there," Nettie continues while elbowing me in the ribs and winking. "Practicing for the honeymoon suite, are we?"

"Nettie!" Bess swats her arm. "Must you be so crass? Besides, not all of us scream at the top of our lungs behind bedroom doors."

"And it shows," Nettie says without missing a crass beat.

"Never mind that," Bess says, waving her off. "Trixie, what's going on? What in the world are you screaming at? Do we need to call—" She freezes mid-sentence once she spots the deceased. And just like that, both women unleash screams that could wake the dead—or in this case, the already dead.

And sadly, their screams don't seem to be working in that capacity.

Before I can stop the aria at hand, Elodie bursts in with her heels clicking against the hardwood like a tap-dancing telegram of doom. She takes one look at the scene—more specifically, the body—and tosses her hands in the air.

"My goodness"—she scolds right at me—"you just couldn't wait to get your hands dirty again, or should I saybloody? A knife to the back? Really? Look at that pool of crimson he's lying in. For the love of all things evil, Trixie, think of the cleaning crew. Bloodstains are such a nightmare to deal with."

"But"—I scoff at the sassy blonde before me. "Elodie, I didn't?—"

"Oh hush, you." She waves a finger at me to do just that. "You're always coming at us with excuses. What is it this time? He just happened to fall on a knife. In your

vicinity. Again.”

I gasp her way. “Actually?—”

“You know”—she continues, pacing around the body with a frown as if she’s judging a particularly disappointing art installation—“most people bring back seashells from their honeymoon. You bring back bodies.”

“She’s not wrong,” Bess says while fanning herself with her fingers, most likely to keep from fainting.

I shake my head at the three of them. “For your information, I haven’t even been on my honeymoon for more than twenty-four hours.”

Elodie’s mouth falls open. “I think she’s threatening us with more bodies. I’d watch your back, girls.” She nods to Bess and Nettie. “And I’d especially watch out for errant knives.”

I’m about to form my rebuttal when a six-foot wall of muscles jumps into our midst.

“Wes,” I practically shout as the captain steps in close.

“What’s going on? What’s with the screams? I just stepped into the lounge and heard a choir of terror going off.” His captain’s uniform looks so pristine in this dim light it practically glows—lots of white, lots of brass, lots of clout. Wes is tall, a wall of muscles himself, and those green eyes of his could make any woman weak in the knees. But right now, those eyes are narrowed my way with suspicion.

He wasn’t all that thrilled that I had chosen Ransom to have my happily ever after with, but he was kind enough to accept the fact and even officiated the two of us as we tied the knot.

“Trixie,” Wes says my name like a reprimand. “Again?”

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“Why does everyone assume I’m responsible?” I gag on the words.

Nettie scoffs. “If the knife fits... Now go on and wrap your hand around it. I bet it fits like a glove.”

Bess rolls her eyes. “It’s a knife, for Pete’s sake. It fits everyone like a glove. Besides, you should know, you were the one holding one just like it back at the murder memorabilia display.”

We all gasp at once.

“You don’t think that’s the same knife, do you?” Elodie asks what every one of us is thinking.

I nod. “Judging by that long back handle, I’d say it was.”

Bess gasps as she grabs Nettie by the arm. “Well, if it is, that means it has your fingerprints all over it!”

Nettie’s eyes balloon to the size of life preservers. “That means I’m the killer!”

Footsteps pound in this direction.

“Trixie?” Ransom shouts from the other side of the curtain before making an appearance. He stops short once he spots us, then his eyes drift to the body and he lets a few loose expletives fly. “Is he dead?” He drops to his knee and checks the man for a pulse before calling it in over his phone. “My men are on their way. Wes, why don’t

you help cordon off the crime scene? I'll take it from here."

Wes shakes his head. "Sorry, buddy, but this is my crime scene. You're off the clock. Quinn and I can handle it."

"Quinn broke her arm and medical has requested a medevac to airlift her back to New York. She needs pins put in."

"What?" Wes hisses. "How did I not know this?"

"I was just on my way to track you down when I heard the commotion."

A small crowd ambles this way and soon more screams light up the lounge.

"Everyone, step away from the area," Ransom shouts while holding up his badge. "This is an active crime scene."

More screams ensue—this time with a lot more terror behind them.

"My active crime scene," Wes corrects just above a whisper. "Look, Ransom. You're on your honeymoon. I don't care how many people drop dead on this ship, you're not investigating." Gasps ensue from the peanut gallery gathering behind us. But Wes ignores them long enough to spin on his heels and point my way. "You either."

Now it's me gasping the loudest.

Ransom barks orders into his radio while Wes corrals the growing crowd of curious onlookers and manages to push them back a few feet. And yet their faces press against the velvet curtains like kids at a candy store window—if the candy store specialized in murder.

Tinsley slithers through the crowd like a snake in designer heels. “Well, well,” she muses as she shakes her head down at the corpse. “It looks as if someone’s honeymoon wasn’t enough to hold her interest.” She shoots me a look. “You just couldn’t stand the competition from all those true crime enthusiasts, could you? You just have to prove you’re the brightest and the best when push comes to shoving the knife in someone’s back.”

More gasps ensue from the crowd amassing around us like a wall of judgmental—well, true crime enthusiasts.

Don’t these people have a cold case to stalk? I sigh at the thought, considering the case at my feet is growing colder by the second.

“What’s happening?” a shrill voice shouts and breaks up the discourse and we turn to see Elvie trot up. The poor woman squints down at the body for a moment too long before taking in a lung full of air that never seems to end.

“Oh my goodness,” Elvie groans as if she were just kicked in the gut, and I bet she feels far worse than that. “Is that my husband?” Her hands fly to her mouth. “Oh, who am I kidding?” She rolls her eyes. “I’m not all that surprised.” She fans herself for a moment. “I think I’m going to pass out.”

“Let me help you,” Bess says, making her way to the woman. “How about we get you a seat at the bar.”

“Good thinking,” Nettie says, traipsing their way. “That’s the best place on the ship to get a stiff drink. I’m buying.”

Elvie chokes on her words as she casts one last glance at her husband. “I guess this cancels our dinner plans,” she mutters as Bess and Nettie shuttle her off.

“I’ll say,” Elodie scoffs. “Someone just canceled all of that man’s plans forever.”

Reed materializes from the crowd and bustles his way over.

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“It’s true?” The dark-haired man looks momentarily confused as he does his best to quickly take in the scene. His eyes dart from Brad’s face to the knife. “What the heck happened?” He shakes his head. “Where’s Elvie? She shouldn’t have to see this. Elvie?” he calls out as he quickly makes his way back into the lounge.”

“He’s right.” Tinsley closes her eyes for a moment. “And I don’t want to see it either. I’d better go check on Elvie as well.”

She takes off, and in the murky darkness of the lounge, I spot Becky Lee. Her face has gone ghost-white, hands trembling as she clutches that tote bag slung from her shoulder as if it were a life preserver. Her face crumbles once she spots the body and her entire body proceeds to shake. And sadly, I’m sure that’s a perfectly natural reaction to finding your friend with a knife in his back. She turns away quickly before disappearing into the sea of onlookers.

Soon enough, the entire security brigade has descended upon us and have pushed the onlookers back into the lounge.

Elodie takes off to tend to the Queen’s Mall because, despite the fact we have a body on our hands here in the lounge, the rest of the ship must go on.

Ransom comes my way with his jaw set tight. “Are you okay?” He wraps his arms around me as he pulls me to the side.

“Yes, I’m fine, I promise,” I say.

“Good. Now please go back to our cabin.”

“You didn’t even ask if I found the body.”

“I didn’t need to.” His voice softens just a fraction, and despite everything, my heart does a little flip. “When do you not find the body?”

“You have a point.” I make a face because I’m not pleased with that particular point.

We share a quick kiss before he heads back to the scene of the crime, and I’m about to leave when I spot something catching the light just shy of Brad Whipple’s waist.

I take a step in that direction when the object comes into focus and I gasp.

I’m about to point it out when Ransom snaps a few pictures of it before placing that rhinestone lipstick brooch into an evidence bag.

Oh my word! I know exactly who that lipstick brooch belongs to!

Ransom and his crew get right to work as they continue to document the scene.

“Trixie.” Wes comes my way and offers me a quick embrace. “I’m sorry, but this investigation ends here for you.”

I pull back and I can’t seem to say a word. Instead, I head for the exit and push my way past the steady current of curious passengers.

Wes thinks this should be the end of my investigation, but I can’t shake the feeling that this is just the beginning.

CHAPTER 7

While Trixie’s Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Ahoy, pleasure seekers! While our lovely Trixie is conducting a very thorough investigation of the honeymoon suite's structural integrity with that dreamy head of security, let's address another burning question from our mailbag.

Dear Elodie,

My husband and I booked the Captain's Table for formal night, but I have no idea what to wear! The dress code says elegant formal attire, but how formal is too formal? And how elegant is too elegant?

Dress Code Distressed

Dear Distressed,

The real question isn't how formal is too formal, but rather how much attention do you want your husband (and every other eye in the dining room) to pay to your...elegant assets?

My personal rule is if one of the ship's security guards blushes when you walk by, you're on the right track. If the maître d' drops a menu, you've nailed it. And if your husband can't remember how to use his spoon? Well, that's what I call a successful formal night.

Remember—the Captain's Table might be formal, but that doesn't mean it can't be fun. Although do try to keep your hands visible during dessert. We wouldn't want to scandalize the sommelier. Again.

Sailing seductively,

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XOXO Elodie

P.S. If you're worried about your dress being too revealing, just remember what I always say—the best accessories are confidence and perhaps a strategically placed napkin.

Trixie

The honeymoon suite welcomes me back with the scent of fresh roses and vanilla.

And much to my delight, housekeeping has transformed the space into a virtual romantic paradise.

A white coverlet strewn with pink and red petals is arranged in a perfect heart, and two swans fashioned out of towels sit with their necks intertwined while perched in the center of the bed like a couple of love-struck teenagers.

The room would be perfect if I wasn't still haunted by the image of Brad Whipple face-down in the Neptune Lounge.

I hop over to my closet, ready to swap my murder-scene sweatsuit for one of the many honeymoon negligées Elodie gifted me. But when I swing open the doors, I can't help but notice something odd. And once I realize I'm not hallucinating, I freeze solid. Every last one of my comfy clothes has vanished, replaced by—I pluck at a hanger—an entire litany of jewel-toned cocktail dresses?

“Well played, Elodie Abernathy. Well played.” I glance down at my current

wardrobe choices and wince. “I guess she wasn’t kidding when she said I was taking my newly minted marriage to heck in aschlubbyhandbasket.”

This is what I get for crossing the self-proclaimed queen of ship fashion.

I’m about to send her a playful yet quasi-threatening text when I hear what sounds like someone clearing their throat from behind.

I spin so fast on my heels, my feet feel as if they’re drilling into the carpet.

Two thoughts cross my mind. Either there’s still a member of housekeeping in the room with me or a killer is in the vicinity—within backstabbing distance no less!

But I don’t see a living soul.

Someone giggles—someone who is decidedly not me— and I turn my head toward the right where the sound is coming from and gasp.

A scream gets locked in my throat as I spot the uninvited guest—a luminescent redhead lounging in the velvet desk chair as if she’s posing for a 1940s pin-up calendar. And she would be dressed for that occasion, too, in a short red and white polka-dotted dress, along with black fishnet stockings. Her heart-shaped face is framed with a perfect victory roll sitting over her forehead, and her bow-tie lips are colored in with bright red lipstick. Not to mention that her entire countenance glows with the luminosity of a dying flashlight. Emphasis on the dying considering the fact she’s most likely long since done that.

I belt out a scream.

She belts out a scream.

And then we sort of belt out a unifying scream in perfect harmony.

“You’re a ghost,” I hiss as I step closer, while my heart does its best to turn me into a ghost as well. “Oh my goodness! I knew it! You’re the woman I saw in the window! And then I saw you again in the casino earlier this evening.”

“That would be me.” She gives a cheeky wink as she says it. “So where is that handsome hubby of yours, anyway?” She cranes her neck toward the door. “I was rather enjoying the naughty show earlier.”

I gasp and gag all at once, grabbing the nearest throw pillow and hurling it right through her head. “You may not hover around the vicinity when I’m—when we’re—when you know what is happening. That’s not why you’re here.”

“Speaking of why I’m here.” She leans forward and her eyes sparkle like a gossip columnist who just found dirt on the mayor. I’d say the captain, but I know for a fact there’s no dirt to be had on Wes. “Who bit the big one? Was it Elvie?” She gives an eager nod and that alone makes me wince.

“No. And why would you be so happy if she bit the big one? That’s downright wicked.”

She makes a face. “It’s not wicked. I love Elvie. I was her personal assistant way back when she was just starting out with Luscious and Delicious. In fact, I was one of her first testers. We were the best of friends. Oh, how I miss her.” She sags and nearly melts right out of the chair. “And that’s exactly why I can’t wait to hang out with her again in Paradise. The shopping is divine, the spa treatments are heavenly—literally—and don’t get me started on the eternal happy hour. It’s one long wonderful party. They don’t call it Paradise for nothing.”

“Well, that’s nice that the two of you were so close. But it was actually her husband

Brad who passed away—rather unexpectedly.”

“Oh.” She inches back in her chair. “That’s odd. I thought I heard that the person who perished was someone who loved the ghost that was sent back to help more than they loved anyone.”

As confusing as it sounds, she hit it on the ghostly money.

I step back. “You’re right. Were you having an affair with him?”

I’m not usually so point-blank, but this seems to warrant it. Besides, Ransom could walk through that door any minute now and we have other things to tend to. Far more important things than dissecting the latest ship homicide seven ways to Sunday.

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“An affair?” She leans back and manages to look genuinely affronted. “Heck no.” She shakes her head, looking completely baffled by the question. “In fact, I didn’t think he cared for me at all. Every time I was near him, he seemed to leave the room. Eventually, I started to take it personally.”

“That’s odd. Well, clearly he venerated you on some level or you wouldn’t be here. Like you said, the dead that are called back to solve the case are always someone who the deceased loved the most. Rules are rules.”

She shrugs. “I guess that’s just another mystery for us to solve.”

“I guess it is.” I tip my head at her with suspicion. None of this is making sense so far. It seems I’ll not only need to do some digging when it comes to the deceased, but with the deceased before me as well. “So what’s your name?”

I’ll start there.

“Titsiana Genevieve Forenza,” she announces with all of the drama necessary to accept an Oscar. “But you can call me Tits.”

A choking sound emits from my throat. “I’m not calling you anything near that. Try again.”

“Okay, fine. All my friends call me Sassy.” Her shoulders bounce and she giggles with glee. “It’s a nickname I lived up to in both my old life and in the afterlife.”

“I have no doubt. Especially seeing that for the five minutes we’ve been together,

you've lived up to your name. You are definitely a sassy girl."

"You know what they say—it takes one to know one, sugar. I think we're already fast friends."

The door handle jiggles and my heart leaps into my throat as Ransom steps into the room.

"You're back," I practically sing as I run into his arms.

"A herd of wild homicides couldn't keep me away." His brows waggle and I thoroughly approve of the naughty implications. "And before you ask, I'm not letting Wes get anywhere near my investigation," he sighs as he says it. "But I promise I will make time for us. This is still our honeymoon."

He runs kisses up and down my neck as if to prove his point and I can't help but giggle—only my giggles seem to be echoing to my right and I glance that way to find that ghost with the victory rolls clapping and pumping her fist as if cheering me on.

"You go, girl! You get some of that red-hot sugar!" She laughs as if she were about to get something out of the equation, too—like entertainment. "I can't wait to see the show!"

My mouth falls open and I pull Ransom closer before making crazy eyes at our spectral voyeur from over his shoulder. I'm hoping she'll take the hint, but she only seems to settle deeper into the plush velvet seat she's parked herself on.

"Oh no, you don't," I growl under my breath.

"What's that?" Ransom asks, hardly coming up for air as he nibbles on my ear.

"Sorry, did I bite too hard?"

“Oh no.” I perk up unexpectedly. “You keep doing what you’re doing. I’m here for you to snack on anytime you want.”

Sassy gives an ear-to-ear grin when I say it and I can’t help but glare at her because of it.

Horror upon horror, it’s becoming clear she’s not moving a ghostly muscle.

I clear my throat as I pull back to get a better look at my handsome plus-one.

“Maybe we should turn out the lights?” I suggest, walking us backward until I locate the switch and do just that. But Sassy only glows brighter, like a supernatural spotlight sitting in the corner—a spotlight only I can see.

Ransom carries me to the bed, and between his kisses I try to wave off our uninvited guest, but the stubborn spirit refuses to budge.

“Oh, good grief,” I mutter.

Ransom pulls back. “Trixie, is something wrong?”

“No, no! Nothing is wrong, I promise.” Oh my goodness. I cannot let this peeping phantom ruin my honeymoon. It’s bad enough a killer has already left an indelible deadly mark on it. “I was just, um, cold. How about we dive under the covers for this round?”

“Anything and everything for you,” he murmurs as his lips get back to washing me with kisses.

But apparently, blankets are no deterrent to the supernatural surveillance at hand. Sassy stays all night long, and even though the lights are out, her running

commentary suggests her spectral night vision works just fine.

I guess solving a homicide isn't the only thing I'll have to deal with on this honeymoon. Now I've got a voyeuristic ghost who refuses to vacate the premises.

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But I know all too well that solving the homicide will solve my little ghostly dilemma as well.

It turns out, there are worse things than a haunted homicide—like a haunted honeymoon suite with an audience.

CHAPTER8

Ransom and I sit out on the lido deck just outside the Blue Water Grill, the one and only twenty-four-hour buffet on the ship. The sun is shining, the sea is sparkling, and the scent of bacon and coffee warms our senses.

It's the very next morning after the homicide and we've decided to forgo a formal breakfast and catch some fresh air along with the other passengers—mostly because I couldn't stomach the fact Sassy was logging every moment of my private escapades with Ransom as if she were about to be quizzed on my husband's smooth yet sexy moves.

Believe me, with all that proverbial copious note-taking, she would have aced it.

And despite passing up breakfast in the formal dining hall, that didn't stop me from wearing a navy off-the-shoulder dress with a white furry faux mink stole. That's because Elodie all but stole my street clothes.

I would have worn the same sweats I had on last night, but they ended up in a puddle of champagne in the middle of the night.

Don't ask.

Just know there were bubbles involved and a good time was had by all—Sassy and my sweatsuit included. I've always been one to include everybody in the room when it comes to a good party, even if that everybody happens to be a ghost with voyeuristic tendencies. I'm far too nice that way.

The autumn breeze whips across the deck, sending passengers scurrying to wrap their robes tighter over their bathing suits. The Atlantic stretches out before us with steely waves crashing against the ship as the Emerald Queen makes her way toward England.

In just over a week's time, we'll be docking in a brand-new country, on a brand-new continent—and better yet, reuniting with my son Parker, who happens to be finishing up his master's degree there.

And equally as great is the fact that Ransom's daughter Emerson, who happens to be dating Parker, is planning to meet us there as well. The timing couldn't be more perfect, because that timeframe will land us right at Christmas. The thought alone warms me more than my pumpkin spice latte.

Speaking of breakfast yum-yums, Ransom and I have loaded up two plates each worth of goodies from the buffet—Belgian waffles swimming in maple syrup, eggs Benedict dripping with hollandaise sauce, bacon so crispy that it shatters upon impact, fresh fruit glistening with morning dew—or more to the point, sugary syrup—and pastries that could make a French chef cry. And yes, two pumpkin spice lattes brimming with whipped cream because we may be investigating a murder, but we're not savages.

“What have you found?” Ransom asks between bites of his waffle as both of our laptops compete for space with the culinary feast we've laid out.

“Nothing yet,” I tell him, scrolling through another dead end. “How about you?”

“Just a few basic things about his business. Apparently, Brad ran and operated a few haunted houses with Reed Williams. His wife has her own business, a successful cosmetics company—Luscious and Delicious—and Brad was the star of his own macabre podcast. But you knew all of that.”

I did because I was the first to clue him in on it last night. I also told him who that rhinestone brooch belonged to that he discovered next to the body. Let’s just say it’s not looking so good for Elvie so far. Everyone knows the spouse is the first to be a suspect—and most likely the killer, too.

I’m about to say something regarding the woman in question when a shadow darkens our table and Wes suddenly plops down in the seat across from us, his navy uniform looks crisp and pristine despite the fact he had a rather frazzled night.

“Captain,” Ransom scowls. “How nice of you to join us uninvited. On our honeymoon no less.”

“That’s exactly why I’m here.” Wes ticks his head to the side. “Trixie, I want you to help me keep your new husband in line. I’ve officially dismissed him from Brad Whipple’s homicide case. I’m taking over.”

Both Ransom and I stare at him as if he’s just announced he’s trading his captain’s hat for a rainbow wig and a shiny red ball that sits on the tip of his nose. He’d have better luck with that. Wes really does have a way of making people laugh. Like now. Only there’s nothing funny about it.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he says, stealing a fresh baked chocolate chip cookie from Ransom’s plate. “I’m already on top of things. I’ve spoken with the security staff and we have video from the Neptune Lounge.”

“You do?” I ask, both excited and relieved.

“He doesn’t,” Ransom is quick to correct. “All of the cameras are set up in the front of the lounge and they face the back, the opposite direction of where the crime was committed. I reviewed the footage before I called it a night. There’s no damning evidence there.”

Wes shakes his head. “That will be up to me and the rest of the security team to determine. Ransom, what part of I-don’t-need-you-to-fill-this-role don’t you understand? You have a beautiful, gorgeous, one-of-a-kind new wife that you should be spending some serious alone time with.”

Ransom growls at Wes, and I’m guessing he’s not amused by all of the kind adjectives. It’s safe to say that Wes was crushing hard for a while. And some feelings may still linger.

Wes sighs. “The last thing you need to be doing is interrogating suspects.” He nods my way. “Trixie, just for the record, had you married me, I would have happily found another captain to take my place for the duration of our honeymoon.”

“Aww,” I coo and Ransom’s eyes widen in my direction before he scowls twice as hard at Wes.

“Okay, we get it.” Ransom shakes his head at Wes. “You’re willing to play the part of hero all the way around. But what you’re forgetting is that Quinn is hurt. She was the only other qualified officer to handle this case. That leaves me. And I took a position where I promised to keep the passengers on this ship safe—that includes my wife.”

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A spike of heat bisects my stomach when he calls me his wife. I can't help it, the title is still new, and—oh, who am I kidding? That will never get old.

“Ransom,” Wes growls.

“Wes,” Ransom growls back. “I’m the trained professional here. Need I remind you I was in the FBI and I’m a licensed private detective. The rest of my men are prolific in nothing more than nabbing a shoplifter. There is a killer on this ship, in the event you’ve forgotten. They are dangerous. They’ve already ended one life. What’s to say they won’t end another? What’s to say it won’t be your life on the line once you start sniffing around?”

Wes tips his head back and closes his eyes. “Let me work with you, then. At least that way there’s a chance of catching them twice as fast. Quinn was medevacked off the ship this morning. I’m all you got.”

I clear my throat. “I may have apprehended the last almost dozen killers we’ve had on the Emerald Queen. With a little help from you, of course.” I nod in Ransom’s direction.

“Hear that?” Wes chuckles. “It was a little help. Very little, if I recall correctly.”

“Not even true by a longshot,” Ransom counters as he looks my way. “You apprehended them all on your own, Trixie. I would never try to take credit for that. I was simply there to land them in cuffs.” He sighs hard. “You’re good at what you do. Wes and I both know that. But Wes and I both want you safe as well.”

I sniff at the thought. “Believe me, I’d like to remain safe as can be.” I run my finger over the rim of my coffee mug. “And since my safety and that of the passengers is on the line, why don’t you two let me in on your investigation? Going along with your point, Wes, with the three of us working together we might just solve this case three times as fast. What could be better than that?”

Ransom frowns. “Me—going at it alone.”

Wes shakes his head. “You mean me working with you.”

“Don’t forget me,” I say, raising a hand slightly.

Ransom’s phone pings and he sighs at the screen. “I’ve gotta run. There’s an entire slew of messages piling up from the local authorities.” He tips his head toward Wes. “I’ll need you to speak with a few of the investigators with me.”

“I’m all yours,” he tells him.

Ransom lands a kiss on my lips. “And I’m all yours as soon as I’m done. Try not to nab a killer without me.”

I cross my heart with a laugh.

“Speaking of killers”—Wes says as they both rise from their seats—“have any apparitions appeared ready to toss their ghostly hat in the ring when it comes to solving this thing?”

An entire reel of last night’s supernatural surveillance flashes through my mind, complete with Sassy’s running commentary and enthusiastic applause. She really does know how to cheer us on at just the right moments.

“We’ll talk later,” I say, wrinkling my nose as they both take off with a wave.

I glance around the deck and there’s no sign of Sassy anywhere.

Figures.

Ransom and I must have exhausted her ghostly energy reserves.

Not shocking, considering the rather acrobatic performance that went on for hours.

I’m about to take another bite of a waffle when Bess and Nettie stop short at my table.

“Well, well,” Bess muses with a grin. “Look who’s vertical again.”

“And dressed to kill,” Nettie adds with a wink. “Although I would have stayed horizontal if I were you.”

“Very funny,” I say. “Ransom is busy. Why don’t you join me?”

“We were just on our way to enjoy a bite ourselves,” Bess says as they land at the table, and the three of us make short work of both my breakfast and Ransom’s abandoned plate.

“So where are we headed?” I ask, watching the last of my waffle disappear. “The formal dining room?”

It’s our tradition to have first breakfast here and second breakfast there. There’s just something about fine china and white tablecloths that makes gluttony feel downright sophisticated.

“We’re headed to the Luscious and Lethally Delicious Beauty Brunch,” Bess says as she takes a sip from Ransom’s pumpkin spice latte and moans with approval. “Elvie Whipple’s team is hosting their big beauty shindig. Apparently, it was all planned before that man’s unfortunate demise. I hear it’s going to be glam and carbs all rolled into one. What could be better?”

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My mouth falls open. A soirée hosted by my top suspect? Heck, she's my one and only suspect. With a focus on beauty and food? Now that's what I call the breakfast of champions.

"I hope you don't mind if I crash the party," I say innocently. "You know I'm all about glam and carbs these days."

Nettie gives a dark laugh. "We know exactly what you're up to these days. Some hot and heavy time with your honey, and some hot and heavy time with a killer or two."

"You do know me well," I say with a curve of my lips.

I'm willing to bet Elvie Whipple will be at that event. And now so will I.

After all, nothing pairs better with murder than a mid-morning makeover. It's time to see what secrets are hiding behind all that luxury lipstick and that killer smile of hers.

And if the last locale of that sparkly brooch is any indication—Elvie Whipple might be a killer indeed.

CHAPTER9

While Trixie's Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Welcome back, maritime adventurers! While our favorite newlyweds are still gathering evidence in their suite (and honestly, who can blame them with those ocean views—and views of each other), let's tackle another pressing question.

Dear Elodie,

Help! I signed up for the midnight stargazing class on deck, but I'm worried it might be boring. Any suggestions for making it more interesting?

Starboard Stargazer

Oh honey,

Trust me, there is nothing boring about being out on deck after dark. The sea breeze, the moonlight, those strategically placed lounge chairs... Stargazing is all about positioning, my love.

While the astronomer drones on about constellations, you could be conducting your own study of heavenly bodies. Just remember that the ship's telescopes are for celestial observations only—although I've heard the security cameras have excellent night vision. Beware.

Pro tip: Those plush deck blankets they provide aren't just for warmth. Though you might want to request a fresh one. Just saying.

Twinkling and Tantalizing,

XOXO Elodie

P.S. If the crew asks, you definitely saw the Big Dipper. Whether you were looking up at the time is irrelevant.

Trixie

“So let me get this straight,” Bess says as the two of us, along with Nettie, make our

way to the Coral Crown Lounge. “Your ghostly friend spent the entire night critiquing your honeymoon performance?”

“Like she was judging the Olympics,” I confirm, still mortified. “Complete with numerical scores and style points.”

“Did you at least get a perfect ten?” Nettie asks as her gray hair bounces with each step.

“No, but she did give us extra credit for artistic interpretation,” I admit, sending both women into a fit of laughter that echoes down the corridor.

I’d laugh, too, if the thought of entertaining the dead on my honeymoon didn’t make me want to cry.

The Coral Crown Lounge sparkles like a fairy tale come to life. The crystal chandeliers glimmer like stars across the seafoam green walls. Rows and rows of tables are set out with lavender linens, and there’s an arrangement of white orchids floating in mercury glass bowls set on each and every one of them.

It all looks as elegant as elegant can be.

The floor-to-ceiling windows to the right expose the cobalt sea, and out near the horizon there’s another cruise ship about to pass us by. The crew always considers that good luck. And heaven knows the Emerald Queen could use a healthy dose of luck these days.

A sign near the door, written in swooping rose-gold font, announces Where Beauty Meets Brunch—Prepare to be Deliciously Transformed. Below that, added in smaller text, it reads Warning: Side effects may include feeling irresistible.

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“Well, that sounds promising,” Bess mutters. “Although on this ship, the word irresistible usually segues into a homicide investigation.”

Nettie nods. “Desserts, a makeover, and murder. What more could a woman ask for?” She bumps her shoulder into Bess. “And here you were afraid a transatlantic cruise would be boring.”

“I would never say such a thing about an adventure on the Emerald Queen,” Bess corrects. “Not out loud anyway.”

“Eh, you were loaded to the hilt with truth serum when you said it,” Nettie explains.

I nod to Bess. “And that’s exactly why I don’t drink.”

The scent of something sugar-sweet layered with the scent of fruit intoxicates our senses and it mingles with the scent of expensive perfume, while Beethoven’s “Symphony No. 5” hums over the speakers.

Women in everything from sundresses to sequins mill about, examining the elaborate display tables with the kind of intensity usually reserved for crime scenes. Okay, so maybe I’m projecting, but it’s the exact intensity that I myself put into a crime scene.

What can I say? I’m dedicated to my craft.

Speaking of crime scenes, the buffet stretches along one wall like a pastel paradise brimming with towers of macarons in every shade of springtime, petit fours topped with flowers made of sugar, chocolate-dipped strawberries are nestled in edible

glitter, and a row of smoothies is set out in citrine hues that would make a tropical sunset jealous.

“Twenty bucks says at least one of these desserts is poisoned,” Nettie whispers as we make our way toward the buffet line.

“What makes you say that?” I ask, stunned she’d tempt fate by verbalizing the nightmare scenario. Lord knows we have enough of those playing out as it is.

“We brought you, didn’t we?” She no sooner says the words than both she and Bess burst out with a laugh.

“Very funny, ladies.” I shoot a wry look to the rest of the room and spot Elvie Whipple dressed in a bright pink gown as she and a few other women load her products onto a table.

It’s nice to know my prime suspect won’t be going anywhere soon.

“Come on, girls,” Bess says, steering us to the left. “This buffet isn’t going to eat itself.”

We head on over and find Elodie already working her way through the spread, loading a sampler plate with everything in sight, and she even has a pink smoothie precariously balanced in her other hand.

“You,” I say, sharper than intended. Oh heck, who am I kidding? I very much intended it. “Here, let me help you,” I say, momentarily breaking faith with my ire to take the smoothie from her before it hits the floor.

“What about me?” Elodie winks and wiggles her shoulders in her crisp white blouse and navy pencil skirt that looks as if it were painted on. Easy for her to look business-

casual—no one threw away her entire closet in the night.

“I have a bone to pick with you,” I say, still miffed about her wardrobe heist. “And you know exactly what it’s about.” I wiggle my own shoulders in an effort to exemplify the white fuzzy stole pinned over my shoulders.

“The only bones you should be picking are in your husband’s direction,” Nettie chimes in and earns an elbow to the ribs from Bess.

Elodie bubbles out a laugh. “Oh, Trixie, don’t be silly. Nettie is right. And stop being so dramatic. You look fabulous in that evening gown.”

“Maybe so, but it’s not yet noon,” I point out, adjusting my stole for the hundredth time. “I look like I got my formal night mixed up.”

“Oh hush.” Elodie snatches her smoothie from me. “Nothing says Breakfast at Tiffany’s like full formal gear. And if you’re lucky, Ransom will shower you with diamonds because of it. It’s win-win.” She takes a quick sip of her drink. “And baubles aside, you’re the best-dressed woman in the room.” She nods to my rather regal attire. “By the way, that shade of navy really brings out the wicked witch in your eyes.”

“Better a wicked witch than a wardrobe thief,” I mutter, but that just makes her grin all that much more.

Bess and Nettie dissolve into cackles as they pile their plates with pastel confections, creating towers worthy of an anxiety-riddled Jenga game.

Elodie leans past me and her eyes light up like a kid spotting an ice cream truck. “Hold on to your wicked thoughts. I see Mrs. Whipple over there. I think I’ll go help her lay out the goods. She’s letting me sell whatever doesn’t move today in the ship’s

boutique. And I'm already in love with her products." She casts another glance my way. "I've sent up a basket filled with Luscious and Delicious lotions and potions to your room. Everything is edible and can be placed anywhere on the human body. Do I need to draw a map for you?"

"No," I say in haste before she decides to do it anyway. "I think I can figure out the logistics."

"Draw a map forme," Nettie pipes up, but Elodie simply ignores her as she takes off.

"Drats." Nettie snaps her fingers in dismay. "Just when we were getting to the good part."

"Please." Bess shakes her head. "You've got decades and a mile-long list of men on her. You should be the one drawing a map for Elodie. Besides, we're here to question a suspect, not give a dissertation on what goes where in the bedroom."

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“Don’t forget which lotions and potions to use to get you there,” Nettie adds with a wiggle of her brows and it’s enough to make a grown woman blush. Although not one in our immediate circle.

Bess gives me a nudge. “Why don’t you join Elodie? She can talk shop with the woman while you talk murder.”

I frown at the thought. “I think I’d rather corner Elvie on my own. Besides, we all know there’s no competing with Elodie when it comes to stealing the attention of menorwomen.”

“She could sell ice to penguins,” Nettie agrees. “And probably convince them they needed matching scarves.”

“And she did call you a wicked witch,” Bess teases. “Although, let’s be honest, I’m betting your broom gets more action than hers these days.”

“You would think,” I mutter as thoughts of that Sassy disembodied busybody comes to mind.

“Well, we both seem to have a reason to talk to Elvie, so I suppose we have more than just our transportation options in common.” I snap up a plate and am about to hit the buffet hard when a certain cruise director with a mane full of chestnut locks stomps our way.

I sigh at the sight of her. “Speaking of wicked witches.”

Something tells me this beauty brunch is about to get ugly. Good thing I have experience with both murder and makeovers—although honestly, the makeovers are usually more dangerous. At least with murder, you know who your enemies are.

I glance over to where Elodie is chatting with Elvie.

It's almost time to see what secrets are hiding behind all that luxury lipstick. After all, in my experience, the prettier the package, the deadlier the contents.

CHAPTER 10

The click of determined heels against marble announces Tinsley's arrival as she parts the crowd of beauty enthusiasts like a shark through a school of well-dressed fish.

I take that back. Juxtaposing Tinsley to a shark is an insult to sharks everywhere. And perhaps witches, too.

The chandeliers here in the Coral Crown Lounge catch the auburn highlights in Tinsley's chestnut mane, and her usual scowl looks especially hardened this morning.

She makes a beeline for our little group, ignoring the tower of pastel macarons I'm attempting to balance on my plate. The classical music seems to fade as she comes in hot, or maybe that's just the sound of my appetite dying.

"Trixie." She says my name as if she's reading it off a list of ship violations. "I have a very serious problem that only you can solve."

Bess and Nettie gasp so hard their pastry towers give a mean wobble.

"Did hell just freeze over?" Nettie clutches her invisible pearls.

“Quick, someone check to see if the woman’s got a fever,” Bess adds. “I think she’s delusional.”

I’d laugh, but they’re not being funny. I’m the last person Tinsley would come to for help of any kind.

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense,” I say to Tinsley and watch as her eyes twitch. “What’s the crisis? Do you need me to teach a class? I mean, Wes gave me time off for my honeymoon, but if you’re in a pinch I’d be happy to help.”

I’m not just a permanent resident on this floating paradise, I teach art classes on board as well. With the exception of this particular cruise. Both Ransom and I were supposed to be free from any outside duties other than tending to each other. It was a nice thought while it lasted. But thankfully, one thing remains the same—that man will end each and every day in my bed. All night long.

I have a feeling the rest of our lives will be one long honeymoon.

Tinsley balls her fists as she leans my way. “I need your help with something.”

Nettie shakes her head in disbelief. “Out there somewhere, pigs must be flying—right before they end up at the breakfast buffet.” She pats her stomach as she eyes the offerings before us.

It’s just like Nettie to relate everything back to food. And come to think of it, I’d rather gobble up an entire herd of flying bacon than team up with Tinsley. She’s pretty much tried to make my life miserable ever since I set foot on this ship. And she’s succeeded.

That whole flying pigs thing Nettie just spouted is more or less true.

Tinsley would rather eat her shoe, and perhaps the shoe of every passenger on this ship, even the smelly ones, than ask me for so much as a glass of water.

Bess shakes her head. “Tinsley Thornton asking for help—from Trixie Troublefield? That seems about as likely as the buffet running out of bacon.”

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I tip my head her way. “It’s Trixie TroublefieldBaxter,” I say. “And I’ve seen a buffet or two run out of bacon before. But that’s only because the three of us showed up for it.” True story.

And I knew I wasn’t the only one daydreaming of bacon after Nettie’s swine-based soliloquy. Bess, Nettie, and I have been around each other for so long now, we essentially share the same brain—and have the same appetite for salted breakfast meats.

I turn my full attention to the feisty brunette at hand.

Tinsley lifts a finger. “I came to you because—” she starts.

“Because she’s so good at stealing your men?” Nettie quips before shrugging my way. “I couldn’t resist.”

“She didn’t steal them,” Tinsley hisses. “They just temporarily lost their minds.”

“Very thoroughly and repeatedly,” Bess adds as she gobbles down a macaron.

But before Tinsley can respond with what I’m sure would be a perfectly venomous comeback, Elvie’s voice cuts through the chatter.

Elvie Whipple commands the room to attention as every last one of us turns our attention to the front as she stands at a podium wearing a hot pink suit.

“Welcome, one and all,” she shouts into the microphone set in front of her and nearly

blows our eardrums out. “Ooh, sorry.” She tones it down a bit. “I want to thank everyone who showed up despite the tragedy that has befallen my husband.” Elvie bows her head for a moment and I can see her hands trembling as she holds out a piece of paper in front of her. “I know that each precious soul who made the trek to be part of the Whispers of the Wickedcruise loved Brad as much as I did. But seeing that he was a big believer in life moving on after tragedy, I’m determined to do just that in his honor. And I hope you’ll join me in enjoying your lives and this cruise to the fullest.”

A light round of applause circles the room.

“It’s true.” Her perfectly lined lips curve into something between a smile and a grimace. “Brad would have wanted us to celebrate life—and beauty. That’s why I created Luscious and Delicious. It wasn’t just about making women feel beautiful on the outside, but confident on the inside, too. And I’m thrilled to pieces to share that vision with all of you today.” She beams a toothy smile at the room as she says it.

Bess leans my way. “It might just be me”—she whispers—“but this woman seems less like a grieving widow and more like someone who just found out that calories don’t count on a cruise—and maybe that dead husband doesn’t count either.”

“Maybe she’s just good at concealing things,” Nettie whispers back. “She does own a cosmetics empire.”

“Shh,” Tinsley is quick to shush them both. “Let’s hear what else she’s hiding—I mean, sharing.”

Elvie sighs out at the crowd with a content smile. “The idea for Luscious and Delicious came to me one night when I was eating chocolate-covered strawberries,” she tells the crowd, rapt at attention. “I thought, wouldn’t it be wonderful if our beauty products could be just as delectable as our desserts? Why shouldn’t luxury

feel—and taste—amazing?”

She spins her tale of cosmetic innovation effortlessly. She starts at the conception of the company then takes us through time right up until this very moment.

“Which brings me to our lovely brunch spread. I must ask—how are you enjoying your treats?”

A chorus of delicious and amazing rings out.

“I’m so glad to hear it,” she practically purrs. “Because every dessert, smoothie, and tea you’ve been enjoying was made with Luscious and Delicious products. From our vanilla-infused lip glosses to our chocolate-based bronzers, everything is safe, edible, and as you can plainly see—absolutely divine.”

The entire room gasps with delight while Elvie pauses for effect, surveying the room like a queen addressing her subjects—and for the most part, the subjects seem rather enthralled to be noshing on forty-dollar lipsticks.

Although Bess, Nettie, and I exchange a less than amused look. We’ve eaten outside of our comfort wheelhouse before, but never straight from our makeup bag.

“Well”—Nettie examines her half-eaten cupcake—“that explains why this frosting tastes like cherry lip gloss.”

Bess makes a face. “And I bet I know what happens to any product she’s not able to move. She puts it in a blender and downs it for breakfast.”

Elvie wraps up her speech and invites everyone to continue with the culinary cosmetic feast and to feel free to move up to the front for their complimentary makeovers as well.

The crowd surges toward the makeover stations as if there's a two-for-one special on eternal youth. And I waste no time making my way through the chaos, determined to reach Elvie before she disappears behind her wall of perfectly contoured volunteers.

But Tinsley cuts me off at the pass. "Where do you think you're going?" she snips as she pulls me back by the elbow.

"To get some answers," I say, prying myself loose. "And maybe figure out how to make my breakfast double as lipstick. I'm all about efficiency these days."

"Not without me you don't."

I inch back as I inspect her. "Meaning?"

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“Meaning, we’re right back to that big problem I need you to help me solve.”

“Which is?”

“I need you to help me track down Brad Whipple’s killer.”

I lift my chin at the thought.

For once, Tinsley and I are on the same page—albeit a homicidal one.

I nod her way. “I guess we’re joining forces.” I’m not one to fight a gift horse in the mouth—not even a stubborn mule like Tinsley. Heck, if she helps solve this case, that means I can land myself in the honeymoon suite where I belong—horizontal.

“Joining forces?” Tinsley balks. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Okay,” I tell her. “Regardless, we’re bringing down a killer.” I turn my sights on Elvie Whipple. “In the least, we’re about to shake down a suspect.”

“Nothing can go wrong,” Tinsley whispers as we make our way through the room.

“Nothing will,” I say just as a sassy redhead materializes out of nowhere and floats down from the ceiling.

And just like that, I have a feeling things are about to go very,verywrong.

Time to find out if our cosmetics queen helped arrange her husband’s permanent

retirement.

After all, they say you have to suffer for beauty, but I'm betting murder is bad for business.

CHAPTER 11

The Luscious and Lethally Delicious Beauty Brunch swirls around us in a cloud of perfume, primping, and an annoying level of perkiness from the beauty brand ambassadors ready and willing to ambush anything that moves with a blush brush.

Classical music floats through the Coral Crown Lounge like champagne bubbles, mingling with the scent of vanilla and something fruity that I'm pretty certain started life as a face cream.

Women crowd the makeover stations, while others sample what look to be ordinary pastries, and are, in fact, high-end cosmetics. I'm still trying to decide if it's a case of brilliant marketing or a lawsuit waiting to happen. Perhaps both.

Tinsley and I weave through the crowd toward Elvie Whipple, who happens to be holding court next to a display of products with names that sound like they were dreamed up at a true crime convention. Kiss Me Deadly Lip Stain sits next to Mortally Gorgeous Face Powder, while Scrumptious Suspect Zero Setting Spray promises to keep your makeup intact during police lineups. And part of me is wondering if this upcoming conversation will lead to the police department indeed.

"Oh my stars and murder mysteries, how I miss this!" Sassy, AKA Titsiana Genevieve Forenza, materializes beside me in a shower of hot pink stars with her spectral form vibrating with enough excitement to make the chandeliers shiver. "These launches were always so much fun. Although I have to say, the afterlife has much better catering. And the dress code? Well, it's to die for." She winks at her own

joke. “Get it, die? I’m technically dead by earthly standards. But let me be the first to tell you that death is more or less a lie.”

I shoot her a curt nod.

Indeed, after being visited by almost a dozen ghosts, I’ve surmised the fact death is more of a gateway than it is an eternal dirt nap. I’d let her know as much, but seeing that Tinsley is right next to me, I bite back a response. The last thing I need is her thinking I’m talking to myself while we interrogate a suspect. Heaven knows she’s already questioned my sanity on more than one occasion.

Believe me, so have I.

“Ooh, look at that dreamy display,” Sassy says while zipping right through a tower of cosmetics, with each package shaped like a pastel macaron cookie. “The cherry-flavored Crime Scene Cleanup concealer was my suggestion. Brad hated it—he said it was too on the nose. Speaking of noses, you should try the Alibi-Proof Powder in coconut. It really works to keep down the shine. I mean, it worked when I had a nose. And now I can’t stop shining.” Her entire countenance brightens a notch as if to prove her point.

We come upon the guest of honor, and my suspect of honor, the newly minted widow herself.

Elvie glows in her bright pink suit almost as bright as Sassy. Her auburn waves match her stark red lipstick, and juxtaposed to her pale skin it looks almost garish.

Funny, I don’t remember her looking so pale yesterday. But I suppose that’s what a night of grieving will get you. Even though she and Brad had exchanged a few barbs yesterday, certainly she loved him.

Thoughts of my ex come back to me. Stanton Troublefield had been trouble for the twenty-five years I was married to him. Sure, he cheated at every turn, unbeknownst to me, and he got on my very last nerve nearly every single minute—something I was very well aware of—but I'd grieve him if someone suddenly plunged a knife into his back.

Wouldn't I?

Even a little?

But then, I could have easily plunged that knife into his back myself. And the only person I would have been grieving for would've been me—in fear I'd be carted off to prison.

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“Elvie!” I paste on a manufactured smile, the kind that screams I’m certainly not here to accuse you of murder. “So nice to see you again. We met yesterday. Although with everything you’ve been through, I’m sure you don’t remember.”

“Of course, I remember you.” Elvie’s perfectly lined lips curve upward and her features soften as she says it. Her brown eyes are the color of root beer and they look as warm as can be. “You’re the one who solves all the crimes around here.” She turns to Tinsley and picks up her hands. “And I certainly know who you are—you’re the superfan.”

“That I am.” Tinsley puffs up like a peacock at a beauty contest—if that beauty contest ended in a homicide. And if she puffed up any more, she’d float away. A part of me wishes she would. I’m not sure how I feel teaming up in an investigation with Tinsley.

Besides, I’ve already teamed up with Ransom and Wes. I think.

“We’re so sorry about what happened to your husband,” I say to Elvie and her chest expands and quivers.

“Yes, I’m so very sorry as well.” She closes her eyes for a moment. “But, like I mentioned earlier, he would have wanted me to go on with things.” She waves an arm around the room. “Despite our differences, he was my biggest cheerleader when it came to my little cosmetics empire.”

“It’s true.” Sassy ticks her head to the side. “But it’s most likely not for the reasons Elvie might think.”

I gasp as I look at the waifish wraith.

I'll have to quiz Sassy later on exactly why she'd say something like that.

"What's the matter?" Elvie leans my way. "You're not having a reaction to the food, are you?" Her mouth rounds out in horror as if this were a real possibility.

"Oh no," I say, quickly looking around for a grounded reason for my reaction and spot Bess and Nettie getting their faces dusted with sparkling rouge and bright blue eyeshadow.

Oh my word, they both look like clowns!

I clear my throat. "I was just looking at all the wonderful makeover transformations taking place."

Honestly, I'm a little shocked at how easily I spilled the lie.

"Oh please, girls." Elvie motions to a couple of empty chairs next to her. "Take a seat. I'd be glad to give you both a makeover. In fact, it will help me a ton—you know, with the grief. I just need to take my mind off of things until this ship gets to port. I can't believe this awful thing happened, and here I am stuck on a cruise ship for the next week and a half."

"Well, if you really don't mind," I say, shrugging at Tinsley and we both promptly plop in a chair.

"Ooh." Sassy floats before us. "You are in for a treat. No one knows their way around Luscious and Delicious cosmetics like the queen of beauty herself. You're both going to look like royalty once she's through with you."

Here's hoping.

I cast a side glance back at Bess and Nettie and see that they're having their lips drawn in at exaggerated angles.

Oh, good grief. The only position in a royal court those poor women are fit for is the part of court jesters.

"I hope you like lots of glam," Elvie says as she begins to brush a liquid foundation on us, alternating from Tinsley to me. And is she using the same brush?

Tinsley and I have very different skin tones. Maybe this is one of those self-adjusting foundations. Not that I believe in their ability to adjust across such a vast spectrum.

Tinsley's skin has a constant warm glow, while on most days I look as if I've crawled out from under a rock.

"I just love glam," Tinsley says as she lifts her face toward Elvie's artist brush strokes. "In fact, I think I'll get dolled up later now that I'll be looking my best and see if I can't find me a man to entertain."

Entertain?

I shoot Tinsley a look, but she's stoically staring at the ceiling.

Sassy snorts. "If she finds herself a man to entertain, I'll be entertaining myself by pulling up a front-row seat."

I can't help but frown at the glib ghost for thinking it, let alone speaking it out loud. Although, as far as the bedroom peanut gallery goes, she's already done as much with me.

Hey? Maybe Tinsley and her man can take the spotlight off of Ransom and me for a while?

Hand to Heaven, Tinsley would be my new best friend if she could pull off that feat.

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“Ooh, looks as if there’s a man on the horizon.” Elvie bucks with a laugh as she slathers a hot pink blush all over Tinsley’s cheeks. “How about you, Trixie? How will you be entertaining yourself? If I remember correctly, you’re the ship’s unofficial investigator. And, well, now it seems we all have something to investigate.”

“Trixie is on her honeymoon,” Tinsley answers for me. “But I’d be happy to take on the investigation.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Elvie coos, and if I didn’t know better, I think she looks relieved.

As for Tinsley’s proclamation of taking over the investigation...

I shoot the perky cruise director a wry look. I have a feeling that’s exactly what she plans on doing.

CHAPTER12

“Ahoneyymoon on a cruise ship must be magical.” Elvie’s eyes light up as she looks my way right here in the middle of the Luscious and Lethally Delicious Beauty Brunch. “Who’s the lucky guy? Don’t tell me you married the captain. You’re certainly pretty enough to land any man on this ship.”

“Actually, I married the head of vessel security.” I cringe a little when I say it.

Should I have confessed my proximity to the ship’s detective so soon in the investigation? I’m guessing not. But I blame Tinsley for the investigative blunder.

“Oh wow.” Elvie pauses from her whirlwind of brush strokes. “Detective Ransom Baxter? Why, I spoke with him last night. My,my, he is a hunky hunk if ever there was one. No wonder you look so exhausted.” She chortles out a laugh. “And not to mention dressed for success. I’ll admit, when I saw your evening gown, I thought maybe you dressed up for my event. Heaven knows that dressing up seems to be a dying art these days. I’ve had more women stumble into my shop in pajamas than I care to count. It’s as if our entire society wants to lounge around in bed all day—and it shows.”

A titter of laughter escapes me. “I can’t say I blame them, but only because I get to lounge around with my new handsome hubby.”

“Speaking of which”—Sassy says while inspecting her glossy red nails—“can we hurry with the shakedown? I’m missing that handsome new hubby of yours myself. I’ve never seen a wall of muscles perform so well. And the way he?”

“Well, regardless”—Elvie interrupts the pesky poltergeist before she can offer me a play-by-play, which I, of all people, do not need—“you certainly look dressed for success.”

“More like dressed for excess,” Tinsley mutters while Elvie brushes some lipstick onto her kisser.

“Speaking of success, Trixie.” Sassy fans herself with a glowing hand. “That honeymoon of yours is off the charts. Trust me, the two of you are already very successful together.”

I wink her way because I happen to agree.

“Anyway, congratulations,” Elvie adds as she quickly brushes some color onto my lips as well. “And I do apologize. I imagine our little murder interrupted your

romantic getaway.” She takes her thumb and begins to blend my cheeks so hard I’m convinced she’s going to leave a bruise.

“Oh, she’s still getting plenty of romance,” Sassy pipes up. “I’d give them a solid nine-point-eight for last night’s performance. It would have been a perfect ten, but someone got tangled in the sheets.”

“Tangled in the sheets!” Elvie bubbles with a laugh and I straighten in horror.

I gasp hard.

Oh my word!

It turns out that if someone—anyone—is touching my flesh, well, then they can hear the dead, too. I’m sort of like a bad game of telephone in that respect—or more to the point, a very good game of telephone. One that specializes in long distance calls.

“You know”—Elvie turns to Tinsley—“you sounded just like my old friend Sassy when you said that.”

Thankfully, Tinsley’s eyes are sealed shut and she seems to have no idea what Elvie is rambling on about, or even the fact that she’s addressing her.

“May I ask what happened to your old friend Sassy?” I ask. I may as well get to the bottom of that mystery, too. After all, something did the woman in. And judging by her youthful face, it did her in well before her prime.

Elvie’s mouth opens as if to say something but closes just as fast as if she’s thought better of it.

“Let’s just say she met a rather tragic end.” Elvie casts a mournful look right at Sassy

as if she, too, could see the deceased. “It was unexpected and I still miss her dearly each and every day.”

I turn to the specter among us.

A tragic end? It looks as if I have another mystery on my hands indeed.

“But marrying a detective—” Elvie fans herself with her fingers. “And such a good-looking one at that, I can imagine you’re quite the crime-solving duo.”

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My cheeks warm at the thought. “Yes, well, solving crimes seems to be part of my marriage package.”

“Along with other packages,” Sassy adds with a wicked grin. “I just can’t wait to get back to that man. Can’t you put a rush on this?”

“I’m almost done,” Elvie says, picking up another fluffy brush and I shoot the pushy poltergeist a look. “And now for the grand finale...” Elvie gives a little laugh. “Have either of you tried our new Drop Dead Gorgeous Highlighter?” She holds up a compact that sparkles like glitter-laden evidence under a white-hot spotlight. “It’s not only delicious, it’s todiefor.”

“Of course, I have.” Tinsley is quick to kiss the ring. “And I love that you worked the theme of the podcast into the names of your products. That’s so very clever.”

“Yes, my marketing team really leaned into the whole murder theme, didn’t they?” Elvie gives a light chuckle. “In fact, it was my old friend Sassy who thought up Murder She Wrote Mascara and Killer Queen Contour Kit.”

“I sure did.” Sassy glows with pride. Like really, really glows. “Remember when we created the Fatally Flawless Foundation? That was actually my idea, too. Although Brad tried to take credit for it. He was sure good at taking credit for things.” Her glowing eyes narrow at the thought.

I look over at the table next to me and spot a product called Last Words Lip Gloss in a shade called Confession Pink and wonder if someone is trying to tell us something. More to the point, the suspect before me.

I clear my throat. “Elvie, I’ll be honest, I just don’t know how you’re handling everything right now,” I say, steering the conversation toward less cosmetic matters. However, on this ship, cosmetics and crime seem to go hand in perfectly manicured hand.

Elvie’s smile slips a fraction. “As well as can be expected. Brad and I, well, like every relationship, we had our bumps and bruises. But my goodness, I loved that man.”

“More bumps than bruises,” Sassy interjects and I gasp at the revelation. Although I’m not sure why I’m surprised, I seemed to witness a few myself.

Tinsley leans toward Elvie. “Was he having trouble with anyone?” She manages to keep her tone gentle as if she’s asking about the weather instead of potential killers. Tinsley being gentle about anything is sort of an anomaly in itself. “Any recent arguments or threats?” she continues.

Okay, I’ll give it to her, she’s good at getting to the point.

“Brad made enemies,” Elvie admits, fiddling with a tube of lipstick and glancing at the bottom. “Homicide Red.” She wags the color at us. “That seems appropriate.” She quickly dusts some on both my lips and Tinsley’s. “Brad solved cold cases in his spare time. He did a lot of digging. That tends to upset guilty people.” She glares at me when she says it. “I don’t really know of anyone in particular who might have been after revenge. But let’s see...”—she sighs, looking out at the room—“Oh, why, I think Becky Lee Darling might know more.” She nods to the back of the room. “She handled all of his promotional inventory and swag. I think she did some organizational work and light accounting for him, too. In fact, she spent a lot of time with him these last few weeks getting ready for this trip. We brought so much of that murder merch junk along to give away to the kind people who joined us. I’ll admit, some of it is cute and clever. And if she can’t help out with the case, you can always

Speak with Reed. That's Brad's business partner, Reed Williams. They've been friends longer than I've known Brad. This was the second marriage for both of us. Anyway, both Becky Lee and Reed seem to have spent more time with Brad lately than I did."

"So you really think it could be anyone?" Tinsley presses, while Elvie absentmindedly brushes some eyeshadow on us both. Tinsley's eyeshadow is a dark and moody shade of blue and matches her sourpuss expression perfectly.

"All I know is there's a lunatic among us." Elvie's hand trembles as she puts the brush down. "Someone who thought murder was the answer to whatever problem they had with Brad. I don't know anyone who would come to that conclusion." She casts a dark look to the sea as if she thought differently on the subject.

I study Elvie's face, searching for any crack in her perfectly powdered facade. Is she really the grieving widow, or is this just another stellar performance from a woman who's made a fortune selling beautiful illusions? Everything about her screams perfection, but it does make me wonder if her Fatally Flawless Foundation is doing its best to fool me.

After all, in the cosmetics game, everything comes down to appearances. And sometimes the most flawless finish is hiding the deadliest secrets.

We wrap it up and Elvie takes off for the buffet on the hunt for some hot java.

Both Tinsley and I turn to look at one another and belt out a scream at the very same time.

"You look like a clown," I cry in horror at the punchy spots of color on her cheeks and lips, not to mention the fact her eyes look like two large bruises.

“Oh honey”—Tinsley shakes her head as she inspects me—“the circus has come to town and it has not left you off the roster. She even penciled in a bright blue tear running down your cheek!”

“That’s actually her signature beauty mark,” Sassy shrugs. “She thinks it adds a touch of pizzazz to the face.”

“Wonderful,” I say as we rise from our seats to meet with other far too colorful women among us. “We can always wash this off, but there’s a killer out there with blood on their hands and that’s going to leave a permanent stain on their record if I have anything to say about it.”

Tinsley nods. “That’s exactly why we need to question our next suspect.”

I glance around the room, and sure enough, I spot the stocky brunette with a dusting of gray locks as she steps right out of the lounge.

She might be out of our grasp for now, but, Becky Lee Darling, we’re coming for you.

CHAPTER13

While Trixie’s Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Welcome back, pleasure cruisers! While Trixie and Ransom are still investigating suspicious activity in their private hot tub (and really, who am I to interrupt such thorough detective work?), let’s dive into today’s steamy question.

Dear Elodie,

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I keep hearing about the Romance Package add-on for my upcoming cruise. Is it worth the extra money? The rose petals and champagne seem a bit cliché.

Romantically Resistant

Dear Resistant,

The ship's Romance Package is like a little black dress—it's just the beginning of your evening's possibilities. Sure, they'll scatter rose petals on your bed, but the real fun is finding creative ways to pick them up. And that champagne? Let's just say there's more than one way to appreciate its bubbles.

Although between us, skip the chocolate-covered strawberries they offer. I've found much more interesting ways to enjoy both chocolate and fruit. The room service menu has some delightfully creative options if you know how to read between the lines. Just ask for Elodie's Sultry Special. You're welcome.

Sailing suggestively,

XOXO Elodie

P.S. And yes, room service is discreet. Trust me on this one.

Trixie

Laughter ripples across the promenade deck as Bess, Nettie, and I make our grand entrance, although I can't blame a single soul for their reaction.

The polished teak gleams beneath our feet while the ocean sparkles beyond the rails, but neither view can distract from our faces.

Tinsley scurried back to work after that catastrophe of a brunch—probably to avoid being seen—and Sassy vanished, muttering something about needing to haunt someone who didn't actually scare her. That says a lot, considering she's the ghost in this supernatural equation.

Bess, Nettie, and I exchange a sideways glance at one another. We look as if we're victims of an explosion that took place at the cosmetics counter—and were severely injured, perhaps even maimed beyond recognition.

Between my blue teardrop, Bess' neon blush, and Nettie's Easter egg surprise eyes, it's clear we're starring in our own circus sideshow right this minute.

"Would you look at that?" Nettie points across the deck at a woman sporting electric blue teardrops painted down both cheeks. "Another victim of the Luscious and Lethal makeover massacre. And compared to us, I'd say she got off easy."

"Yup," Bess says. "And she only had to kill six people in prison to do it."

I give a mournful chuckle. "And there's another one." I nod toward a passenger whose face resembles a sunset gone wrong. "At least we're not suffering alone. We're like the sisterhood of the traveling disaster."

Bess nods. "Sisterhood of the somewhat edible traveling disaster," she adds. The three of us agreed that the "food" left a lot to be desired.

"And why is my stomach suddenly burning?" As if I had to ask.

"Mine feels like a volcano that's about to erupt." Bess groans as she nods to a woman

to our left. “Hey, look! There’s the leader of the luscious and lunatic pack,” she says as the woman passes and we can see up close that her lipstick extends well past her natural lip line.

“I think Tinsley and I got the worst of it,” I say, peering at my reflection in a shop window. “Elvie must have really put her broken heart into our transformations.”

“Or her revenge,” Nettie adds as she sidles up next to me. “Although I have to say, this eyeshadow does bring out the crazy in my eyes.”

Bess snorts. “Everything brings out the crazy in your eyes.”

The sound of footsteps closing in causes us to turn around and the three of us gasp on cue.

Ransom and Wes are headed this way and they both stop dead in their tracks at the sight of us. Their faces freeze in that special way that says they’re trying very hard not to react—and that in and of itself is a pretty horrible reaction.

Their mouths contort as they reach for words that never quite make it past their lips. Mostly because their mothers raised them not to say anything if they don’t have something nice to say.

Wes squints over at us. “You look”—his lips press tight, because evidently, he cannot tell a lie.

“Colorful,” Ransom finishes diplomatically while his eyes enlarge a touch as they dare inspect us. “Very colorful and”—Ransom searches for the right word as if he’s hunting for a life preserver—“festive.” He rocks back on his heels with a hint of relief.

Wes nods. “Like Christmas came early,” he adds. “And brought all its colors with it. Every single one of them.”

“Save it.” I hold up a hand. “We know we look like we raided my paint supplies—in the middle of an earthquake.”

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“I was going to add that you look radiant.” Ransom pulls me into his arms and drops a kiss on my lips before pulling back and giving me another quick once-over. “Is that a teardrop on your cheek?”

“That’s right,” I tell him. “And you know what that means. I’ve killed before, and if you’re not careful with your words, I might just do it again.”

We all give a quick laugh—well, everyone but me.

“All right, ladies,” Wes says, holding his hands up slightly. “I’m not touching this with a ten-foot pole. How about we treat you to some coffee? You look like you could use a pick-me-up. And I hear The Caffeinated Crown just pulled a batch of cinnamon rolls out of the oven.”

We don’t protest.

In fact, less than five minutes later, we’re settled at the coffee shop’s outdoor balcony, taking in the sea breeze while staring out at sparkling waters.

The smell of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls and premium coffee fills the air, almost masking the scent of whatever fruity powder Elvie dusted on our faces. The sun casts a warm glow over marble tables while turning the waves into crushed diamonds.

Bess cranes her neck past me and frowns. “People look downright petrified of our presence. I’m starting to feel like we need an exorcist.”

Nettie shrugs while studying the menu. “Or maybe just a paper bag to put over our

heads.”

Ransom lifts a brow. “It might attract less attention.”

Wes returns with our orders balanced on a tray—a Murderous Mocha for me, complete with chocolate shavings and whipped cream. A Killer Caramel Latte for Bess, and Nettie’s bold choice, a quad-shot Deadly Dark Roast that could wake the dead—and probably has. Each comes with a slice of Death by Chocolate Cake that looks like it might actually follow through on that threat, in addition to those fresh, hot, out-of-the-oven cinnamon rolls. Plus, two plain black coffees for Wes and Ransom. I have a feeling they’ve had enough excitement for the day, merely by being in the same vicinity as us.

“It’s so nice that the café has adapted the theme from Brad Whipple’s podcast,” I say, hoping that I’m right and it’s not the fact that this ship has somehow become the murder capital of the world—the watery portion of the world at least.

“That’s right,” Ransom says, lifting his coffee my way. “They were supposed to be hosting a podcast here this morning, so the manager made a few changes to the menu items yesterday. But we all know why that podcast was canceled.” He looks over at Wes. “Did the barista ask you any questions?”

“She asked if we were with the circus,” he admits, setting down our drinks. “I told her we were with the murder investigation. Somehow that seemed less dignified.” He winces my way. “My apologies.”

“No need to do so,” I say, toasting him with my cinnamon roll before taking a bite. “Oh my word,” I moan. “This is amazing.”

Bess nods in agreement. “I’d wear this mask every day just to get my hands on one of these. How have I not had one before? I live on this ship.”

Nettie grunts. “The same ship we make questionable choices on. Like choosing to successfully avoid this place for years.”

“It just opened up,” Wes is quick to clear the air. “You haven’t missed a thing. In fact, the ship is trying out a slew of new places during our transatlantic run.”

“Speaking of questionable choices and questions in general.” Ransom sighs as he looks my way. “What did you learn from Elvie Whipple? Besides her unique approach to makeup application.”

Well, well, so much for keeping secrets. But then, that’s what I get for marrying an ex-FBI behavioral analyst.

I have a feeling my days of getting away with anything at all have all but dissipated.

And I’d love to say the very same thing about the killer.

CHAPTER 14

My mouth falls open. “What makes you think—” I gag in response to Ransom all but accusing me of speaking to Elvie Whipple.

I did, of course, but that’s beside the point.

Ransom raises a brow in a way that says he knows me far too well as the ocean glitters beneath our balcony view here at The Caffeinated Crown.

“Oh, all right.” I take a sip of my mocha, buying time and leaving a blue lipstick print on the cup. Wait, I thought they were red? Oh, good grief, my entire face has probably changed colors six times by now. Elvie’s cosmetics aren’t only edible, apparently, they’re mood-shifting, too.

I quickly give everyone at the table the synopsis of my meeting with Elvie, carefully omitting Tinsley's involvement. I figure that's my ace in the hole for when I really need to distract Ransom or Wes from whatever trouble I'm about to get into. And on this ship, trouble is as reliable as the dinner buffet—or one of my surnames.

Wes clears his throat. “Well, I heard something interesting involving Brad and Elvie.” He leans forward and those brass buttons of his catch the light. “I heard the two of them had quite the argument before yesterday's deadly lounge party.”

“We heard that argument firsthand,” Bess confirms, absent-mindedly scratching her day-glow cheek and accidentally scraping through the first six base layers. “Those two were spitting venom like a couple of cobras at a snake fight.”

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“More like cobras at a snake divorce court,” Nettie adds. “I haven’t heard that kind of language since my second husband found out about the man who was about to become my third husband. Or was it when my third husband found out about my fourth?”

“It could have been the fifth and the sixth.” Bess shrugs at her bestie and they both look genuinely perplexed by the matrimonial mathematics.

Ransom offers a sober nod my way despite my rainbow glow. “And I discovered Elvie has been making some interesting transfers from their joint account.”

“Wow.” I lean back and inspect this gorgeous demigod among us. “Who told you that?”

“I can’t reveal my sources.” He winks my way. “And I’ve yet to confirm it. So far it’s still a rumor.”

“But if it’s true...” I blow out a breath. “It could mean that she’s been funding more than just her cosmetics empire.”

Bess nods. “Like a hitman.”

“Or a hitwoman,” Nettie counters.

Wes tips his head. “Maybe Brad found out about her money moves and threatened to expose her in some way?”

Nettie holds up her drink. “Maybe Brad kicked puppies for fun on Friday nights and that’s why he had to go.”

Bess rolls her eyes. “You would root for the killer.”

Nettie turns my way. “I’m always rooting for you, kid.”

A river of words gets lodged in my throat, but before I can say another sound, my face begins to itch.

“Ouch,” I say, giving my cheek a quick scratch.

“You can say that again,” Bess says, rubbing her hands over her own cheeks. “Why does it suddenly feel as if I’ve got a third-degree sunburn?”

Nettie lets out an ear-piercing yowl. “And why do I suddenly feel as if my face wants to break out in fur? We didn’t opt for the werewolf formula, did we?”

“I hope not,” I say as my face starts to feel like one large blister. I look at Ransom. “I’d hate to start borrowing your razor so soon in our marriage—especially for my own beard.”

My face starts to burn like I’ve been slapped by a jellyfish, while both Bess and Nettie continue to paw and claw at their cheeks as if they’re trying to remove their skin.

“It looks like we’re not the only ones who feel as if we’re being attacked by fire ants,” I say, nodding over to another group of women with colorful faces, all of whom are twitching and itching with the best of them.

“Whatever is in that makeup, I think I’m allergic to it,” Nettie shouts.

“I think it’s time for a shower,” I shout as well as if trying to talk over the pain. “I’d better head back to the cabin before my face matches my lipstick. Although at this point, that might be an improvement—despite the fact it’s blue.”

“Need help with that shower?” Ransom offers with a devilish curve taking over his lips.

“From you?” I muse. “Always.”

We scramble to our feet but not before scooping up our cinnamon rolls.

We’re no fools.

As we hurry toward our respective cabins, I can’t help but wonder—is this reaction just another cosmetic casualty, or did Elvie Whipple just try to add three more names to her body count? Or judging by the gaggles of itching women we bypass, another hundred bodies.

Either way, I have a feeling this case is about to get messier than mascara caught in the rain.

Although first thing is first—a delicious shower with Ransom to help wash away the sins of the world. Unlike the sins of the killer.

Whoever stabbed Brad Whipple in the back won’t have their sins absolved until they’ve served their time—as in a life term behind bars.

Brad Whipple can’t enjoy his freedom on earth anymore.

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And if I have any say in it, neither will the killer.

CHAPTER15

While Trixie's Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Ahoy, amorous adventurers! Our honeymooners are still reviewing security footage (wink, wink), so let's tackle another burning question from our mailbag.

Dear Elodie,

I noticed the ship has a couples cooking class. My husband thinks it sounds boring, but I'd love to spice things up in the kitchen. Is it worth it?

Culinary Curious

Oh,my simmering sweetie,

There is nothing boring about playing with food. Trust me, a couple's cooking class is just foreplay with better props. Think about it—all that kneading, stirring, whisking... It's like Fifty Shades of Gourmet.

The best part? The kitchen's marble counters are just the right height for... Let's just say quality control testing. And don't get me started on what you can do with that chocolate fountain after hours. Although I do recommend bringing your own apron. Those ship-issued suits of armor can be a bit...restrictive.

Heating things up,

XOXO Elodie

Trixie

The honeymoon suite wraps us in warmth, with its soft golden lighting and plush carpet beneath our feet. Music filters through the speakers—something jazzy and slow that makes my pulse skip in time with the beat.

Ransom's arms slide around my waist as we sway together in the middle of the room. I must look absolutely ridiculous with this overdone makeup still on my face, but the way he's looking at me makes me forget everything else—my new rainbow features included.

“You know”—he murmurs as his thumb traces circles on the small of my back—“I'm developing quite an affinity for this colorful side of you.”

A dark laugh rumbles through me as I tighten my arms around him. “Ransom, I'm a walking spectacle, and don't you dare deny it.”

“Have it your way.” He pauses to brush the hair from my eyes. “But I have a sudden craving for a walking spectacle.” His eyes crinkle at the corners as he offers up that devastating half-smile, making my knees weak. “Particularly beautiful blonde ones with the softest lips I've ever kissed.”

“Real smooth, Baxter,” I say, leaning into his kiss and running my fingers through his thick, glossy hair. His mouth is warm and insistent against mine, and I lose myself in the sensation until a thought hits me and I crash back to reality. “Oh! I just remembered something. I need to run down to the boutique. Elodie hijacked my entire wardrobe and I'm relegated to looking like a formal night castoff until we hit

England.”

“I thought the closet looked as if a runway show was taking place in it.” Ransom frowns over at the closet. “Elodie does seem to have a talent for wardrobe redistribution.” He presses a kiss to my temple. “Although I must say, I’m rather fond of what you’re wearing now.” He gives my furry white stole a quick rub. “And that blue dress brings out the beautiful in your eyes.” He lands a kiss to each of my eyelids as if to drive the point home.

“This old clown costume?” I tease. “It’s designer and costs more than this stateroom. Elodie left all of the price tags on. You have great taste, Mr. Baxter.”

“Only in women,” he shoots back with a wink. “So are we doing a quick trip to the Queen’s Mall?”

“Are you in?” I wince as I ask and he nods without hesitation. “Oh, thank you. I promise, we’ll be in and out in ten minutes, tops, and then we’ll come right back here and continue where we left off,” I say, already heading toward the door, and I’m about to swing it open, but the handle doesn’t budge. I try again, this time putting more muscle into it, but nothing happens. “Uh, Ransom? Either this cabin is having an existential crisis or we’re locked in.”

“What’s going on?” He steps over after retrieving his phone from the dresser. “Having a wrestling match with the door?”

“And losing spectacularly.” I jiggle the handle again as if that might change things. “Something isn’t right. It’s almost as if it’s locked from the outside.”

He gives it a try, but the result is the same.

“That’s odd.” He takes a minute to glare at the door as if that might convince it to

open. Shockingly, it doesn't.

"Should we call engineering?" I suggest, but Ransom is already shaking his head and glaring at his phone with that look in his eye that usually means trouble.

The engineering department here on the ship is usually the one that the staff calls if anything needs to be fixed, adjusted, or set free to live out their days flying in the sky. That last one involved a seagull and Nettie. And there were several activists looking to sue the kaftan right off of a certain gray-headed granny. There was some major cursing and some minor bloodshed involved. Trust me, you don't want any more details. Just know that both Nettie and the seagull came out the victors.

"I don't think we need to call engineering." Ransom's fingers fly over the screen. "I say we escalate the issue all the way to the captain. I'm going to ask him if he's the one responsible for this." And he does just that before hitting send.

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The reply comes almost instantly.

Wes: A hostage situation? Such dramatic language. Loosen up and enjoy your honeymoon, kids. Barring a ship-wide emergency, I'll let the two of you out in the morning. You deserve the alone time. No more sleuthing for either of you. I'm officially giving you the night off.

I suck in a quick breath as I read it. "He didn't!" I examine the screen once again. "He absolutely did."

"Oh, he did." Ransom wags his phone my way. "And it's perfectly legal. Certain crew members have override privileges when they suspect passengers need some—enforced rest."

"So we've essentially been placed on a medical quarantine," I muse, laughing despite myself.

I know for a fact that the staff can lock down staterooms if someone has been loading up on cold medicine in the gift shop or showing other concerning symptoms. I just never thought it would happen to me.

"Sure, it's technically legal." I run my finger softly over Ransom's lips. "Although I strongly suspect this particular lockdown lacks proper medical authorization."

"That's for sure," he muses. "Typically, room service is still available in these situations," he points out while backing me slowly against the wall as his arms lock around me tight. "And housekeeping, should we need it. But otherwise..." His lips

brush my ear, sending shivers down my spine, and I soak in each and every one. “We’re stuck here, all night long with no way out.”

“Whatever shall we do?” I say as I tweak his ribs and his gaze presses into mine, unwavering.

His lips curve with a wicked grin because Ransom Baxter knows exactly what to do in a situation like this. “You did mention something about a shower earlier.”

“That I did,” I say as his mouth finds mine again, and this time there’s nothing gentle about it. This kiss is all heat and promise, making my toes curl.

Ransom and I kiss our way into the bathroom of the honeymoon suite, batting around blindly, far too consumed with passionate kisses to care that we’re knocking over cosmetics and toiletries alike.

The bathroom in the honeymoon suite really is a marvel of luxury, easily twice the size of a standard cabin’s facilities. Gleaming white marble stretches from floor to ceiling, with a rainfall shower big enough for a small party (not that I’m planning on inviting any guests). Gold fixtures catch the light, and a bench seat built into the shower wall practically begs to be utilized in some shape or form. The whole space screams decadence—and, well, in this case, shower for two.

Ransom reaches in to turn on the water and steam begins to curl through the room as if it could hardly wait to get here.

His jacket hits the floor, followed by his tie. “Now, where were we?”

I take off my stole and do my best to fling it onto the chair next to the closet. I’m not a monster.

I waste no time unzipping my gown and letting it drop to the floor. I'm about to toss it to the chair as well when I spot a spray of light pink stars next to the ceiling, and within seconds a full-fledged ghost materializes, a redheaded menace sporting a victory roll and a bright red toothy smile to boot.

I gasp at the sight of her as Ransom does his best to ravish me.

Sassy gives an impish wave before motioning for me to get back to work. Not that it's work doing a single sinful thing with the handsome stud before me.

However, I'm not entirely sure I can perform my best knowing that I have a live studio audience.

Ransom's lips find that spot just below my ear that makes coherent thoughts impossible, and I groan for more than one reason as I tilt my head toward our nosey disembodied neighbor.

I shoot her a look that says, Really, Sassy? Now?

And honestly, I have a feeling the here and now is exactly what she's looking forward to most on this trip back to the planet.

Can't say I blame her. The here and now with Ransom is my favorite part, too. Or at least it would be if I knew I wasn't going to get scored on my performance.

Ransom pulls back and inspects me for a moment. "Is something wrong?" he murmurs against my cheek as his hands land possessively on my hips.

A part of me is tempted to tell him that it's just our new resident ghost deciding this is the perfect time for a show, but I don't dare say a word. It's bad enough Sassy is ruining the honeymoon for me. The last thing I want is to ruin it for Ransom, too.

“Nothing is wrong,” I say, pulling him close. “In fact, everything is right.” Mostly.

I shoot the sassy nosey specter a dirty look because of it.

Ransom pulls back and gives a slight frown. “You did say something earlier about being quick.”

“That was about shopping,” I say as his mouth does wicked things to my neck. “This is entirely different. This deserves to be savored.”

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Ransom's mouth claims mine again as we step under the hot water and it feels like heaven.

Maybe being locked in a luxury cabin with Handsome Ransom isn't such a terrible fate after all.

Although I am definitely going to have words with Wes about his creative interpretation of crew privileges. Eventually. Much, much later.

Meanwhile, Sassy, our supernatural voyeur, simply grins and settles in for the show, fanning herself with entirely too much enthusiasm.

At least someone is having the time of their afterlife.

And if she wasn't dead, I might have considered homicide myself.

CHAPTER16

While Trixie's Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Welcome back, pleasure seekers! While our newlyweds are busy securing the perimeter of their private balcony, let's address today's deliciously desperate question.

Dear Elodie,

Help! I signed up for private dance lessons on the ship, but I'm having second

thoughts. The instructor is gorgeous, and I'm worried my husband might get jealous. Should I cancel?

Tangled in the Tango

My dancing darling,

Cancel? Oh honey, no. Those dance lessons are like a three-course meal of temptation—appetizing to look at, and delicious to sample, but your main course is waiting in your cabin. Use that gorgeous instructor to fuel your fire, then take those new moves back to your room for a private performance.

Pro tip: The Latin Heat class is particularly effective. Maybe warn your cabin neighbors first—last week's participants got a bit enthusiastic with their "homework."

Dancing dangerously,

XOXO Elodie

Trixie

The memory of this morning's room service buffet still lingers in my mind. Wes really outdid himself by sending up a buffet to end all buffets. Champagne, chocolate-covered strawberries, and enough gourmet delicacies to feed a small army. The strawberries were divine, though, even with Sassy providing commentary on my technique for eating them.

Speaking of the Sassy specter...

I can't believe I actually told my new husband I had a headache last night.

Of course, that was long after the shower, but still.

A headache! On my honeymoon!

Technically, it wasn't a lie. I did have one—a ghost-shaped headache named Sassy Forenza who spent the entire evening taking what appeared to be detailed notes while floating above our bed like a celestial tornado.

Let me be the first to tell you that romance is significantly harder to achieve with an otherworldly stenographer in attendance.

I really should see about getting her fired.

I certainly don't need her. Although I wouldn't mind quizzing her on what she knows about the deceased. I'll have to find time to do just that, because the sooner I solve this case, the sooner I can get back to my honeymoon—headache-free and without a spectator.

But I'm no longer in my luxurious honeymoon suite coming up with excuses to give to my handsome new husband. I'm standing in one of the ship's boutiques located in the Queen's Mall, wearing what can only be described as radioactive pink couture, while said ghost passes through designer racks with entirely too much enthusiasm.

Of course, I met up with Bess and Nettie and brought them along as well. We indulged in first breakfast in the Blue Water café, a smorgasbord of blueberry pancakes, fresh baked croissants, cinnamon rolls because we now have a full-blown addiction, and a seven-layer chocolate cake—because why not? That led to second breakfast in the formal dining room where my body commanded that I indulge in the savory fare, eggs with Hollandaise sauce sitting on a pile of lox along with an everything bagel.

Everythingseems to be the keyword when it comes to my breakfast these days.

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Bess and Nettie accused me of working up an appetite and I let them know I was more or less eating away my performance anxiety. Bess thinks I should find a way to bar the far-too-friendly ghost from my stateroom, and Nettie has decided she likes Sassy's style.

She so would.

The boutique is already teeming with customers—women with nowhere to go and all day to get there with a credit card in hand—which happens to be almost verbatim when it comes to Elvie's business plan regarding this trip. And with all these buy two, get one free sales that the Queen's Mall seems to be running, Elodie really doesn't fight fair.

Speak of the devil.

I spot my blonde bestie looking rather sassy herself in her ship's uniform that looks about two sizes too small. She's unbuttoned her crisp white blouse to show off her ample décolleté, and that navy pencil skirt looks as if it was dipped onto her body by way of hot wax.

"Elodie," I hiss her name a little harsher than intended, but only a little.

"Oh, don't you Elodie me." She purses those ruby-red lips my way and punctuates her sass with a wink.

Sass seems to be a catching condition these days.

Oh, who am I kidding? Elodie invented sass. If offered the ability to haunt my honeymoon, she'd be sitting in the middle of the bed with us, barking out commands.

"Look at you," she purrs. "You look positively edible," she says, circling me like a fashion-obsessed shark.

"I look like a flamingo in the middle of a fever dream," I counter, tugging at the hem of this hot pink cocktail dress I've squeezed myself into. And don't think I didn't notice that all of the glitzy gowns Elodie stuffed in my closet were at least a full size too small. Either that or my newfound obsession with cinnamon rolls is already taking its toll.

"Please, Elodie," I beg, because let's face it, I'm not above it. "For the love of all things retail, let me buy some jeans."

"Will do," Elodie sings while tugging down the neckline of my dress with practiced precision.

Figures.

"Really?" I inch back as a sprig of hope blooms in my chest. A suspicious bloom of hope, but I'll take it.

"Of course." Those ruby lips of hers give a wicked curve. "As soon as we dock in Jolly Old England. But for this cruise, my love—your honeymoon, need I remind you—denim is strictly verboten."

A kerfuffle arises across the way and I spot Sassy and Nettie playing tug-of-war for the same glittery kaftan.

"NowSassafras," Nettie says firmly to the space three feet to Sassy's left, "I think

you'd look better in palazzo pants."

And oddly, Sassy looks thoroughly offended at the thought of sporting a pair of wide-legged trousers.

Bess shrugs my way. "It could be worse. At least they're not critiquing anyone's love life at the moment."

"Ain't that the truth," I mutter, just as Becky Lee Darling breezes in with her arms already laden with shopping bags.

Her salt and pepper hair bounces in perfect waves around her heart-shaped face. She's squeezed her curvy frame into one of Elodie's more adventurous sundresses and she tossed her signature purple knit cardigan over it. There's something endearing about Becky Lee—a girl-next-door warmth that shines through her smile. Even her pale skin and premature gray at the temples seem to radiate with newfound enthusiasm this morning.

I hope she'll be able to enjoy the rest of the cruise despite the grim circumstances.

She's about to breeze by when I step in front of her. I can't help it. She's next on my hit list and I've got a homicide to solve and a honeymoon to have.

"Trixie!" she bubbles with a laugh. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I nearly barreled right through you. How's married life treating you?" She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively. "Although based on that glow, I probably don't need to ask."

I shake my head. "The glow is purely artificial and a direct result of this glowing frock reflecting off my flesh. This dress could probably guide ships to shore in a storm."

Elodie belts out a laugh and it makes me wonder if making me look like a burlesque beacon in the night has been her intention all along. On second thought, it so is.

“So what are you up to today?” I ask the woman before me. “Planning on getting some knitting done out on the deck? It’s a beautiful day to do it.” And a beautiful day for me to join her and ask every last question about the deceased and his wife.

“That’s exactly what I had planned on doing,” she’s quick to say. “But actually, my head is sort of all over the place right now. My husband is congregating with the rest of the fans from the podcast this afternoon, so I thought I’d catch one of the shows. You know, get my mind off of things.”

“I can’t say I blame you.” A moment of silence bounces between us as she gives a quick nod. “So which show are you thinking about?”

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“Well, I’ve always been a little intrigued by magicians and the like, and wouldn’t you know it there is this really cool mentalist on board. He has a show in about an hour. This guy supposedly reads minds, reveals secrets—the whole mystical enchilada.” She gives a little sigh at the thought. “I figure in the least it should be a hoot. And I’d give anything to have a genuine laugh right about now.”

“A man who can read my mind?” Elodie pulls her shoulders back and her boobs nearly dislodge themselves right out of her top. “On this cruise?”

Becky Lee nods. “The Amazing Alfonso,” she’s quick to confirm.

“Oh,him.” Elodie frowns at the mention of his name. “I’m familiar. Very mysterious, very dramatic. Very anticlimactic beneath the sheets. Lots of velvet.”

Becky Lee shrugs. “As long as he entertains above the sheets, I’m okay with velvet.” She glances at her watch. “I’d better get going if I want to snag a good seat. Plus, I want to hit the buffet beforehand.”

“Smart,” I tell her. “Maybe I’ll see you at the show.”

Her mouth opens and closes. “That would be nice. In fact, I’ll save you a seat.”

She takes off just as Bess and Nettie barrel this way along with the sassiest ghost of them all.

“You ladies ready to kick this investigation up a notch?” I ask and they all belt out a collective whoop of approval.

Perfect.

Now all I have to do is solve a murder, survive a mentalist show in a dress that could signal passing aircraft, and somehow get through my honeymoon without trying to kill a voyeuristic ghost. Not necessarily in that order.

The Amazing Alfonso won't be the only one in that room trying to pry secrets from unsuspecting minds.

The question is, what kind of secrets does Becky Lee Darling have to tell?

CHAPTER 17

While Trixie's Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Ahoy, my amorous adventurers! While our detective duo is busy examining evidence in every corner of their suite (and really, thorough investigation is so important in these cases), let's tackle today's titillating question.

Dear Elodie,

I noticed the spa offers a couples mud treatment. My wife is interested, but I'm concerned about the small little robes and public setting. Thoughts?

Muddy Minded

Oh, you dirty dog,

Public setting? Honey, those spa treatment rooms are like Vegas—what happens there, stays there. Although, unlike Vegas, the walls are surprisingly soundproof. Not that I've tested them. Recently.

Those small little robes are just the appetizer. Wait until you discover what that volcanic mud can do for your...circulation. And don't get me started on the rainfall shower designed for two. However, I do recommend keeping your voices down during the rinse cycle. The massage therapists are still blushing from last week's ratherenthusiasticclients.

Pro tip: Book the last appointment of the day. The spa staff appreciates a good reason to close early, and you'll appreciate the extra...scrubbingtime.

Getting dirty with dignity,

XOXO Elodie

P.S. If anyone asks, those handprints on the steam room window were absolutely part of atherapeutic exercise routine.

Trixie

The Queen'sTheater offers up a warm hug in velvet with its heavy curtains draping the stage like wine-colored waves.

The theater is hushed, dark, holds the scent of sugar and spice, and has more than a couple dozen people already anxious for the show to begin.

The air conditioning battles with a deluge of perfumes and colognes wafting through the air that sort of reminds me of my grandmother's vanity—that is, if her vanity had hosted a cocktail party in a refrigerator.

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“All I’m saying is”—Nettie continues as we make our way down the aisle—“any man who can read minds is bound to be good husband material.”

“Nettie”—Bess sighs—“he’s not actually reading minds. It’s an act.”

“Think about it”—Nettie goes on undeterred—“no more guessing as to what your needs are. He just knows.”

“I bet Ransom doesn’t have to guess either,” Bess says with a dark chuckle.

“You’re spot-on,” I tell her. “He’s very intuitive when it comes to the female body. Although with Sassy around, he might be moved to second-guess himself. The poor man probably thinks I’m giving him the cold shoulder.”

“Eh.” Bess shrugs. “I think it’s a good idea to pepper in a headache now and again on your honeymoon. That way you can manage expectations.”

“You would.” Nettie grunts as she gives her bestie the side-eye while walking straight into an empty seat and somersaulting over it.

Thankfully, she’s able to dust herself off with no apparent injuries—at least that are apparent to the naked eye.

“Trixie! Over here,” a light female voice calls out from somewhere up ahead and I squint into the darkness to see Becky Lee Darling waving to catch my attention. She’s managed to snag a cluster of seats near the front and that purple cardigan she’s bundled in adds a cozy splash of color in the dim theater.

I'll choose to overlook the fact she's inadvertently seated in what's known as the fun zone. Anytime you're up front and center at one of these interactive shows you're inevitably a part of the act. But, as it stands, there's room for all three of us next to her.

"You're a lifesaver," I tell her as we settle in.

Although she's pretty much responsible for whatever Nettie does to poor Alfonso. I don't need a road map to know where this fun-zone train is headed.

Becky Lee says a quick hello to both Bess and Nettie as we settle ourselves in our seats. Her hair is up in a messy bun, and what little light there is in the room seems to be picking up her gray roots and making them shine like tinsel. She shifts in her seat, tugging her cardigan closer.

I can't say I blame her. There's always a chill in the theater.

"We're in for a real treat." Her messy bun wobbles as she turns my way. "I hear this Alfonso person is pretty incredible," she says with the words tumbling out all at once. "There was this woman in Miami, and he told her exactly where to find her lost wedding ring. Down to the date and location."

"Really?" I inch back to get a better look at her and note the fact her fingers keep tangling in the hem of her cardigan. "How'd you hear that?"

"Research." She gives a quick nod. "As soon as I heard Brad and Elvie wanted to take their fans on a cruise, I researched everything right down to the shows. That's how I initially heard about The Amazing Alfonso. I must have watched a hundred of his videos online. When I get my mind set to do something, I need to know every last detail before I dive on in. I'm sort of a perfectionist that way." She gives a robust laugh. "My husband thinks it's silly, but doing things like that eases my mind."

I chuckle along with her. “Well, I hope you researched all of the dining options, too,” I tease.

“Are you kidding?” She laughs once again. “That was the first thing I did. But with hundreds of places to eat on the ship, I ran out of time to dig into them all.”

“I guess you’ll just have to see them for yourself.”

She nods my way. “That’s exactly what I plan on doing. In fact, right after this?—”

The lights dim to pitch before she can finish, and music swells through the theater, something dramatic and vaguely mystical, and I can’t help but feel as if a séance is about to break out.

“Ladies and gentlemen”—a deep voice rolls through the darkness like thunder—“prepare yourselves for an afternoon of mystery, of wonder—of secrets revealed.”

Smoke curls across the stage as a man steps out of the shadows and The Amazing Alfonso materializes before us. He’s six feet of theatrical drama wrapped in a wine-colored velvet suit that might have made even Liberace think twice. His silver hair sweeps back from his temples in perfect waves, and his goatee looks sharp enough to use as a letter opener.

“Welcome, one and all,” he thunders in a deep, booming voice that seems to rattle its way right through my ribcage. “Every mind holds secrets,” he purrs, prowling the stage like a tiger who’s raided a velvet factory. “Some we keep from others, some we keep from ourselves. But today”—he pauses, and I swear even the fog moving around him seems to be holding its breath—“today, we explore them together.”

Light gasps and murmurs circle the crowd before it quiets down again. It’s clear

every soul in this room is ready to have their secrets plucked right out of their minds—or more to the point, the minds of others. There’s not a person on the planet who would want all of their deep, dark secrets laid out for all to see by some would-be mentalist.

Alfonso gets right to work, starting with the crowd-pleasers, with lots of audience participation that includes plucking numbers from the minds, guessing the right cards from a playing deck, and even revealing the contents of a few women’s purses. Even I could do that last one. The entire act so far is standard fare for a mentalist, but executed with enough charm to keep both Bess and Nettie sitting at the edge of their seats.

Okay, fine. I’m sitting at the edge of my seat, too. But only because I’m a sucker for these kinds of shows.

“And now”—Alfonso hovers his hand over his eyes as he squints out at the audience—“it’s time to get a little personal.”

Another hushed round of ooohs and ahhh circles the room.

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He pecks his head to all sides of the room before zeroing in on individual audience members.

“You there, sir, in the blue jacket.” He points to a man to our left. “Something is troubling you. Something small and furry.” The man gasps as Alfonso tilts his head. “Ah, it’s your daughter’s hamster. The escape artist who vanished yesterday morning. Have her check behind the bookcase in her room, third shelf from the bottom.”

The man’s jaw drops. “How did you know? My daughter sent a frantic text to me and my wife this morning. She’s just sick over it.”

“She won’t be for long,” the woman seated next to him pipes up as she types something into her phone.

Bess leans my way. “Boy, is he good!”

I nod. “If it’s true, I guess he’s scary good—or scary amazing.”

“And you, madam, with the lovely pearl necklace.” Alfonso points to a woman in black yoga clothes seated to our left. “You’re contemplating a major life change. Something about your hair?” She laughs as if affirming the fact and Alfonso offers a knowing smile in return. “Trust me, purple would be a mistake.”

The woman gasps, clutching her current blonde locks. “How did you know?” She can’t help but echo the sentiment of the first man. “What about pink?” she asks and the audience gives a riotous laugh.

“Now”—his gaze sweeps the crowd before landing on Bess—“you, my dear. Your profession—it’s something you’ve picked up after you retired.” He squints her way and bores his gaze into her as if he were seeing straight into her soul. “This has something to do with solving puzzles. Crosswords? Word searches?No!” He straightens dramatically. “No, this is something far bigger than that.”

“He’s onto you, Bessie,” Nettie whispers and I can’t help but wonder if he is indeed onto my dear friend.

I nod in agreement. And I wonder what else The Amazing Alfonso will reveal. Something tells me that if I had half of his seemingly supernatural skills, I could wrap up Brad Whipple’s murder investigation before first seating dinner tonight.

And then I could get right back to the only feast I’m interested in—the one with Ransom Baxter in my bed.

CHAPTER 18

“I know your secret,” The Amazing Alfonso bellows, right here in the Queen’s Theater, as he points a white-gloved finger at Bess. “You solve mysteries,” he thunders and the room gasps at his epiphany. “You are a detective. And I think you’re quite good at it as well.”

A light applause breaks out in Bess’ honor.

My heart thumps hard in my chest, because let’s face it, he’s not wrong. Bess and Nettie have been just as instrumental in helping me track down every killer we’ve caught—and some might argue they’ve been far more instrumental than the ghosts that have come down to help.

Some would be me.

Bess straightens. “Lucky guess,” she shouts up at him and the room breaks out in laughter. And it was. That man has been on the ship long enough to have figured that out.

“Perhaps.” Alfonso winks her way. “But I’m also sensing something about... knitting needles? Yes, you recently took up knitting, but you’re keeping it hush-hush. Worried it might damage your professional reputation?”

I can’t help but chuckle. Bess doesn’t knit. If she did, I’d be the first to know. Well, right after Nettie.

Bess huffs at the thought. “How did you know that?” she cries out and the room gasps with glee.

“What?” I say as I lean back to better inspect the woman I thought I knew. “When did this happen?”

Becky Lee leans past me. “I just love knitting! We’ll talk after.”

The room quiets down once again while I try to surmise who this stranger sitting to my right is. And more importantly, how Alfonso picked up on something that clearly Bess gave him no clue about.

There’s no way this guy is a real-deal mind reader. It was probably just a lucky guess on his part. I mean, most older women take up knitting at some point in their lives.

I shoot a sly glance at Nettie and she shakes her head my way as if to refute my point.

Alfonso turns to me next, and something in his expression shifts. “And you, my ethereal beauty in pink.” He gives a tiny wink and I make a face, because clearly that was a dig at this cocktail disaster Elodie has forced upon me. I’d cause less of a scene

walking around in a bathrobe, or perhaps in the nude (and that's saying something else entirely).

“Another detective,” he declares while pointing right at me.

This time it's me gasping.

He nods my way. “But you see things others cannot. Isn't that true? Things that shouldn't be possible. Things that float and pass through walls.”

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I gasp twice as hard as whispers break out amongst the rest of the audience.

My stomach drops. How could he possibly know about that? I glance over at Nettie again, but she looks more regaled by the handsome silver fox than she does guilty of whispering something into his ear at some point in the past year.

“You’re haunted by questions,” he continues. “About secrets kept in plain sight. But be careful what you ask—some answers come with a price.”

Bess nudges me as if making sure to drive home his point.

But before I can process any of it, he swings toward Becky Lee, who seems to be trying to achieve molecular fusion with her cardigan with the way her fingers are twisting the cuffs of her sleeves.

“And you, my love,” he purrs her way as if he were trying to seduce her. “Such interesting patterns in your mind. Loops and lines, like yarn seeking a shape. You create to escape, don’t you? Each stitch is a step away from what truly binds you.”

Becky Lee’s entire body freeze solid and I can’t help but wonder if he hit a nerve.

“You’re so very tired,” Alfonso continues and his voice is gentler now. “So tired of pretending. Of smiling when you want to scream. Of listening to endless discussions about things that don’t matter while the things that do slip away.”

“No.” She shakes her head in protest. “I don’t know what you’re?—”

“The purple suits you,” he adds, nodding at her cardigan. “Your best work yet. However, the new stitch pattern for the cables gave you trouble. There is always trouble when you’re thinking about change.”

Her face goes white and she opens her mouth as if to protest, but Alfonso has already turned to someone else—Nettie.

And here we go.

Bess groans as she leans my way. “This man doesn’t know who he’s about to mess with,” she whispers.

I nod her way. “I have a feeling he’s about to learn fast,” I whisper right back.

“Ah, the skeptics in the front row.” He chuckles while looking at both Bess and me before fixing the most mysterious gaze he can muster right on Nettie. “You’ve been having doubts about my abilities as well. Is that not true?”

I’m pretty sure everyone in this room doubts his abilities. Although the people he’s already pegged with his musings might think differently. Me included.

“That’s right.” Nettie straightens in her seat. “If you were really able to read minds, you’d know exactly what I’m thinking right now.” She ticks her head to the side while keeping her eyes plastered to his face and I can tell she’s thinking up a storm. Never a good thing.

Alfonso belts out a dark laugh. “Oh honey, I can’t share those thoughts out loud. This is a family show.”

The crowd bursts with a laugh as Bess leans my way. “He really can read minds!”

I make a face at him.

Okay, so he got another one right. But in the defense of my cynicism, Nettie is more or less an open book—an open book with a one-track mind. Clearly, he’s met her before. I’m guessing many times in a dark corner.

“My dear lovely, yet skeptical, woman.” Alfonso nods toward Nettie. “Perhaps you’d care to join me on stage and show everyone how simple this all is?”

Bess groans once again. “Anything but that.”

I take it back. Clearly, this man has never met Nettie before or this whole hop-up-next-to-me thing would never be happening. Not if he values his limbs, and perhaps his life. I’ve seen Nettie’s good intentions go sideways on more than one occasion.

“You bet your shiny red velvet patoot, I will!” Nettie shoots back as she hops out of her seat.

Bess and I exchange a look of horror.

“I hope we’re in for a good time,” I say.

Bess shakes her head. “More like a felony.”

The ship seems to be rife with felons these days, and one of them just so happens to be a killer.

But for now, it’s Nettie who is about to slay this party.

CHAPTER19

Nettie is already halfway to the stage here in the Queen's Theater before Alfonso can finish extending his hand. And judging by the riotous laughter, the audience is already eating it up.

"Finally, someone who appreciates my talents," she shouts.

"Your talents?" Alfonso raises a perfect silver brow.

"For reading minds." Nettie taps her temple as she winks his way and more laughter ensues. "For instance, I can tell you had eggs for breakfast."

Alfonso inches his head back. "I... did, actually."

More laughter lights up the room.

"With hot sauce," Nettie goes on. "The expensive kind, because you're far more pickier about your condiments than you are your women." The room explodes with a roar at that one—and I do believe The Amazing Alfonso's face just turned the same shade of that velvet suit he's wearing.

Becky Lee leans my way. "I think she hit a nerve!"

I nod. But then, Nettie is an expert at spotting a womanizer in the wild.

Nettie leans his way and openly inspects him. "But you are particular about your hair

products because you have them imported from Italy.”

The man’s jaw roots to the stage. It’s clear she’s impressing him, and the rest of the audience, too.

“And that suit?” Nettie circles him like a fashion critic at a crime scene. “Custom made in Milan. But they got the measurements slightly wrong on the left shoulder. That’s why you keep adjusting it when you think no one is looking!”

More gasps and laughter.

Becky Lee bumps her shoulder to mine. “I thought he was fidgeting.”

“Take that, buddy,” Nettie says as she pokes him on the chest over and over, causing him to stumble backward.

Security starts moving toward the stage, but Alfonso staves them off, although he does look genuinely rattled.

“How could you possibly?—”

“Eh.” She waves him off. “You’re no challenge.” The room is inconsolable at this point. “Oh, and you might want to check your jacket pocket. Your room key fell through that hole in the lining about twenty minutes ago.”

Alfonso’s hand flies to his pocket and his mouth rounds out in surprise when he finds it empty.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Nettie announces to the chuckling crowd—“the real mystery isn’t reading minds—it’s learning to use your eyes!”

The crowd offers up a rather violent applause as Nettie spins and squints at the crowd.

“Now, let’s see what we have out here. You, sir, in the white dress shirt—you’ve been secretly taking your secretary to lunch when you tell your wife that you’re going golfing!”

The man begins to protest just as the woman next to him whips around to glare at him.

A sharp round of gasps breaks out, the loudest of which comes from Bess.

“Nettie,” she shouts. “You take that back. You’re going to ruin their marriage!”

So much for using her eyes—more like her third eye. And I so knew she had one.

Nettie shrugs. “I can’t take the blame for something he did first.” She inspects the crowd once again. “And you, madam in the shiny blue blouse. Interesting how you’ve been volunteering at the museum just when that handsome new curator started to work there. Those ancient artifacts aren’t the only things you’re studying, are they? And your husband is none the wiser either.”

“Ethel, is that true?” the man seated next to her cries out and the two of them begin to bicker.

Nettie’s attention darts around the room like a heat-seeking missile ready to strike just about anyone down with embarrassment by way of a naughty secret or two.

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“And speaking of studying,” Nettie starts. “The gentleman in row three with the yellow polo shirt told his wife recently that he’s been working late when in reality he’s been taking cooking classes with another woman!”

The man nearly ejects himself from his chair as he spins to look at the woman to his right.

“I’m taking them with my sister,” he protests. “She’s trying to recreate our mother’s old recipes. It’s completely innocent!”

The woman jumps to her feet. “If this was so innocent, why in the world would you keep it a secret from me?” She charges her way up the aisle and heads for the exit.

“Wait,” he calls after her. “These were secret recipes!”

The room breaks out in loud murmurs. Clearly, Nettie has taken the crowd from delight to fright in a single bound.

People begin to shift with unease as Nettie rolls on.

“And you!” She points to a woman trying to disappear into her seat to our left. “Writing steamy romance novels under a pen name while your bridge club thinks you’re working on a cookbook? I say good on you, sister. And I must say, I find chapter six quite instructive.”

Bess grunts as she leans my way. “Coming from Nettie, that’s saying a lot.”

Soon enough, a mass exodus begins as Nettie unleashes revelation after revelation.

Hidden toupees, secret love affairs, underground poker tournaments, and a mob mix-up are enough to empty out the entire room in record time.

It's clear no one is willing to wait around to have their deepest, darkest secrets exposed.

More than half the audience is trying to escape while simultaneously attempting to hide behind their programs, creating a traffic jam of scandalized cruisegoers at every exit.

"And someone in here is trying to get away with murder in the workplace," she bellows.

That last statement sends the remaining holdouts scrambling for the doors, leaving behind a trail of abandoned programs and perhaps wounded dignity.

Next to me, Becky Lee is laughing so hard she's crying. "I haven't seen anything this entertaining since my husband's podcast group tried to start a boy band!"

On stage, The Amazing Alfonso stands forgotten with his mouth hanging open while Nettie takes a bow to the nearly empty theater.

"Now that's what I call entertainment," she shouts to Bess and me. "Although I did hold back on the really good stuff!"

The stampede for the door grows in ferocity.

While Alfonso does his best to salvage what's left of his dignity, I catch Becky Lee watching Nettie. I can't help but think there's a hint of fear in her eyes, and it might

have everything to do with Nettie's impromptu performance and what she just might reveal next.

But Nettie won't have to reveal a thing.

"How about we grab a bite to eat?" I offer and Becky Lee is quick to nod.

Her lips quiver for a moment and her entire body trembles with a little laugh. "I would love that."

Between Becky Lee's quivering lips and trembling body, I know one thing for certain—Nettie might have stolen Alfonso's show, but Becky Lee's performance is just beginning.

CHAPTER 20

While Trixie's Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Welcome back, pleasure seekers! While our honeymooners are busy reviewing security protocols in every possible position—I mean, position of the ship—let's dive into today's deliciously desperate question.

Dear Elodie,

My husband and I booked a private cabana for our upcoming cruise. The cruise website mentioned something about butler service, but I'm not sure what to expect. Any advice?

Cabana Confused

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My secluded sweetheart,

Those private cabanas are like sizzling hot Vegas hotel rooms—except with better views and more creative possibilities. The butler service? Think of them as your personal “do not disturb” sign enforcers. One raised eyebrow from me, and they know to take the long way around. Repeatedly.

The curtains are quite sturdy (don’t ask how I know), and that daybed is engineered for more than just sunbathing. Although I do recommend saving the more vigorous activities for after the lunch rush. The family pool is surprisingly close, and sound carries over the water.

Pro tip: Request cabana number four. It has the best privacy angles and a conveniently placed support beam. Plus, the service button is within arm’s reach—assuming your arms aren’t otherwise occupied.

Coupling in the cabana,

XOXO Elodie

P.S. If anyone asks why the cushions are rearranged, you were practicing your yoga. Very energetic yoga.

Trixie

It took about three seconds for Becky Lee Darling and me to decide we were in the mood for something sweet, calorie-laden, and potentially drenched in chocolate. Bess

and Nettie didn't need their arms twisted either, so we moseyed on over to one of the ship's most posh ice cream parlors.

And believe me, the Crème de la Crème Ice Cream Parlor lives up to its pretentious name. Dark mahogany wood lines the walls, and creamy marble countertops gleam under crystal chandeliers that probably cost more than my first car.

The display case stretches for days and is packed with more colorful flavors than I can count, each one looking as if it belongs in my stomach right this minute.

And the best part? They're best known for serving their frozen fare on top of a bed of oversized waffles, complete with a mountain of whipped cream, berries, fudge, and sprinkles. This isn't a quick bite by any means; it's a culinary experience and a memory in the making.

Nettie groans hard as she presses her nose against the glass like a toddler who can't control their excitement. "Now this is what Heaven looks like."

"No, it's not," a bubbly female voice chirps from behind and I'm shocked to see Sassy floating beside me, glowing like the naughty pink cherub she is. I can't help but make a face at the glib ghost because she serves as a stark reminder of what I'm missing out on with Ransom.

Sassy glides right up to the glass display next to Nettie. "Up in Paradise, there are so many more flavors that humans haven't even invented yet. My favorite is lavender and cloudberry."

Ooh,that does sound interesting.

Bess huffs as she ogles the offerings. "I have a feeling Heaven has fewer calories," she mutters, already eyeing the double chocolate fudge. Ironical she would say so since

neither she nor Nettie can hear a word that Sassy says. Although I suppose just about everyone associates this frozen heavenly treat with paradise.

We all decide to splurge and opt for the waffles in paradise sundae, which includes the requisite hot, fluffy waffles, a mountain of ice cream and whipped cream with brownie crumbles, chocolate cheesecake bites, and a blanket of rainbow sprinkles, because why stop at ice cream?

We each opt for two flavors. Nettie goes for rum raisin and butter pecan, declaring it a sophisticated combination.

Bess goes for the double chocolate fudge and Rocky Road, while I opt for salted caramel and chocolate lava.

Becky Lee opts for the strawberry cheesecake and something called Midnight Mocha Murder, which feels on point given the homicidal circumstances on the ship.

Each of our treats is served on a dinner plate with the requisite fresh warm waffles and we take our luscious loot to the outdoor patio where we're welcomed with a perfect view of the Atlantic where the water sparkles in deep, delicious blues while stretching out to forever.

The sky is clear, the seagulls are circling, and the breeze is perfectly crisp on this sunny autumn day.

We've hardly settled into our seats when a pod of dolphins breaks the surface, playing in the ship's wake.

"Oh!" Becky Lee fumbles for her phone. "Would you look at that?"

"Nature's own welcoming committee," Bess says, then frowns as her ice cream

makes a bid for freedom via Sassy's finger as she blatantly steals a bite.

"Mmm." The hungry ghost moans. "Rocky Road is my weakness. I'd do just about anything for a scoop."

Anything? I make a mental note of that for later.

Becky Lee gags as she stares out at the exact spot next to Bess where our resident Sassy specter is currently floating.

"I'd swear I just saw a scoop of ice cream sail away," she says, slack-jawed, while pointing a finger right at the dairy thief among us.

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Bess' eyes round out as she looks at Becky Lee. Bess is used to food disappearing in her presence due to a hungry disembodied spirit or two, but it's more or less a shock to the system for others to witness.

"It's probably just the wind." Bess forces a laugh. "We have food up and fly away all the time on this ship."

Nettie shrugs. "Or it could be a ghost with a hankering for chocolate."

We all share a laugh at that one with Sassy's being the loudest—even if I am the only one who can fully appreciate it.

"I don't believe in ghosts." Becky Lee wrinkles her nose as she indulges in a bite.

Sassy scoffs at the woman. "Now that's just rude."

Rude or not, Becky Lee Darling will have a rather rude awakening one day when she becomes a ghost herself.

"Becky Lee"—I take a deep breath because I might as well dive in—"I wanted to say how sorry I am about your friend."

And I plan on saying a whole lot more about Brad Whipple, too.

CHAPTER21

"Pardon? Did you say you were sorry about my friend?" Becky Lee Darling asks,

wide-eyed, as we sit outside of the poshest frozen dairy distributary here on the ship along with Bess and Nettie—and one Sassy specter.

“Oh.” Becky Lee shakes her head as if something had just occurred to her. “You’re talking about Brad Whipple.” She licks a stray sprinkle from her lip as her expression shifts from jovial to somber. “He was really my husband’s friend. I hardly knew him personally.” She pauses, then brightens. “But I did get to help with the podcast merchandise. Patrick, that’s my husband, he got me this amazing sublimation machine for Christmas a few years back, and well...” She pulls out her phone and quickly shares an entire slew of pictures with us of her hovering over what looks like a fancy printer. “I sort of became the unofficial merch queen for the Whispers of the Wicked podcast,” she says with a touch of obvious pride.

I lean in to get a better look, genuinely curious as to how this works. The photos show an impressive array of true crime-themed items that would make any podcast fan’s heart skip a beat, or stop altogether. There are endless colorful mugs with cute little sayings on them like *My Favorite Murder Weapon is Kindness and Coffee: Because You Can’t Solve Crimes Without Caffeine*.

An endless array of tote bags are emblazoned with fun sayings like *Evidence Collection Kit* and *Crime Scene Queen*.

There are even pens with sayings printed on the side like *Taking Notes on Your Alibi* and T-shirts that read *True Crime* and *Chill and Amateur Sleuth: Professional Snoop*.

“Wow,” Bess muses as she leans back into her seat. “The quality is professional-grade.”

“Thank you.” Becky Lee sniffs. “Brad and Elvie seemed pleased with everything.” Her eyes moisten with tears and her hand begins to shake slightly as she holds the

phone out for us to see. There's something about the way she lingers on certain photos, like they hold more meaning than just merchandise memories.

"These are all so very clever," I say, and mean it. "The designs have that perfect blend of macabre humor. I bet they sell like hotcakes at conventions."

"Oh, they do," Sassy is quick to interject. "Or at least they did while I was still around. I was Elvie's assistant with her beauty brand, but heaven knows I amassed plenty of Becky Lee's murder merch. That's what Elvie and I used to call it."

Sassy knew Becky Lee, too? Sassy may not be on my suspect list, but that's not going to stop me from grilling her as if she was holding the top stop.

"Thank you for all the kind words." Becky Lee laughs as she says it. "The Evidence Collection Kit was Brad's idea," she says as her laugh dies down to nothing. "He was such a brilliant man. And that's exactly why he was so good at coming up with catchy phrases. He had a real knack for knowing what fans would love, mostly because he was the number one fan of anything that had to do with murder."

"Sort of like our Trixie," Nettie is quick to add and I shoot her a look.

"I'm not so much a fan of murder as I am of solving them," I say. "But I guess so is everyone who joined you for this trip," I say to Becky Lee. "How are you enjoying the cruise?" I wince as I say it. "When you're not dealing with, you know, an actual murder."

Becky Lee sighs as she casts a glance at the sea. "It's been restful—well, when it hasn't been stressful. I didn't realize homicide could bring so much chaos." We share a mournful laugh at that one. "But it's nice to be able to do nothing but sit around and eat. Back home I work from sun up until—well, sun up."

“Oh?” I lean in a notch. “I guess your merchandise keeps you busy.”

“No, it really doesn’t. I was only doing that a few times a month for them. I’m actually a housewife, but the chores never end. My husband Patrick has three kids from a previous marriage that live with us part-time. All teenagers.” She rolls her eyes and the fatigue behind the gesture looks as genuine as it gets. “Let’s just say they’ve made a game of hiding glasses and mugs in interesting places. I found one in the bathroom cabinet last week, wrapped in a towel as if they were hiding evidence of a crime. And don’t get me started on the silverware that keeps vanishing. We’re on our fourth set.”

Bess, Nettie, and I all share a warm laugh.

“I remember those days all too well,” I tell her. “Let’s just say my own children had their creative interpretation of organization. The time I found a fork collection growing behind the couch still haunts me.”

Nettie grunts. “I made my kids eat with their bare hands.”

“We don’t doubt it,” Bess chuffs before turning to Becky Lee. “Don’t worry. Your brood will be off to college soon enough. And then the grandkids will start pouring in. Life just gets better in that respect.”

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“That’s when you pack it in and live on a cruise ship full time,” Nettie adds with a laugh. “Best decision we ever made.” She lifts a spoonful of whipped cream our way as if to toast us with it.

“Oh, that’s right!” Becky Lee perks up. “You all actually live on board, don’t you? I confess”—she looks my way—“when I found this ship online, I read a bunch of your blogs. So how does living on board a cruise ship even work?”

“Well, it’s cheaper than a retirement home,” Nettie jumps in. “Plus, better food and a new view every day. We just hop from one sunny locale to the next. We had some folks do the math once and figured out it’s actually more cost-effective than maintaining a house.”

“Not to mention the built-in entertainment,” Bess adds.

“Not to mention the built-inmurder.” Sassy nods my way. “You’ve amassed quite the reputation in the heavenlies for your knack at discovering bodies. There’s a whole list of people hoping they’ll be called to help you next. When I was tapped to come down, it was sort of like winning the lottery.”

Wonderful. I’m a part of a much sought-after and ratherlethallottery among the dead. I guess I can cross that morbid item off my bucket list.

“I’m so envious of you all,” Becky Lee says while staring out at the ocean with a dreamy sigh. “I’d love to sit by the water and knit all day.” She takes a quick bite of her waffles laden with whipped cream and sprinkles. “This would be a great place for me to get a lot of studying done, too.” Her fork freezes mid-air as if she said more

than she meant to.

“What are you studying?” I ask with a touch of delight. “I’m a big believer in continuing education on every level.”

“Oh, actually, it’s my sister who’s studying,” she says with a weak laugh. “I’m sort of helping her out. She’s in nursing school and it’s one of those online programs. But it’s very rigorous and I help by making flashcards, going over notes, and quizzing her. She’s pretty terrible on her own but fairly decent with my help.”

“Wow, that’s really nice of you,” Bess says. “My sister is a nurse and I can remember how hectic her life was while she was studying for those endless exams. Your sister is really lucky to have you.”

“Thank you.” Becky Lee cringes slightly. “Let’s just say I’ve been hitting the books lately, pretty hard.”

“No wonder Alfonso hit the mark about you being tired,” Nettie says.

“Did he ever.” Becky Lee blows out a breath toward the sea.

That entire scene plays out in my mind once again.

“Was he right about the other parts, too?” I press gently. “About being tired of pretending? Of smiling when you want to scream? Of listening to endless discussions about things that don’t matter while the important things slip away?”

Sassy chokes out a laugh. “You don’t waste much time, do you?”

I shoot her a look. We both know I have a honeymoon to tend to.

Becky Lee closes her eyes for a moment. “Yes,” she says quietly, then sighs. “I’ll admit, things haven’t been easy at home.”

Trouble on the home front?

Bess, Nettie, and I exchange a quick glance.

And just like that, my heart breaks for the woman.

CHAPTER 22

“We don’t mind if you share,” I tell Becky Lee Darling as we nosh on our waffle ice cream monstrosities—or rather masterpieces. “You know, about the trouble you’re having at home,” I say, watching her methodically shred that napkin into tiny squares.

Bess nods encouragingly at the woman.

“Yeah.” Nettie leans in hard. “Spill the juicy deets.”

“Nettie,” Bess howls as she tosses her napkin at her. “This is not juicy, this is serious. Trouble at home is no laughing matter. You and I both know that.”

I nod to Becky Lee. “I’m more than familiar with it myself.”

“Well, in that case.” Becky Lee clears her throat as her fingers continue the destruction of her napkin. “I hope you don’t mind me unloading on you. It’s just—Patrick, well, he’s...” She glances around the deck as if she’s checking for eavesdroppers. “Everyone sees the successful attorney side of him. The provider, the family man. But at home...” her words trail off as she stares vacantly out to the ocean. “He works these killer hours at the firm. By the time he gets home, he’s cranky and starving, and nothing I do is right. The dinner is always too cold or too spicy. The

house is too quiet or too messy. Last week, I bought the wrong brand of coffee and the way he went off on me, you'd think I had committed a capital offense."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Bess says mournfully. "That must be so difficult."

"And hard on your spirit," I say and Becky Lee's face fills with a bit of relief as if someone is finally seeing her.

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“The verbal jabs are no fun. And they seem to be never-ending.” She swallows hard. “In the beginning, it was little things like, ‘Can’t you cook a decent meal?’ Or, ‘Why do you waste so much time with that ridiculous knitting?’ But lately...” Her voice drops a notch. “Last month, I forgot to pick up his dry cleaning. He told me I was as useless as his first wife. Then he laughed and said he was joking. But I knew better.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” I say. “My ex used to say cutting remarks like that and I did my best to brush him off, but they hurt just the same.”

And come to find out, all of those jokes about him finding another woman weren’t really jokes at all. But I choose to leave that little detail out of the conversation in the event I send her mind sideways for no reason at all.

Becky Lee nods to no one in particular. “I’ve been trying to get him into counseling. I found this great therapist who specializes in couples on the verge of—” She catches herself. “Well, couples who need help communicating. But Patrick says he doesn’t have time. He says if I was a better wife, we wouldn’t need therapy anyway.”

My jaw roots to the floor. A part of me wants to demand she leave him. But I’m in no position to have that strong of an opinion on another woman’s marriage. Even though I thoroughly do.

“Look”—Bess leans in—“I’m going to be perfectly honest. I think you should set up a private savings account in your name only in case things continue to go south for you in the marriage department.”

Nettie hitches a thumb at her bestie. “What can I say, she’s a ball of sunshine.”

Becky Lee gives a quiet laugh. “Well, I’m one step ahead of you in that respect. I’ve already done it. I took that step about a year ago.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I say just above a whisper.

Becky Lee fiddles with the ice cream in front of her that’s quickly turning into a smoothie. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. He’s not really a bad person. He’s just very stressed. And I really don’t want to rock the boat. Things are just a little complicated right now.”

I reach over and give her hand a squeeze. “It sounds as if you both needed this vacation.”

“More than you’ll ever know,” she shoots back. She straightens for a moment. “So how is Brad’s case going?” She forces a tiny smile my way. “I’m shocked there hasn’t been an arrest yet. I mean, every single person here for the Whispers of the Wickedcruise is basically an amateur sleuth. Of course, they’ve all got theories going. They’re even comparing notes at breakfast and debating motives over dinner. In fact, half the people with us have their own true crime podcasts, and the other half probably solve cold cases in their sleep.”

Oddly, her sudden enthusiasm about the case seems to have lightened the mood among us. Then again, talking about someone else’s tragedy is often easier than facing your own.

“So what’s the consensus?” I ask, shoveling in a glorious bite of warm waffles with rich chocolate lava ice cream. There just so happens to be a dessert on board called Mocha Lava Cake and it happens to be my favorite. As soon as I saw this flavor in the shop, I knew I wasn’t walking out the door without it.

“Actually”—Becky Lee cringes for a moment—“the fingers are pointing pretty hard

at Elvie. But Nobody wants to see her arrested, even if she did it. She and Brad were on the brink of divorce, you know. This was the second marriage for both of them. Brad didn't have kids, but Elvie has two grown sons from her previous thirty-year union." She leans in. "Her older son is a notorious alcoholic. He had a great construction job but couldn't hold it down. Apparently, he got hurt on the job because he showed up three sheets to the wind. Now he's living on disability and about to sue his employer. Elvie thinks that's his golden ticket. He's crashed about six cars in the time I've known Elvie and Brad. In fact, Brad told Elvie to take her son's keys away. He said that man was going to hurt someone someday and the blood would be on her hands, too."

I tick my head to the side. "He wasn't wrong."

Becky Lee nods as well. "And her other son is no better if you ask me. He works in advertising and has four kids. The first is from a previous marriage, and he treats that kid so poorly because of it. Brad wasn't a fan of his either. In fact, I heard the two of them actually came to blows once."

"Ooh." Bess winces. "That's never a good thing. I can see how that can drive a wedge between spouses, too."

Nettie grunts. "I hated every move my ex made. But if he even thought about hitting one of my kids, no matter how old they were, I'd have a body to bury."

"And I'd help you hide it," Bess tells her.

Sassy laughs. "I knew you ladies were experts at what you do. There's a pool going on the other side on whether or not the three of you are seasoned serial killers yourselves."

My mouth opens as I look at the sparkling specter but don't say a word.

“There’s something else.” Becky Lee takes a deep breath as she looks my way. “I heard a rumor that Brad had a mistress.”

The entire lot of us gives a loud gasp.

“Who?” I ask, indulging in another creamy-laden bite of my waffle. When there’s no popcorn, you just need to improvise. And honestly, frozen dairy products are so much better than anything grown on a stalk.

Becky Lee shrugs. “Heck, if I know. Probably some groupie. She might even be on this ship. All I know is that apparently, Elvie has known about it for weeks.”

We gasp again.

“For weeks?” I lean back. “Why in the world would she agree to take a cruise with him? I was cheated on once. It’s horrible, degrading, and cruel in every way. And I certainly didn’t take a cruise with him once I found out. In fact, that’s exactly how I ended up on the Emerald Queen all by my lonesome. Or at least I was lonely until I found these two.” I nod to Bess and Nettie and they both blow me a kiss.

Bess sighs in Becky Lee’s direction. “Well, finding out that your husband is a cheat is terrible. I can attest to that as well. The first thing I did was get tested to make sure the big slime didn’t pass along some slimy surprise.”

Oh my word! I don’t believe I ever got tested for a slimy surprise myself. Did I? If I have, it has completely slipped my mind.

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Another pod of dolphins appears, followed by what looks like a whale spouting water high into the sky, and suddenly a crowd surges toward that end of the deck.

“Oh, I just love whales,” Becky Lee shouts as she jumps up with her phone in hand. “Please excuse me, ladies. But I just need to get a few pictures.”

“Wait,” I call out as she’s about to dart into the mob of bodies that have suddenly materialized. “Who did you hear that rumor from? Are they on the ship?”

“Reed Williams,” she tosses his name over her shoulder as she heads for the rail.

Duly noted.

Bess and Nettie join the whale-watching crowd, but as for me, I’m too busy calculating the fastest route to the infirmary.

Because nothing says honeymoon surprise quite like finding out that I’ve brought along more than my emotional baggage to my new marriage.

Sometimes solving a murder takes brains, sometimes it takes luck, and sometimes it takes a full panel of STD tests. Here’s hoping the ship’s doctor has a sense of humor—and maybe a rush option.

CHAPTER23

While Trixie’s Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Ahoy, maritime-merry makers! While our newlyweds are busy testing the durability of their cabin furniture (and really, quality control is so important), let's address today's steamy question.

Dear Elodie,

I noticed there's an adults only hot tub after dark. My wife thinks it sounds scandalous, but I'm intrigued. What's the proper etiquette for late-night soaking?

Hot and Bothered

My bubbling beloved,

The after-hours hot tub is like Fight Club. What happens there stays there, and the first rule is don't talk about what you saw in the hot tub. But unlike Fight Club, the only wrestling should be of the recreational variety.

The jets are positioned for maximum uh—relaxation, and underwater lighting is more forgiving than you'd think. Though I do recommend maintaining at least a minimal dress code. Those security cameras have surprisingly good resolution, and our hunky head of security has seen enough trauma lately.

Soaking seductively,

XOXO Elodie

Trixie

The ship's infirmary smells like every doctor's office I've ever visited with that distinct mix of antiseptic and anxiety, although here there seems to be a dash of sea breeze thrown in for good measure.

Thankfully, the waiting room is empty with the exception of a potted plant that has seen better days and a stack of magazines old enough to be considered historical documents.

A sweet young man rises from his seat behind the desk as I belly up to the counter.

“I’m sorry, but the doctor stepped away for a moment,” he says as he adjusts his wire-rimmed glasses.

Marcus Chen, physician assistant according to his name tag, looks about twelve, but the credentials framed on the wall behind him suggest otherwise.

His pristine white coat makes me think of fresh fallen snow, but that’s probably my brain trying to convince itself that everything in here is inexplicably sterile.

I may have been married to a doctor of sorts, but that’s never made me a fan of being a patient. In fact, you might say I’m one of the worst. Case in point, my rather latent visit regarding the epiphany I just had regarding what my slime of an ex could have gifted me as a rather slimy parting gift.

“Please”—I lean over the counter and drop my voice to a whisper as if I had to—“I need a full panel STD test and I need it stat. Like, yesterday stat.” I give a quick glance around the room as if sexually transmitted diseases might be lurking in the corners. And if Stanton was ever in the vicinity, they just might be. “I’ll do anything to speed it up. I’ll pay extra. I’ll tip you. How does a thousand bucks for rushed results sound?”

His eyebrows shoot up as if our conversation has taken a rather exciting turn—and for him it certainly has. I’m pretty sure the physician assistant is one of the few crew members who never receives a tip. But that cash-deficient tide is going to turn today. That is, if he cooperates.

He ticks his head to the side, and I can tell he's considering my rather substantial offer. He'd be a fool not to.

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“That’s quite the tip for a routine test,” he says.

“Trust me, there’s nothing routine about this.” I drum my fingers on the counter as I try to come up with something, anything that might spur this little medical predicament of mine along. “Look, I just realized that my ex might have been more generous with his affections than I knew, and I happen to be on my honeymoon with my new husband who I’d really like to, you know...” I wave my hands in what I hope is a very clear but not too graphic gesture.

He cringes slightly, although for the most part, he manages to keep a straight face. “Get biblically acquainted with?”

“Yes! That! I’d like to do that without wondering if I’m giving him any unexpected wedding presents,” I say, clapping my hands despite the fact I’ve wandered into a full-blown lie. Ransom and I are more than acquainted with one another in the biblical senses—and, well, therein lies the real problem. I may have already inadvertently offloaded something to poor Ransom without meaning to.

Who knows what the medical implications might be.

Sure, Stanton’s joy stick didn’t fall off, but will Ransom’s?

“I’m so sorry.” The man tries to hide a smile but fails by a smiling mile. “The doctor usually handles?—”

“Please?” I’m not above begging or throwing my weight around. But what weight is the question. I don’t dare drag Wes or Ransom into this. A thought comes to me. “In

fact, I'm sort of a celebrity writer. I pen a blog about the ship. Maybe you've seen it?" I can't believe I'm going to try to throw around my weight as a blogger. Oh well, desperate STD results call for desperate measures. By no stretch of the imagination am I a celebrity, but if it yields the results I want, then I'm all in. And the results I want are negative all across the board.

He shakes his head and looks rather bored by my antics. "I'm sorry. I don't read blogs. I read books."

Drats.

"Oh well, actually"—oh good heavens, Lord forgive me—"I'm actually thinking of penning a novel."

"Oh really?" He looks less than amused and a full-on frown is taking over his face.

Hey. I take umbrage with that look. Doesn't he think I'm intelligent enough to pull off a one-million-word book? Wait, how many words are in your average-size novel, anyway? Oh, never mind.

I clear my throat. "Yes, really," I say a little too curt. "I'm outlining a cozy mystery as we speak. If you hurry, I'll throw in a signed copy of my new book. You can be a minor character in it. I'll even let you solve a small crime."

His mouth falls open at the thought. "Make it a medium-sized crime and you've got a deal." He starts pulling out forms. "I can have your results within the hour."

"You're a saint," I say, breathing a sigh of relief. "A potentially crime-solving saint."

"Just fill these out, then we'll get started." He slides over a clipboard. "And please use your real name, not your pen name. We've had issues with that before."

Twenty minutes later, I'm alone in the waiting room, having provided more bodily samples than I care to think about when familiar voices drift down the hallway. My heart stops cold because I happen to recognize both of those baritone voices.

Sure enough, Ransom and Wes walk in, deep in conversation about something probably very important. But I can't focus on that right now because the level of panic I'm experiencing is all but ensuring that I'm about to have a cardiac event.

At least I'm in the right place for it.

They both spot me at once and all conversation ceases.

Ransom inches back and his lips give a delicious curve.

"You look familiar," Ransom teases, opening his arms and I practically leap into them on cue.

"You look a little familiar yourself," I manage, accepting a quick kiss that reminds me of exactly why I'm here having various fluids tested.

"Trixie?" Wes inches back and his eyebrows draw close. "What in the world brings you to our lovely infirmary?" He rocks back on his heels, teasing as well, but the concern building on his face lets me know he's also interested in my answer.

I open my mouth, not sure what to say, just as Marcus, the physician assistant, bursts through the door with all the enthusiasm of someone who has just solved a medium-sized crime.

"Great news, Mrs. Troublefield Baxter," he announces with a touch of pride. "You're completely STD-free!"

A thick silence follows and it's enough for me to wish for a rather convenient ocean to throw myself into.

Wes and Ransom turn my way and their eyebrows rise in perfect synchronization.

I press my lips tight before clearing my throat. "Would you believe this is research for a book I'm thinking of writing?"

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Wes tips his head my way. “About an amateur sleuth getting an STD test on herhoneymoon?”

“It’s a very specific subplot,” I say and the words come out more like a question.

But judging by the unamused look in Ransom’s eyes, he is far more interested in some solid answers.

“Maybe we should go someplace and talk,” I suggest, and within seconds I’m shuttled out the door.

CHAPTER24

To say it was embarrassing to have Wes and Ransom walk in as soon as my results were read is an understatement.

It would have been less embarrassing to run across every deck of this ship in nothing but my birthday suit. And truthfully, I might have preferred it.

Soon enough, we step into the crew lounge down the hall.

I’ve never been inside, despite the fact I’m technically crew, and I’m pleasantly surprised by how spacious it is, not to mention the modern design and furniture. Just like everything else on theEmerald Queen,every inch of the crew lounge is luxurious through and through.

The signature fleur-de-lis pattern in the carpet is woven with colors of emerald and

silver, there are a few marble bistro tables ensconced with leather chairs in a butter-soft cream hue, and mahogany panels line every inch of the place. A wall of windows offers endless ocean views, while hidden speakers pipe in jazz so smooth that a part of me wants to apologize for interrupting the tranquility.

“Trixie.” Ransom pulls me into his arms and bores those cobalt-blue eyes into mine. “Do you want to tell me what that was about?”

I open my mouth to answer, but Wes beats me to it with a chuffed laugh. “What do you think it was about, buddy?” Wes looks physically affronted that Ransom even had to ask. “Clearly she’s worried that your years of womanizing have come home to roost—in her body.”

I gasp hard.

The thought had never even crossed my mind! At least not today.

“My years of womanizing?” Ransom goes from glaring at Wes to wincing at me. “Fair point. And I have no defense to plead.” He gives a mournful sigh. “I’m so sorry, Trixie.”

Wes nods. “You should be.” He looks my way. “Trixie, I’ve spent years trying to warn him to stop treating women like a ride at an amusement park. I’m shocked prime body parts haven’t fallen off of him by now.”

Ransom is back to frowning at Wes. “I don’t remember asking for a commentary.” He inches back as he returns his attention my way. “Wait a minute—is this why you’ve been a bit standoffish?”

Wes gives a dark chuckle. “Your new bride has been standoffish? Oh, this is one for the record books. The great Ransom Courtland Baxter denied on his own honeymoon.

How is that ego holding up, buddy?”

“Better than your face will once I’m through with you,” Ransom growls his way.

“No, no.” I jump in before fists can fly. “It’s not about you, Ransom.” I grimace for a moment. “Well, it is, actually, but not in that way.”

Ransom lifts a brow and his eyes double in size.

“I was worried that Stanton might have left me an unwanted gift that I may have unwittingly gifted to you by proxy,” I say. “But thankfully, he didn’t.”

Ransom gives a slow nod. “And that’s why you’ve been standoffish?”

I cringe. “Not exactly.”

Wes edges toward the door. “And I’ll take this as my cue to leave.”

“No, please stay,” I say, catching him by the sleeve. “You should hear this, too. Because there’s something else that’s made me standoffish. Something bigger—something very much supernatural.” I give a little shrug up at Ransom. “And her name is Titsiana Genevieve Forenza. She’s the ghost that’s come back to help me solve the case.”

“Titsiana?” Wes leans in like maybe he misheard.

I nod. “She goes by Tits.” Now it’s me wincing. “And she also goes by Sassy, thankfully.”

Wes chuckles to himself. “So let me get this straight.” He looks over at Ransom. “There’s a ghost named Tits who’s somehow keeping you from enjoying your

honeymoon? I'm not sure where or how, but I'm sensing there's a bit of cosmic justice in there somewhere." He lifts a shoulder my way. "Sorry, Trixie. But when your husband beds half the female population, evidently the universe feels the need to get involved when it comes to retribution."

"Maybe so, but she was Elvie's assistant," I explain to Wes. "She actually worked with her on the Luscious and Delicious cosmetics brand." I look back up at Ransom and wince once again. "And, well, she just so happens to have a hankering for hanky-panky—as in ours. Or more to the point, anybody's, but we're sort of front and center at the moment."

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Ransom closes his eyes for a moment. “You mean, we’ve had an audience all this time?”

“It seems so.”

Wes shakes his head. “I suppose this gives new meaning to the phrasethree’s a crowd.”

Ransom’s eyes widen my way for a moment. “Is this the lady from the window?”

“The one and only,” I say.

Wes sighs. “I’m sorry you’re both going through this. I guess the only way to restart your honeymoon is to solve the case.” He ticks his head to the side. “Whoever Sassy may be, Brad must have really revered her if she’s been sent to help.”

“You would think,” I say. “But according to Sassy, she hardly knew Brad. In fact, she says he couldn’t stand her.”

“Yet another plot twist,” Ransom says with a sigh. “As much as I hate to say it, I think Wes is right. The fastest way to resume our honeymoon is to solve this case. So by all means”—Ransom gestures to one of the leather chairs—“let’s take a seat. Tell us more about our spectral friend with the name of an exotic dancer.”

Ransom and I do just that, but Wes moves toward a small cupboard next to the window.

“This calls for sustenance.” He pulls out a tray of what looks like fresh baked white chocolate chip and macadamia nut cookies. “It’s the head pastry chef’s secret stash. Don’t tell him I know where he hides the treats.”

Wes’ phone chirps before we can dig into the stolen baked goods. He glances at the screen and grimaces. “Looks like duty calls. Try not to summon up a cemetery while I’m gone. One ghost is probably enough for any cruise ship.”

No sooner does the door close behind him than a spray of pink and red stars glitters through the air just as Sassy materializes in her spectral glory—redheaded victory roll and all.

“Well, well,” she purrs as she floats over in her red and white dotted dress. “It looks as if the head of security is about to arrest his new bride.” She gives a dark laugh. “I just can’t wait for the naughty twist about to take place.” She snags a cookie and lands across from us, ready for the show.

I grab Ransom’s hand and give it a squeeze. “The guest of honor just showed up.” I nod her way. “And now it’s our turn to do a little prying into her personal life.”

CHAPTER 25

“All right, Sassy,” I say as the perky poltergeist makes her presence known to Ransom and me, right here in the crew lounge. “Let’s hear all the dirty deets you’ve got on this latest homicide. You can start with everything you know about Brad and Elvie Whipple.”

“Oh honey.” Sassy settles into her seat across from us—albeit floating—while making quick work of a freshly baked white chocolate chip and macadamia nut cookie that’s far more chips and nuts than it ever is a cookie. Have I mentioned that they’re perfection personified? “Where should I even start?” She sighs. “The whole thing is

messier than a romance novel written by a divorce lawyer.”

Ransom squeezes my hand as he nods her way. “Start with Elvie,” he suggests. “And we can work our way down from there.”

“Elvie Whipple.” Sassy sighs. “She’s a sweet woman and one of my best friends, but she has terrible taste in men. Both of her husbands were pieces of work if you ask me. But at least the first one just ignored her. Brad, however?” She shakes her head. “That man had more secrets than a confessional booth.”

“Like what?” I ask while squeezing Ransom’s hand for good measure.

“Like the fact he was bleeding money from the cosmetics company. Small amounts at first, then bigger sums. Elvie didn’t seem to notice. She was too busy trying to keep her sons from self-destructing. But I noticed. I worked with the books, after all.”

Ransom and I exchange a look. I know he’s thinking what I’m thinking.

Is Brad Whipple the reason Sassy had to vacate her corporal frame?

I clear my throat. “Did you confront him?”

“I tried to.” Sassy snorts, sending miniature sparkling stars through the air. “That’s when things got messy. He threatened to tell Elvie that I was the one embezzling. He had the paperwork all set up to frame me if I didn’t keep my mouth shut.” She pauses to shudder and more pink stars emit from her. “I bit the big one before it came to that, obviously.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” Ransom says, nodding in her general direction. “Sassy, I have to ask, how exactly did you die?”

“Anaphylactic shock,” she says without hesitation. “It turns out, I was allergic to peanuts. I avoided them all my life. Everyone knew about my allergy. My mother always said to put it out there in the event someone tosses some peanuts into a dish at the potluck. But well, it didn’t do a lot to protect me in the end. In fact, I’m not even sure what I ate that last day that had them in it. Regardless, it turned out to be a lethal amount.” She shrugs and more sparkles explode all around her. “But you know what they say, when the earthly jig is up—you go up. That is, unless you go down. And from what I’ve heard, you don’t want anything to do with the room downstairs. Besides, all that heat would be murder on my hair.” She gives her crimson locks a quick bounce with her hand.

“What do you know about Becky Lee?” I ask. “When I was speaking to her earlier, you mentioned you amassed plenty of her murder merch.”

“Did I ever.” She rolls her eyes. “And don’t think Brad gave me a discount on it either. But it was so delicious I couldn’t get enough of it. No one could. Elvie used to say it was the murder merch that drew the crowds to their podcast events more than Brad or Elvie themselves. In fact, they were so profitable, Brad and Becky Lee set up a website to sell to the public. Apparently, it was pretty lucrative.”

“I bet,” I say, before turning to Ransom. “Becky Lee told me all about the cute catchphrases she’s emblazoned on everything from tote bags to T-shirts.” I blow out a breath. “She also told me all about the trouble she’s having at home with her husband. It sounds like there might be some emotional abuse going on there. But she’s working on getting him into counseling.”

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Ransom tips his head. “I know for a fact he’s here on the ship with her. I spoke with him earlier. Here’s hoping this trip can help reset them as a couple, and reset him as a husband. Although I’m guessing he needs more than a vacation to set him straight.”

“You got that right,” I say. “Who else should we ask about?”

“Reed Williams,” Ransom says without hesitation. “I know all about the haunted house ventures he had with Brad. What do you know about the guy, Sassy?”

“Whatdon’tI know.” She gives a low gurgle of a laugh. “Let’s just say some of those bedroom moves I saw the two of you pull off—well, Reed and I pulled off a few just like it.” She twists her lips as she inspects Ransom. “Although I’ll admit, his moves weren’t quite as smooth or spicy as yours.” She shoots me a look. “What are you waiting for? You have a perfectly empty lounge to defile. Now go on, get busy. I’ve been taking notes on all the good stuff. And believe me when I say, it’sallgood stuff.”

I concur, but I don’t dare say that to her—although, let’s face it, she already knows.

Now it’s me shooting her a look—a dirty one at that. “Continue with what you know about Reed.”

“Fine.” She gives a dramatic sigh. “I told him about the fact Brad was siphoning funds from Luscious and Delicious. And he thought something was off with the finances in their haunted house venture, too.”

“And what did he discover?” Ransom doesn’t hesitate to ask.

“I don’t know, I applied a little too much lip gloss and ended up at a singles mingle in Paradise. Let’s just say relationships are a little more genuine up there. And don’t worry about that whole there-is-no-marriage-in-Heaven thing. The real beauty is, it’s not needed because once you find your true soul mate, the two of you simply choose one another each and every day.”

“I’ve heard that before,” I say as I blink back tears. “I think that’s so very beautiful.”

Ransom kisses the back of my hand. “I’ll choose you forever.”

“I’ll hold you to it,” I say, kissing his hand right back. “For all eternity.”

“Well, go on and get busy.” Sassy giggles as she scoops up a handful of cookies. “You’ve got a honeymoon to get back to. Keep those kisses coming and maybe lose a few clothes, would you?” She munches away on her sweet treats as if they were popcorn.

Ransom groans. “I hate to burst your bubble, Sassy, but we’re not interested in an audience.”

I shake my head her way. “Especially not a very enthusiastic audience who takes notes.”

Sassy strikes a pose that would make a Vegas showgirl proud. “I prefer the term thorough observer. But if you’re going to be a couple of prudes about it, I’m headed back to that uppity ice cream shop. I believe there’s a Rocky Road waffle sundae with my name on it. Oh, and don’t forget, Elvie and Reed are hosting a big get-together tomorrow afternoon for those crime aficionados who hopped on this boat with them. It’s going to be a killer good time. And I bet the killer will be there, too.”

She up and disappears and I gasp at Ransom. “We will be there with bells on.”

He frowns my way. “I don’t suppose there’s any way to stop you.”

I shake my head. “And there’s no way to stop me from having my way with you right here, right now, either.”

“Right here?” He inches back and a devilish grin curves on his lips.

“This is the crew lounge,” I point out, biting down on a grin of my own. “Any one of the ship’s employees can walk in at any given moment. Which makes it extra exciting. Besides, I just got an all-clear from the infirmary and I think we should celebrate.”

I pull Ransom into a dark corner and have my way with him indeed without an STD, or a voyeuristic ghost anywhere in the vicinity.

Sometimes solving a murder requires following leads, sometimes it requires following your heart, and sometimes—if you’re really lucky—it requires doing both at the exact same time.

Ransom Courtland Baxter has smooth moves indeed.

There’s a killer out there who thinks they’re pretty smooth, too, but both Ransom and I are about to prove them wrong.

And then we’re going to arrest them.

CHAPTER 26

While Trixie’s Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Welcome back, pleasure sailors! While our honeymooners are busy conducting a

thorough inspection of their private balcony (and honestly, their dedication to detail is admirable), let's address today's burning question.

Dear Elodie,

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I signed up for the couples massage workshop, but my husband is nervous about practicing on strangers. Are we making a mistake?

Massage Misgivings

My tense treasure,

First of all, there is nothing strange about the beautiful bodies you'll meet in that workshop. Although some of the positions might raise an eyebrow or two. Think of it as a hands-on anatomy lesson with mood lighting.

The massage tables are surprisingly hearty (don't ask how I know), and those privacy screens are more suggestions than barriers. I do recommend staying focused on your own partner. Last week's "accidental" oil spill led to some very interesting partner-swapping discussions.

Pro tip: Request table number three in the back corner. It has the best angle for proPERTechnique. Plus, it's conveniently close to the supply closet, which, by the way, locks from the inside. Not that I've verified this personally. Or at least recently.

Massaging minxishly,

XOXO Elodie

Trixie

It's just been a few hours, but the memory of that yummy tryst I just shared with

Ransom lingers over me like a plush, warm coat. A coat that has the power to send me to the moon and beyond and see stars at the very same time.

The fact that we're both STD-free didn't hurt either. Although I can't say the same for Stanton. As far as I know, he's acquired at least ten dicey social diseases in the time we've been apart. And knowing the fact he's an overachiever, he's probably invented a dozen of his own in addition to that.

But alas, afterward, Ransom and I made a beeline for the honeymoon suite. Ransom had to get back to work so we jumped into the shower—it was all suds, fun, and no duds—then he hopped in a suit and I hopped in—well, another formal gown no thanks to my rather bossy bestie.

The emerald green sequins of my new gown catch every light in the corridor as I make my way to first seating dinner to meet up with Bess and Nettie.

A thick crowd of passengers walks as a mob in the same direction, all dressed markedly more casual than myself.

I think I heard a few of them asking one another if tonight was a formal night—or address your best night as the ship likes to call them. And when someone in their party checked the online newsletter that keeps them abreast of the daily happenings, I even heard a few of them say things like, how embarrassing, poor thing, and should we tell her?

I, however, am not in the least bit embarrassed. Compared to half the shenanigans I've been a part of over the past year, walking around dressed as a lime green disco ball is the least of my worries. But when your wardrobe choices are limited to fancy versus fancier, you work with what you've got.

At least the memories of this afternoon's adventure in the crew lounge put an extra

spring in my step.

The Emerald Queen glitters herself as day turns into night and the excitement on the ship levels up more than a few notches. The brass seems to glow brighter, the endless walls of mirrors sparkle and shine, the scent of perfume collides with cologne, and there's a waft of a fresh grilled steak calling in the distance. The sound of happy chatter fills the corridors, along with easy-listening music streaming from unseen speakers.

If there's one thing I love about the ship, it's the fact it feels as if I'm living in one long party that never really ends. Nor would I want it to.

However, there is one thing I'd love to bring to a conclusion posthaste. The murder investigation of Brad Whipple.

Bess and Nettie would love the very same thing, and that's exactly why I'm sure I'll have no trouble getting them to join me tomorrow afternoon for the big podcast meet and greet.

If by some miracle we can catch the killer tomorrow, then there will still be plenty of days left on our transatlantic voyage for Ransom and me to make up for some serious lost honeymoon time. Although let's be real, I plan on turning the rest of my life into one long honeymoon with Ransom.

I come upon the casino where a cacophony of spinning slots and desperate hopes from the passengers enjoying, or rather sweating, over the tables and slot machines causes me to pause.

I was never one to run off to Vegas or Atlantic City way back when, but I'll admit, there is something magical about the ship's gambling hub that makes my heart beat a little faster each and every time I walk past it.

The whirling lights paint the passengers' faces in bright vivid colors as people happily feed their retirement funds into machines that promise fortune but deliver mostly regret. The air might be thick with expensive perfume and even more expensive dreams, but the level of sheer excitement in the room is a high all to itself.

"Trixie Troublefield," an all too familiar voice snips from behind and I freeze mid-step.

"Baxter," I add, mostly to myself.

Within seconds, Tinsley appears before me, looking rather miffed—her go-to expression. At least it is around me.

Her chestnut locks are pulled back into a severe ponytail, but she looks chic in her navy pantsuit with a white blouse flowing beneath her blazer. Tinsley is a stunner. And if she were nice, she would be the whole package.

"I've got a bone to pick with you," she snips along with her signature snarl. Her hands are balled up into fists and firmly planted on her hips, and I'm guessing none of the above is a very good sign for me. "Two bones exactly," she continues with the preamble to her irate tirade. "And don't think I'm about to let you get away with either of these things."

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A thought comes to me and I gasp as scenes from that racy encounter in the crew lounge flit through my mind.

There's no way she could have witnessed it, could she have?

Or worse, maybe others were privy to it and snapped a couple of pictures for posterity—and to circulate among a couple hundred of their closest friends!

Or maybe they simply made a VIDEO!

Oh, good grief.

Why didn't I think of any of this before?

Ransom and I could be going viral on at least three different porn sites by now. And there's an off chance it wouldn't be his first time. Not on purpose anyway.

I clear my throat as I try to regain my composure. "Just two?" I manage to smile as I say it. Let's face it, the fact she only has two bones to pick with me signals that this is a light day.

"Oh, there are subsections, too," Tinsley is quick to assure me as she continues to glare my way. "And don't look so smug. First of all, have you been reading that scandalously inappropriate advice column Elodie has been posting on your blog? It's an abomination. And I'll have you know, the ship's passengers are treating it like their personal bible of bad behavior. Either rein her in or I'll find a way to delete her myself—from the ship."

My fingers fly to my lips like a reflex. “Oh my goodness. I guess I haven’t been reading it. But in case you weren’t aware, I have other things occupying my time.” I press my lips tight as memories of that afternoon delight come rushing back like a tidal wave—a tidal wave of pure ecstasy.

She frowns twice as hard my way as if she were privy to my inner musing. “And that brings me to my second bone.” She inches closer and I inch back. “How dare you shake down a suspect without me. I thought we made a deal. I want in on this case, Trixie Troublefield, and if you won’t work with me, I’ll be forced to go rogue.”

“No, don’t do that,” I say as a genuine panic sets in. Tinsley may not be my biggest fan and vice versa, but I certainly don’t want her stumbling into the path of a killer. “And it’s Trixie TroublefieldBaxter, in case you need reminding.”

I have a feeling she will, and often, but only because she refuses to believe Ransom Baxter is off the market. Tinsley has a long history of lusting after both him and Wes. I suppose Wes is still up for grabs, but he’s made it clear he’s not interested in the brunette hurricane in front of me.

Tinsley lifts a finger, ready to argue about who knows what, when a blonde vision in pink sashays up.

Saved by the bombshell.

CHAPTER 27

While Trixie’s Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Hello, thrill seekers! While Trixie and Ransom are conducting their own version of maritime research (and honestly, their dedication to hands-on investigation is inspiring), let’s address today’s burning curiosity.

Dear Elodie,

Help! The cruise director mentioned something about a midnight chocolate buffet. My wife is excited, but it seems a bit late for dessert. Is it worth staying up for?

Sugar Rush Skeptic

My sweet seeker,

Too late for dessert? Oh honey, midnight is when dessert gets interesting. Trust me, you haven't lived until you've watched your significant other sample the chocolate fountain after hours. Those dipping stations are like foreplay with better lighting.

The fresh strawberries are perfectly sized for sampling, and that whipped cream dispenser has settings you won't find in the manual. Although I do recommend pacing yourself. The night watch is still talking about last month's incident with the chocolate-covered cherries. Just FYI, the corner table behind the ice sculpture offers the most privacy for tasting sessions. Plus, it's conveniently close to the supply of napkins. You'll need them.

Indulging inappropriately,

XOXO Elodie

Trixie

I've never been so glad for Elodie's impeccable sense of dramatic timing and inability to wear subtle colors—which explains my current rather electric wardrobe.

“Well, well.” Tinsley gives a snide smirk to the woman in pink as we stand in front of the casino. “If it isn't the ship's resident romance guru. Tell me, do your articles

come with a warning label, or just a liability waiver?”

“Oh honey,” Elodie purrs while patting her perfectly coiffed locks. “The only warning needed is for people who don’t read them. And even though you seem to have perused my latest, greatest minxy musings, it’s clear you’re not implementing my hot-to-trot tips and tricks. In that case, I’ll be happy to give you some private coaching. Heaven knows you could use a lesson in letting your hair down—literally and figuratively.”

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I gasp and clamp my mouth shut in the event I laugh, or ask for a few lessons myself. My schedule is far too booked for that to happen, but maybe during the next cruise when things slow down a bit.

“I donotneed coaching,” Tinsley snaps with a robust verbosity and me think the lady doth protest too much.

“Mmm.” Elodie ticks her head to the side. “Your dating history begs to differ,” she purrs as thick and sugary as sweet tea. “When was the last time you had a romance that didn’t involve a security incident report?”

Tinsley sniffs. “A drunk hitting on me does not quantify a romance. And by the way, some of us take our jobs seriously.”

“And some of us take our pleasure seriously.” Elodie gives a cheeky wink. “I could help you with that. Lesson one—that pantsuit you’re wearing would look much better on someone’s floor—preferably a hot man with a body of steel. But a medium man with a dad bod wouldn’t be the worst place for you to begin your journey of self-discovery either.”

Tinsley gasps at the thought.

I bite back a laugh as Tinsley’s cheeks turn red enough to serve as a navigation light for the ship.

“My wardrobe is perfectly professional and will not be falling into a puddle on some dad bod’s cabin floor,” she sputters.

“Professional in what capacity?” Elodie leans her way and blinks. “It’s more of a crime deterrent if you ask me.” Elodie walks a circle around Tinsley like the fashion police she is. “Although I suppose it’s working. No one will be attempting any romantic overtures with that militant tailoring you have going on.”

Tinsley grunts. “At least I’m not writing articles about creative uses for life preservers,” she shoots back.

“That was a safety article!” Elodie protests with mock innocence. “I’m simply concerned about passenger...um,buoyancy.” She offers another cheeky wink, this time in my direction and my mouth falls open.

Oh, I really need to be reading these articles, if for nothing else than to see what I should be censoring—and let’s be honest,learning.

Tinsley steps in dangerously close to our resident racy instructor. “Since when does safety require mood lighting and chocolate sauce?”

“Since always,” Elodie hits back. “You’d know that if you’d try my suggestions instead of filing complaints about them.” Her expression brightens on a dime. “Speaking of which, I have a wonderful idea for your next ship-wide game night. It involves handcuffs and?—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence.” Tinsley looks ready to spontaneously combust.

“Fine.” Elodie gives a somewhat dramatic yet clearly contrived sigh. “Stay married to your rule book. Meanwhile, I have a date with a haunted house hunter that needs a thoroughinvestigation.”

That devilish gleam in her eye as she mentions the haunted house sends a warning bell going off in my head. Especially since I have a feeling I know exactly which

ghost hunter she's planning to investigate.

Tinsley returns her ire to me. "I guess I'll see you at the Whispers of the Wicked conference tomorrow." She glares as she says it, although I don't know why. Nobody is forcing her to go anywhere near that murder-obsessed crowd—besides the fact she's apparently murder-obsessed herself. "And that is exactly where I will track down the killer." She stomps off into the thick of the casino, most likely to lecture unsuspecting gamblers about proper security protocols while they're trying to lose their life savings in peace.

"She's going to track down the killer?" Elodie muses in her wake.

"Not if the killer tracks her down first," I say. "And if left to her own devices, I'm afraid that just may be the case."

"You know what they say," Elodie hums. "Don't fear what you wish for. Besides"—Elodie waves me off—"we're not that lucky." She checks her reflection in the mirrored wall behind her. "Speaking of luck, there's a certain haunted house entrepreneur who has caught my eye. Now if you'll excuse me"—she begins to sashay in the opposite direction—"I need to arrange for him to inspect a haunting in my cabin."

"Are you talking about Reed Williams?" I call after her, but she's already disappeared into the crowd.

Great. Now I have two potential victims to worry about—Tinsley charging headfirst into danger and Elodie plotting to get up close and personal with someone who is definitely on my suspect list.

Solving murders would be so much easier if people would stop volunteering to become the victims.

For now, though, dinner is calling. And with any luck, I can keep both Tinsley and Elodie alive long enough to solve this case—assuming they don't drive me to commit a murder of my own.

CHAPTER 28

While Trixie's Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Salutations, ship sweethearts! While our lovebirds are busy reviewing surveillance footage (and really, who knew the security office could be so accommodating?), let's untangle today's relationship riddle.

Dear Elodie,

Help! I booked this cruise to rekindle things with my husband, but he's spent more time at the poker table than with me. Last night he missed our dinner reservation because he was on a winning streak. I'm ready to throw him overboard. Advice?

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Ready to Jump Ship

My neglected nautical goddess,

First of all, resist the urge to test his swimming abilities—the paperwork is absolutely brutal. Instead, let's get creative with our attention-getting tactics.

Book yourself a window seat at the lido bar (the one with the spectacular view of the pool). Order something fancy with an umbrella. Then accidentally drop said umbrella. Repeatedly. You will be amazed how quickly a man's poker face crumbles when his wife is being helped up by the very attentive pool boy.

Or perhaps try room service? Nothing says you're missing out quite like having that gorgeous Italian waiter deliver breakfast in bed. Although I do recommend wearing something more substantial than the complimentary robe. Those breakfast trays can be surprisingly slippery.

Sailing seductively,

XOXO Elodie

P.S. And if he still doesn't get the message, remember, the ship's crew is very understanding about cabin reassignments. Just saying.

Trixie

The Sapphire Lounge beckons ahead, but my mind is still stuck on the whirlwind of

the past twenty-four hours.

After that yummy encounter with Ransom in the crew lounge, the evening continued in a rather pleasant pattern—such as a lovely lingering dinner with Ransom, Bess, and Nettie complete with that heavenly lava cake that makes me forget my own name and even my newly accrued surname.

We caught a musical at the theater, then made an appearance at the casino (where I managed not to lose my shirt, although later in our cabin was another story entirely—and more to the point, I lost my entire cocktail dress). And don't think for a minute that Ransom and I didn't enjoy the captain's generous midnight buffet that was sent up to our honeymoon suite. It was a spread fit for a king and a queen—or ten or twenty. More lava cake was had—in ways that would have made Elodie blush.

And lastly, Ransom and I landed in that private hot tub on our balcony. The hours we spent soaking in the sweet heat proved particularly memorable, leading to some creative canoodling that would have made Sassyblush—if ghosts could blush. Speaking of our spectral chaperone, she made another appearance just as things were getting interesting, and this time she had the decency to disappear after minimal note-taking.

“Earth to Trixie.” Bess nudges me as we approach the Sapphire Lounge. It's the very next afternoon and we're heading straight for a sign that reads Welcome to the Whispers of the Wicked podcast at sea! A killer convention. “You've got that newlywed glow again,” Bess insists.

“More like that I finally got some alone time with minimal supernatural supervision glow,” I shoot back.

“Please,” Nettie snorts. “With a smile like that, I'd say you had plenty of supervision—of the Handsome Ransom variety.”

“You’re not wrong,” I sing.

The Sapphire Lounge has transformed from its usual cocktail hour elegance into something more deliberately dramatic. Crystal chandeliers glow above in the dimly lit room where the curtains have been drawn over the windows.

I’m guessing light and bright doesn’t exactly set the mood for a good conversation about a very horrible murder.

Both Bess and Nettie have dressed appropriately for the occasion—dark slacks and a light sweater for Bess and a lime green kaftan with pineapples printed all over it for Nettie.

Okay, so Nettie’s attire might turn an eye or two. Which happens to be what my current attire has me doing as well, no thanks to the navy sequin gown with a giant pink glittery bow that sits right over my keester. Elodie really does have a sense of humor. Have I mentioned the plunging neckline?

But I digress. Bodies swarm the room amidst the rows and rows of chairs lined up, all facing a makeshift stage up front. The sound of classical music bleeds through the speakers and the scent of sugar-sweet donuts and coffee hijacks our senses.

In fact, to the left there’s an entire buffet of every donut imaginable, from bear claws to eclairs, powdered donuts, to chocolate glazed and everything in between. Admittedly, the platter of powdered jelly donuts looks especially fitting for this morbid gathering, but delicious nonetheless. And don’t get me started on the scent of the fresh brewed coffee.

That’s the nice thing about this ship. You don’t have to go to one of the many fancy coffee shops or cafés on board to track down a decent cup of joe. And am I ever addicted to a decent cup of joe.

The effect of all things combined is more upscale book club than crime convention. However, the enthusiastic chatter about favorite cases suggests otherwise.

“Well, this is cozy,” Nettie says, eyeing both the donut-laden display table and the gathering crowd with equal interest. “But wow, I didn’t expect everyone to be dressed like they’re attending a funeral.”

“Nettie.” Bess shoots her bestie a look. “Given recent events?—”

“I see the three musketeers have arrived,” Bess is cut off by a familiar curt voice coming from behind—one we’re all too familiar with.

We turn to find Tinsley wearing another naval-inspired pantsuit, but this one somehow manages to look even more militant than yesterday’s. And floating alongside of her is a rather stunning redheaded ghost in a dress that matches her glowing locks. Come to think of it, her entire countenance is giving off a red-hot lava effect.

“Four musketeers,” I correct without thinking. Sassy floats beside me, preening like the queen she is in a polka-dot dress that would make any pin-up girl jealous.

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“Four?” Tinsley’s eyebrow arches so high it might need oxygen. “Are you actually counting me in that number?”

“Nope.” Nettie laughs at the thought. “She’s counting your ego. It’s large enough to be its own person.”

Tinsley snarls my way—and I didn’t even make the snide comment. But let’s face it, Nettie isn’t wrong.

“Speaking of big egos,” Tinsley sniffs. “I gather you’re all here to investigate rather than socialize.”

“Multi-tasking is a thing,” I remind her.

“Yeah,” Nettie says. “Some of us can nibble on a donut and solve a murder at the same time,” she adds, already eyeing the refreshment table.

More like inhale a donut or two or a dozen. But who could blame us? The pastry chefs on this ship don’t mess around, and we’re always eager to applaud their efforts by way of gobbling down their wares. It’s the highest compliment we can give them.

“Speaking of the investigation”—Nettie says, craning her neck past Tinsley—“this lounge is chock-full of suspicious characters and suspicious behavior.”

Tinsley rolls her eyes. “The only suspicious behavior I’ve spotted so far is your newfound obsession with deep-fried desserts.”

Before Nettie can defend her dedication to deep-fried everything, Elvie glides over in a flowing black dress that makes her look more like a grieving goddess than your standard widow. Her short hair sits in neat coils and her ruby-red lipstick looks a bit harsh for her creamy complexion. And judging by those bags under her eyes, she hasn't been getting much sleep.

Although I'm guessing fresh grief does that to a person.

Her warm smile seems genuine enough as she closes in on us. Her perfume reaches us before she does and it holds the scent of a strong floral tea.

"Hello, ladies," she says in a cheerful tone. "I'm so glad you could all make it." She gives my arm a light tap as she says it. "I was so hoping you'd come. Reed and I have some interesting topics planned for today's discussion. And that way you'll get to see firsthand what Brad dedicated his life to."

"We can't wait," I tell her.

"Great," she says as she clasps her hands together and an entire sleeve of gold bangles race to her wrist. "We're covering some of Brad's favorite cases today. The ones that really got under his skin."

Sassy snorts at the thought. "Oh honey, if she only knew what really got under his skin. Technically, that would be her, seeing that he was having an affair."

I can't help but frown. That man was a cad through and through. But despite the fact, I've got a case to solve and a sassy ghost to shove back into the Nethersphere so I can get on with my honeymoon.

The lights blink on and off a few times as Reed Williams calls the room to order and both he and Elvie head for the raised platform in the front of the room that acts as a

makeshift stage. His thick, dark locks are neatly combed back and he's wearing a black leather blazer with matching leather pants. He looks sophisticated in a crime-solving junkie slash wannabe biker sort of way, and it's a look that works on him.

"There's my man." Sassy sighs as everyone, including us, rushes to our seats. "Isn't he just delicious?"

I make a face at the drooling vixen. "Those donuts look delicious to me," I say just as a familiar face turns around.

"I thought that was you." Becky Lee gives a little laugh before nodding past the dessert table. "My husband is over there setting up the merchandise we've brought along for Brad and Elvie." She winces a little as she says Brad's name. She's traded her usual cardigan for a sleeveless blouse that shows off her nicely toned arms. "You'll get a chance to see my work, up close and personal."

"We can't wait," Bess tells her.

Nettie nods in agreement. "I'm going to load up until my arms beg to fall off. It's going to be murder." She winks over at Becky Lee and we all share a light laugh.

Reed takes the small stage area with the kind of confidence that comes from knowing exactly how good you look in black leather.

Elvie joins him and her grace masks any nerves, grief, or apprehension she might be feeling.

It's showtime.

CHAPTER29

“Welcome, fellow investigators, one and all.” Reed’s voice fills the Sapphire Lounge without the need for a microphone as the murderous meet and greet gets underway. “First off, Elvie and I want to thank you all for your condolences regarding Brad. Your support has meant everything during this difficult time.”

A thick silence follows his words.

Elvie gives a somber nod to the audience at hand. “Brad would have wanted the show to go on,” she adds as her voice catches. “He lived for these moments, sharing the mysteries that kept him up at night.”

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Sassy materializes beside me. “Sure, the mysteries kept him up—right along with all those late-night visits to see that bimbo he was sleeping with. And I bet they didn’t do a whole lot of sleeping. The only mystery here is who she was.”

I give her a covert nod in agreement.

Elvie waves a hand at the audience. “And before we go on, I have to say that The Midnight Murder Mingle is still a go. Tomorrow night in the formal dining room, you know the time. For those who are unaware, it’s the Whispers of the Wickedbig hoorah that Brad had meticulously mapped out just to show his appreciation to you. Dress to impress. It will be a murderously good time.” She makes a face. “Pun intended, I think.”

A light applause breaks out because of the news and Becky Lee turns around and offers us a surprised smile.

I guess I know where I’ll be tomorrow at midnight.

Reed and Elvie settle into what I’m guessing is a familiar podcast rhythm, the same dynamic that’s earned Brad and Elvie millions of downloads.

Reed plays the part of the skeptical investigator while Elvie provides the emotional heart of each story. Today’s case involves a real estate mogul murdered in his own haunted house attraction. Although Reed made it a point to let us know that it wasn’t one of his haunted houses.

The audience hangs on every word with notebooks open and pens scratching away. I

spot at least three people recording the event on their phones, probably for their own true crime podcasts. There's nothing like podcasters podcasting about podcasters. Somehow that feels perfectly on-brand for this crowd.

"The victim's business partner had the perfect alibi," Reed continues as he paces the stage. "He was at a charity event across town. But here's where it gets interesting—security footage showed someone wearing the partner's distinctive watch entering the haunted house just minutes before the murder."

Elvie leans forward. "The partner swore he had lost that watch months ago. He mentioned that someone must have stolen it to frame him."

"And was it lost?" someone calls out.

"That's the mystery." Reed grins. "The partner swore the watch was never found—and neither was the killer."

An icy breeze whizzes in and I turn to see the lounge doors opening quietly as both Ransom and Wes slip in. For some reason, this makes me feel infinitely safer, although their presence has never stopped a killer from doing the deadly deed before.

They take up position near the back wall and I give a little wave and they wave back.

"The partner was eventually cleared," Elvie picks up smoothly. "But the real killer was never discovered. Some say the haunted house claimed another victim, adding a real ghost to its manufactured horrors."

"Speaking of ghosts." Sassy sighs in Reed's direction. "This ghost misses having a corporeal form to wrap around all that leather. You try being dead when a man like that walks by in pants that tight. The body might be temporary, but lust lasts forever. Being dead can be such a downer at times like these."

I'd have a hard time with death, too, if I saw Ransom trotting around on the planet clad in leather. I've always had a hankering for a bad boy, and Ransom can be bad to the bone when he wants to. Thankfully for me, he wants to again and again every single night. And trust me, he is bad to the bone.

The audience pitches theories about the haunted house murder, but I'm more interested in the undercurrents crackling through the room. Ransom catches my eye, giving me that subtle nod, but that frown on his face lets me know he's reading the room as well. It makes me wonder if he's dug up something new—something I'm not yet privy to. Yet being the operative word.

Wes, however, is eyeing the donuts, much like Nettie.

“Now”—Reed clasps his hands together—“let's talk about what really makes a perfect murder. Theoretically speaking, of course.”

The temperature in the room seems to drop ten degrees and I cast a quick glance back to Ransom once more. He raises a brow my way before reverting his attention to the front.

I do the same and note Elvie's fingers as they tighten around the glass in her hand.

“Does anybody know?” Reed asks the crowd and dead silence takes over.

Ironic that in a room full of crime junkies that not one of them can think of a way to commit the perfect murder. I can think of a few, like using an icicle for the murder weapon. There's nothing like evidence that melts away when you need it the most. Or how about utilizing insulin in a nefarious manner? Or giving someone a brisk shove in the eternal direction by way of a “fall” down the stairs?

I could go on and on. I'm not quite sure what that says about me either.

Probably not good things.

Reed sighs. “In that case, does anyone have a question that I might be able to answer?”

Tinsley’s hand shoots up, as do several others, ready to grill Reed about forensic details, but I’m more interested in the fact he’s teasing the room with the idea he seemingly knows how to commit the perfect murder.

Has he done it before?

More to the point, does he think he’s accomplished this feat on the Emerald Queen? Right under my nose and Ransom’s no less?

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Reed fields questions with a practiced charm, but there seems to be an edge to the smile he's forcing on the crowd.

"Yes, the lady in blue." He points to Tinsley, who's practically vibrating in her seat by now.

"In your expert opinion"—Tinsley emphasizes the word expert so hard it could cut glass—"how often do business partnerships end in murder?"

I sink a little in my seat. Talk about getting right to the point.

"Statistically speaking?" Reed offers a friendly laugh. "Not nearly as often as marriages."

Elvie is about to take a sip of water and pauses with the glass halfway to her lips. It's as if he stopped her in her tracks with that comment. And it does beg the question why.

"However"—Reed shrugs at the crowd—"I imagine financial disputes cause their fair share of homicides."

Elvie gives a sober nod. "Especially when large sums of money go missing."

They wrap it up and soon the crowd is on its feet and mingling about, not to mention hitting the donut buffet hard—which is exactly what Bess, Nettie, and Wes took off to do.

I spot Tinsley chatting it up with Becky Lee as they inspect a table laden with her murder merch but I happen to have my sights set on a tall, dark, and handsome man—one that isn't my husband.

I make a beeline for Reed Williams just as another tall, dark, and handsome man circumvents me—one that happens to be my newly minted hubby indeed.

CHAPTER 30

"Fancy meeting you here," Ransom says with a smile that still makes me weak in the knees as we stand in the middle of the Sapphire Lounge.

"I'd say this is fate, but we both know you're just following the trail of my sequins." I pat my shiny blue dress and he waggles his brows in response.

He nods to Reed just up ahead. "How about we double-team him?"

"I'm always on your team."

Ransom and I walk over and cut Reed off at the pass while Sassy floats overhead like the scandal-hungry spectator she is. Or come to think of it, she might just be hungry for the leather-clad man himself. Most likely both.

"Well done." Ransom extends a hand to Reed. "That was quite a session. You really know how to work a crowd."

"The leather helps." Sassy sighs dreamily beside me.

Reed nods. "High praise coming from you, Detective."

And from Sassy unbeknownst to him.

“He’s right,” I say. “You were a hit.”

“Years of practice.” Reed runs a hand through his thick locks. “But it was Brad who was the natural showman. He could spin a tale that would keep you on the edge of your seat for hours. And that’s why he was able to make a living at it.”

Ransom nods. “I reviewed a few of his podcasts. He was a master at his craft.”

I give Ransom’s hand a squeeze.

Why didn’t I think of reviewing Brad’s podcasts? Lord knows I’ve had plenty of time to watch any and every podcast under the murderous sun these past few days.

“Speaking of spinning tales,” Ransom says as his lips curve with the idea of a smile. “I’d love to hear more about your haunted house venture. It sounds fascinating.”

Sassy wraps herself around Reed like a vine. “Honey, everything about that man is fascinating.” She fans herself with her fingers. “Especially in those pants.”

I bite back a smile. “Was it a successful partnership?”

Reed looks my way and sighs. “It was complicated. It started off pretty great, but then money started disappearing. Someone was dipping into the kitty, so to speak.”

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My mouth falls open at the thought. “I’m sorry to hear it. Did you talk to Brad about this?”

“And did he have any answers?” Ransom tags on the question.

“He had explanations.” Reed laughs as he says it, but it’s mournful and he’s frowning despite the fact. “He said he borrowed money from Elvie’s beauty brand when he needed a personal loan, not our venture. I didn’t know what to believe.” He shakes his head. “We were in serious debt, and at that point my trust was shot.”

“So who do you think was stealing from the real estate venture?” I press gently.

Reed shrugs. “Obviously, Brad was lying. I mean, the guy tried to get away with murder at every turn.” Reed drums his fingers against his leather-clad thigh and Sassy all but convulses with pleasure at the sight. “His lifestyle was expensive, to say the least. The guy had champagne taste on a podcast budget. Neither the podcast nor the haunted houses could keep up with his spending.”

“Did you know about his affair?” The question slips out before I can stop it.

Reed gives a few quick blinks as if I caught him off guard.

“Yes, I did.” He gives a wistful tick of his head. “It was pretty hard to miss.” His expression darkens. “Brad wasn’t exactly subtle about it. In fact, I would say he was flaunting the fact around me. Although who he was having it with, I couldn’t tell you. Not that it matters now.”

Ransom turns his head slightly, his eyes still very much focused on Reed. “Did Elvie know about this?”

“She sure did.” He nods emphatically. “She found out almost a year ago. That’s when she came to me with the news.” His voice softens. “She decided not to confront him, but she needed someone to talk to. I became her inadvertent comforter, I guess you could say.”

Ayearago? I inch back at the thought.

But Becky Lee said Elvie had only discovered the affair a few weeks ago. I guess she didn’t realize exactly how long Elvie had been in the know.

Someone lets out a sharp whistle and the three of us look in that direction to find Elvie waving from the murder merch table.

“Reed,” she calls out. “Would you mind coming to look at something?”

He ticks his head to the side and chuckles. “Duty calls,” he says with an apologetic smile.

“And so do those leather pants,” Sassy purrs, zipping after him like a lusty missile in vintage polka-dots.

Ransom and I exchange a look.

“Someone is lying about something,” Ransom says. “And in my experience, people don’t lie unless they’re hiding something far worse than infidelity.”

“I agree.”

A commotion erupts by the refreshment table before I can say another word.

Nettie and Bess appear to be arm wrestling over what looks like the last maple-glazed donut.

Wes steps in to mediate, just as Tinsley charges forward brandishing her name badge like a shield. Wes grabs ahold of Nettie and tries to gently pull her back and Tinsley does the same to Bess. And within seconds, we've got a tug-of-war of the ages breaking out.

Shouting ensues, gasps circle the room, and a few light screams enter the equation. And then in a spectacular display of cosmic karma, they all go down like human dominoes, sending a shower of glazed fried treats sailing through the air.

"It's raining donuts," someone screams as the entire room runs for cover.

More screams light up the room and it sounds as if a sugar-sweet massacre just took place. And judging by the crimson stains those jelly-filled powdered beauties left in their wake, it looks as if a massacre took place, too.

Great.

Nothing says murder quite like death by donut. Although I have to admit, there are worse ways to go.

Like getting stabbed in the back by a friend—or perhaps your wife.

CHAPTER 31

While Trixie's Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:03 am

Hello, husband hunters! While our newlyweds are busy exploring ship acoustics—and honestly, who knew the honeymoon suite had such excellent soundproofing?—let’s tackle today’s group inquiry.

Dear Elodie,

My girlfriends and I (all delightfully single) booked a cruise for next month. We’re looking for tips on meeting eligible men at sea. There are five of us, and we’re not leaving this ship without at least one love connection. Can you help a sister out—or five?

Desperate Deck Divas

My maritime manhunters,

First of all, I so love that you’re traveling in a pack—it’s like bringing your own cheering section. Now, let’s talk strategy.

The ship’s officers are like catnip in those uniforms. Case in point, the Italian restaurant maître d’ is usually single for a reason (trust me), and the security team is tragically overworked (though the head of which is currently occupied with giving our beloved Trixie very thorough protection).

For best results, stake out the following hunting grounds:

1. The martini bar around sunset (when the business types loosen their ties)

2. The gym at seven a.m. (when the dedicated ones show off their dedication)
3. The coffee bar at eight a.m. (when the walk-of-shamers need caffeine)
4. The pool at three p.m. (when the sun makes everyone look... well, ambitious)

Pro tip: Avoid the late-night buffet hunters. Anyone that excited about midnight meatballs is probably not your soulmate

Warning: The ship's dance instructors are professionally flirtatious. If he says you're his best student, honey, you're his fifth best student today.

Happy hunting,

XOXO Elodie

P.S. If all else fails, there's always the drop-something-by-the-shuffleboard-court maneuver. However, do check his left hand first. We're looking for love, not lawsuits.

Trixie

With Ransom tied up in meetings all afternoon, I spent a gloriously relaxing day with my partners in crime-solving—or more to the point, simply partners in crime as we rested up for the first formal night of the trip. Or first official formal night, I should say.

Bess, Nettie, and I started the day off right with the breakfast buffet at the Blue Water Cafe, where Nettie managed to try every type of breakfast offering available, for research purposes, she claimed.

It was oatmeal and scones for Bess, while I doubled down on both pancakes and waffles. I couldn't help myself. Ransom made sure that I worked up an appetite before I left the room.

Then afterward, the three of us lounged by the pool where I actually made it through three chapters of the novel I'm reading without stumbling over any bodies, which feels like a personal best. And let's face it, it sort of is.

Lunch in the formal dining room turned into high tea, which led straight into bingo—where Bess shocked us all by winning the jackpot.

"It's about darn tootin' time," she shouted and sounded a lot more like Nettie than she did herself. You know what they say—you become the company you keep. "I've been manifesting this win ever since we first stepped on board!"

We celebrated with hot stone massages at the spa, and somehow made it back to our rooms with just enough time to dress for dinner with Ransom and Wes.

But now dinner is long over—although the memory of the chicken Milanese with creamy risotto Milanese lives on. Both are made with copious amounts of parmigiano cheese, the chicken being deep-fried in cheesy crumbles, and it's a dish that has set the bar far too high for the rest of the dishes I plan on inhaling for the remainder of the trip.

Cheese, much like Ransom Courtland Baxter, is my weakness.

The best part? Ransom is a staunch supporter of my cheese addiction, unlike my ex who was a staunch supporter of me starving myself to fit into a size zero. And seeing that the size zero thing never panned out for me, that probably explains the whole cheating ex thing, too.

After dinner, we hit the Emerald Theater and watched the ship's rendition of Phantom of the Opera—that never gets old. Then we trotted up to the Blue Water Café and ate our weight in molten chocolate lava cake—that will for sure never get old.

Now that it's almost midnight, the entire lot of us has migrated to the casino together and that includes, Bess, Nettie, Ransom, and Wes. And once we arrived, we had an unfortunate run-in with Tinsley, which is evidently an ongoing thing for me.

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The casino pulses with formal night energy with a cacophony of chirping slot machines mixing with the rustle of silk gowns and the clink of martini glasses.

The air is thick with expensive perfume, expensive booze, anticipation, and copious amounts of greed.

Let's face it. No one steps into the casino without dreams of winning big. Although judging by the rather violent assault Nettie just launched on a slot machine, some dreams are more determined than others.

My pale lavender evening gown, another Elodie special, catches the rainbow lights as if it were trapping a star. The bodice hugs in all the right places, while the skirt flows to the ground like liquid—assuming liquid came with a thigh-high slit that makes walking both possible and potentially scandalous.

Bess looks elegant in deep purple silk that makes her crimson hair gleam, while Nettie has gone full showgirl in a red and yellow sequined number that could probably be seen from the International Space Station.

Ransom shakes his head my way as his eyes ride up and down my body. "I know I've already said it a dozen times this evening, but you are killing it in that dress."

Tinsley huffs a dry laugh. "Murder is her specialty."

"I wouldn't arrest you." He punctuates the sentiment with a kiss on my cheek.

It should be noted that the man fills out a tuxedo in ways that should probably be

illegal in at least three states.

Bess chuckles. “Murder might be her specialty, but so is tracking down a killer,” she says while studying the one-armed bandit in front of her. “But right now, the only thing I’m interested in tracking down is another win. Let’s go, universe,” she shouts as she settles in next to Nettie. “How about sending me a killer payday?”

Both Bess and Nettie claim their favorite slot machines, while the rest of us huddle nearby, and I must say that Ransom and Wes look particularly dashing in their tuxedos. Even Tinsley has traded her usual pantsuit for a sleek black column dress, although somehow, she’s managed to make even that look uptight and regimented.

“I agree with Ransom,” Wes says, nodding my way. “You’re looking good, Troublefield,”

“Baxter,” I add with a smile. “And you both clean up pretty nice yourselves.” I give Ransom a wink as I say it.

All around us, formal-clad passengers float between gaming tables like exotic birds, their laughter mixing with the electronic whirl and twirl of slot machines. Although I seriously doubt half these people realize they’re gambling alongside actual murder suspects.

The excitement is contagious for a lot of reasons, but mostly because formal night is about to bleed into the hour we’ve been waiting for—the upcoming Midnight Murder Mingle.

“So, Detective,” Wes says, adjusting his bowtie. “How’s the investigation going?”

“Which one?” Ransom asks, looking far too handsome for my powers of concentration. “The official investigation or my wife’s?”

Tinsley belts out a laugh. “Sorry, Ransom, but we all know which investigation he was referring to.”

“That’s right,” Wes says as he bows my way. “I was talking to the detective on the case.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Well, for starters, I’ve been thinking about the brooch we found at the scene—right next to Brad’s body. It looked like the same rhinestone lipstick brooch Elvie was wearing the night of the murder.”

Ransom nods. “I bagged it for evidence and I’ve been thinking about it, too.” His fingers trace a quick pattern down my back and it makes it nearly impossible to focus on murder.

“Speaking of evidence.” Wes scowls at Ransom. “The security footage that night was useless. The cameras were facing the wrong direction.”

Ransom scowls right back. “I believe it was you who instructed me to have them facing the crowd.”

“And this is the time you decide to listen to me?”

Ransom’s jaw redefines itself. “In the future, allow me to do my job as I see fit.”

“I saw Elvie and Brad arguing that night,” Tinsley cuts in, managing to make the gossip sound like an official report. “Before, well, you know.”

“I saw that, too,” I say, turning to Ransom. “Hey, remember when you mentioned Elvie was making transfers from their joint account? How does that fit with Reed telling us Brad was dipping into the Luscious and Delicious cosmetics account?”

Ransom frowns with a sigh. "It doesn't."

"Exactly," Tinsley pounces. "Something is amiss. And as soon as that final piece clicks, I just know I'm going to solve this case." She shrugs our way. "I've listened to enough of Brad Whipple's podcasts to know how to follow a trail of clues. And what a prize it will be formeout of all of his fans to solve this case. The bragging rights alone are worth the effort."

Ransom ticks his head to the side. "Take all the bragging rights you want. I need this case closed, and fast."

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Wes inches back. “I’m shocked you didn’t admonish her for even trying. Tinsley is the cruise director. You are the professional detective on the case.”

I clear my throat and Wes winces.

“You know what I meant,” he says softly my way.

“Indeed. And I’m with Ransom. This case needs to close like yesterday. It’s really cutting into some serious honeymoon time.” I shoot my handsome hubby a sly look. “Speaking of the case, are you ready to reveal the source who told you about Elvie’s sticky fingers?”

“Soon enough, but not yet,” he says, and I frown at the thought.

Wes tips his head my way. “You married him.”

“Yes, I did.” I waggle my brows at the handsome stud before me. “Lucky,luckyme.”

I’ll wrangle that answer out of him later. Thefunway.

“JACKPOT,” Bess screams so loud she pierces the noise in the casino and causes a woman in a skin-tight gold lamé dress to drop her martini.

“I won, too,” Nettie shouts twice as loud as she jumps up and down.

Wes takes a step that way and grimaces at Nettie’s machine. “I’m sorry, Net. This isn’t a win—I think you broke the one-armed bandit.”

“You can’t tell me I did the same,” Bess says, as her winnings climb to an even thousand dollars and we all let out a collective whoop just as her machine belts out a shrill cry, alerting the entire casino to her win. Soon, everyone in the vicinity is clapping up a storm.

The overhead lights blink a few times just as the announcement bell goes off and a smooth voice comes over the speakers. “The Midnight Murder Mingle will begin shortly in the formal dining room courtesy of the Whispers of the Wicked podcast. All passengers are welcome to join in on the potentially lethal fun. Please join us for a killer buffet that’s to die for.”

A round of ooohs circles the casino.

“That’s our cue,” I say just as Ransom’s phone buzzes in his hand.

He checks the screen and his expression sours beneath the casino’s colorful lights. “The toxicology report is in. I need to get to my office.”

“Wait.” I grab his arm as he leans in to kiss my cheek and catch a whiff of that cologne that makes me weak in the knees. “Why would you run toxicology on Brad? He was stabbed in the back.”

“It’s routine.” The start of a smile curves his lips but doesn’t quite initiate. “And I may have a hunch about something.”

He gives me another quick peck before disappearing into the crowd. And before I can question him on that hunch, his tuxedo has melted into the sea of formal wear.

What the heck was that about?

Is it possible that I’ve been looking at this murder from the wrong angle? After all,

sometimes the most obvious cause of death is just the finishing touch.

In my experience, a killer who goes for a dramatic ending usually leaves a trail of breadcrumbs leading to the real story. Or in this case, perhaps a trail of rhinestone brooches and suspicious bank transfers.

“I can’t believe I won a thousand bucks,” Bess shouts as she pumps her fists into the air.

Poor Nettie looks as if she wants to pump a fist right into her bestie’s face—that or commit a homicide.

But the last thing this ship needs is another murder on its register.

Nope.

It’s time for me to bring Brad Whipple’s killer to justice—and trade a homicide for a honeymoon.

CHAPTER 32

While Trixie’s Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Welcome, wayward wanderers! While our newlyweds are busy testing the room service staff’s discretion—and really, who knew breakfast in bed could be such an athletic event?—let’s unpack today’s tantalizing question.

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Dear Elodie,

I noticed the ship offers a couples mixology class in an intimate setting. The brochure mentions hands-on instruction and exotic ingredients. Is this worth the splurge?

Cocktail Curious

My thirsty thrill seeker,

Intimate is putting it mildly. That private bar setup is like a playground for grown-ups with all those fresh fruits to squeeze, spirits to sample, and ice to properly handle. And don't get me started on the proper technique for shaking versus stirring.

The bartender's counter is surprisingly comfortable (ask me how I know), and those barstools are engineered for more than just sitting. Though I do recommend pacing your taste testing. Last week, a couple got a bit too creative with the garnish tray, and the lime wedges may never recover.

Pro tip: Book the last session of the evening. The mood lighting is better, and the bartender knows when to become conveniently nearsighted. Plus, those cocktail shakers are an excellent way to cover up sound.

Mixing with mischief,

XOXO Elodie

It takes less than two minutes for Bess, Nettie, Tinsley, Wes, and me to boot scoot to

the big midnight shindig we've not-so-patiently been waiting for. And it seems as if the rest of the folks who are here for the podcast cruise have shown up in spades as well.

The formal dining room has transformed into something caught between an elegant soirée and a crime scene—if crime scenes came with ice sculptures and chocolate fountains. Bright yellow caution tape is strewn up all around, and there are even several chalk outlines that lie over the black granite floors, making it look as if a massacre has already occurred.

There's even a murder merch table set up to the side with what looks like every available mug, T-shirt, and tote bag on the planet vying for our attention.

Moody soft rock music mingles with the murmur of conversation and the clink of crystal, while the dim lighting casts shadows across the room that make everyone look either sinister or gorgeous. Sometimes both.

"Would you look at this spread?" Bess says, still riding on the high of that thousand-dollar win. "Good thing I've got an appetite."

"Yeah, you would," Nettie grouches. "And just as I managed to lose mine."

Suffice it to say, as inflated as Bess is, Nettie is deflated equally as much if not more.

"I'm so sorry, Nettie," I say, giving her a quick hug. "If you want, I'll help you organize a class action lawsuit against the ship's casino."

Wes nearly snaps his neck as he turns my way.

"I'm kidding," I say with a little laugh, and Nettie growls in response.

“Face it.” Nettie moans. “I’m a loser.”

“Nettie, no, that’s not true,” I protest her way.

“Don’t you worry about her, Trixie,” Bess says while taking Nettie by the hand. “Come on, hot shot, the only losers around here will be the people who get in line after us at the buffet. Let’s get over there and show them what we’re made of—and how much we can put away. I’m thinking we go in hard and start off with two plates each.”

“I’m starting with three,” Nettie shoots back.

“But you’ve only got two hands,” Bess cries.

“The devil is in the details. I’ve also got two feet,” she grouches back before eyeing a tower of donuts labeled Ring of Evidence. “Donuts! Heaven help my diet.”

“I think your diet was pronounced dead on arrival,” Bess says, already plotting her approach to the Killer Canapés.

The midnight buffet sprawls across several stations, each one more cleverly themed than the last. The Smoking Gun Grill features perfectly seared steaks and flame-kissed seafood—both of which have already arrested my olfactory senses.

It’s the dessert display labeled The Evidence Locker that stops me in my tracks. Elegant black boxes lined with gold trim showcase what might be the most criminally delicious collection of fudge I’ve ever seen.

“Would you look at that?” Bess says, pointing to it. “Each cute little fudge bite has its own clever name and look at those yummy descriptions!”

“Breaking & Entering Fudge with chunks of crushed toffee lurking in dark chocolate,” Nettie reads. “Grand Theft Chocolate with a gooey caramel center that should be illegal in at least three different states.”

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We share a quick laugh.

“First Degree Fudge,” I read. “Oh, look, it actually comes with a warning label about the ghost pepper kick it has.”

“Mmm.” Bess moans. “Premeditated Peanut Butter with swirls of chocolate that permeate like a guilty conscience.” We share another laugh before she reads another one. “Conspiracy to Caramel and Double Indictment—loaded with espresso.”

“I’m in,” I say, picking up one from a platter labeled Criminal Intent with a marbled white and dark chocolate pattern.

We nosh on and nibble them all, but it’s the Beyond a Reasonable Doubt Fudge that truly lives up to its name with five different types of chocolate layered into one perfect bite, topped with gold leaf because apparently even felonious fudge deserves to dress up for formal night.

The table at the center of the scene of the crime, aka the mile-long buffet table is called the Cold Case Collection. It presents an array of chilled delicacies including a massive ice sculpture of handcuffs that’s already drawing the attention of every amateur photographer in the room. But it’s the Death by Chocolate dessert station that’s stealing the show—complete with chalk outline gingerbread cookies and red velvet blood-spattered cupcakes.

The crowd sparkles under the crystal chandeliers in a sea of jewel-toned evening wear while holding champagne flutes close to the vest.

Through the sea of shifting bodies, I spot Elvie and Reed by the Lethal Libations bar. And I can't help but notice that he has his arm around her waist with practiced familiarity as they laugh with another couple.

The champagne in Elvie's glass rivals her bubbling laughter. She looks lovely in a floor-length burgundy gown. Not quite the weeping widow effect, but it looks understated and elegant, as she should. Especially considering the fact her deceased husband had a wandering eye—among other wandering body parts.

I'm guessing she really needed that liquid courage to get through this evening, and perhaps the rest of the cruise. If something happened to Ransom, I couldn't see myself leaving my cabin, let alone entertaining the masses.

Elvie Whipple is a stronger woman than I could ever be in that department.

"Well, it looks to me as if the food is calling." Wes pats his stomach as he looks longingly at the buffet table that seems to stretch from one end of the ship to the other.

"Captain! Captain!" a group of excited passengers call out as they wave and head this way.

Tinsley sniffs. "It looks as if more than the food is calling. You know what you need to do."

"Yup." He gives a mournful sigh at the dessert table. "I know exactly what's expected of me and it's not a donut."

"You can always find a way to involve a donut," I say just as he's mobbed with a crowd of captain-hungry passengers ready to take their selfie game to the next level.

And in a move that I think I'm responsible for, he leads them to the donut display, and soon the entire mob is posing with the captainanda donut. As if women didn't already find Wes delicious enough.

"And just like that, the cheese stands alone," I muse to myself while scanning the room for my suspects.

"Not tonight, it doesn't," Tinsley says as she stands shoulder to shoulder with me. "I'm not leaving your side."

"Just my luck."

Becky Lee glides past us in an emerald silk gown, towing a distinguished-looking man who has a scowl that could sink a lifeboat—or a marriage.

"Trixie! Tinsley!" She gives a cheery wave as she makes her way over with the sourpuss in tow. "Hello, ladies," she says sweetly. Her hair is pulled up into a messy bun and she's donned a pink rhinestone brooch in the shape of a flamingo that stands out against the verdant color of her frock. "This is my husband, Patrick." She nods to the man by her side and he offers a staged smile.

"Charmed to meet you," he says in a tone that suggests anything but. "Come on, Beck. The buffet is getting cold. Do you want to play the part of a social butterfly or stuff your face?" He steers her away and his fingers dig into her arm enough to leave white impressions against her flesh.

"Well, he's delightful," Tinsley mutters.

"Like a root canal without anesthetic," I add. "Did you see how he grabbed her?"

She nods. "I bet it's not the first time he's done that."

“Or sadly the last,” I say grimly. I’m about to suggest we hit the buffet ourselves and help Bess and Nettie put a dent in that thing when a blonde hurricane nearly knocks right into us.

“Girls.” Elodie materializes before us in a swirl of pink chiffon. “I see we all survived another formal night. And now it’s time to make some questionable decisions with questionable company.”

“Speaking of questionable decisions.” My shoulders do a little shimmy. “How was your haunted house inspection?”

She waves me off with a perfectly manicured hand. “It never happened. Apparently, he’s taken. And happily so.” She rolls her eyes at the thought of anyone finding happiness without her. “Now where’s the vodka? I’m off the clock and demand to get properly pickled. Besides, there has to be another mysterious stranger here somewhere, looking for a close encounter of the horizontal kind.” She darts off just as pink and red stars explode overhead and Sassy materializes in her wake.

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“Ooh.” Sassy shimmies her shoulders as well as she inspects the ample buffet, already being replenished by the waitstaff. “Oh, how I miss chocolate fountains.” She sighs. “Although not as much as I miss that leather-clad ghost hunter.” She sighs twice as hard in the leather-clad ghost hunter’s direction.

“What do you mean miss?” I practically mouth the words as she glides down next to me. “I thought you were stalking Reed,” I whisper, but Tinsley catches it anyway.

“Why would I do that?” Tinsley snips as she rocks back on her heels to get a better look at me. “He’s so not my type. Besides, you heard the blonde bimbo in pink.” She nods in the direction Elodie took off in. “He’s happily taken.”

“Tell me about it.” Sassy blows out an exasperated breath and releases a galaxy worth of stars in her wake.

“Taken by whom?” I ask, not bothering to lower my voice this time. I squint in his direction and he still has an arm wrapped around Elvie’s waist as if they were the couple in question.

“By the woman of the hour,” Sassy growls in their direction, and the chandeliers tremble ominously in response.

“What?” I shake my head in disbelief.

We watch as Reed whispers something in Elvie’s ear, before his lips brush against her cheek in what could easily be mistaken for a kiss. He steps away and melts into the crowd as Elvie drifts toward the observation windows all by her lonesome.

Her champagne glass may be empty, but her expression is chock-full of secrets.

I make my beeline toward her with Tinsley and my invisible sparkler of a ghost in tow.

After all, nothing says Midnight Murder Mingle quite like confronting a widow about her new romance—especially when that romance might have started before her husband stopped breathing.

CHAPTER33

The observation windows frame the darkness, the kind of onyx night that only exists at sea at midnight.

Elvie stands alone and her reflection looks like a ghost against the void beyond the glass. Her burgundy gown glows sanguine and sinister in the shadows.

“A penny for your thoughts?” I say as Tinsley and I come upon her—and, well, Sassy by floating proxy, too.

Elvie jumps nearly a foot in the air as if we just fired a starting pistol.

“Oh.” She clutches at her chest once she sees us. “Geez. You nearly scared the ghost right out of me.”

“Ooh, that would be fun.” Sassy wiggles as she says it and unleashes an entire sea of pink stars in the process. “I can’t wait until Elvie gets to Paradise. We always got along so great. Although maybe she should wait until after we solve her husband’s murder.”

“Sorry about the scare.” I wince as I say it. Believe me, I want her alive when and if

we squeeze a confession out of her. And by we, I mean me.

“Not to worry.” Elvie is quick to wave the idea away. “I was just getting lost in thought when I really should be getting lost in the party.”

“And it’s quite the party,” I tell her.

“The event is stunning,” Tinsley says, tipping her ear toward the woman. “Although I question whoever decided to name the shrimp cocktail Evidence in Cold Storage.”

The three of us share a laugh—four if you count Sassy.

“That was Reed’s idea.” Elvie’s smile wavers for a moment. “He has a particular talent for clever wordplay.”

Sassy sighs. “He’s pretty clever in other ways, too.”

I’d rather not know. Unless, of course, they have to do with wielding a knife.

“Elvie, I really want to extend my condolences once a—” I begin, but Tinsley rudely cuts me off at the pass.

“Mrs. Whipple, could you explain your whereabouts on the night in question? Aka the night of the murder?”

I suck in a quick breath and resist the urge not to elbow her in the ribs.

Oh, what the heck. I elbow her not-so-gently. “Tinsley, this isn’t an interrogation. Besides, we already know where she was.” I offer a meager smile to the poor woman before us who looks as stunned as she does peeved. “She was speaking with Reed.”

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Was she? Oh, good grief. I have no idea where Elvie was at the time of the murder. Heck, I don't even know the time of the murder.

"Actually, I was speaking with Reed." Elvie shrugs and looks just as stupefied by my lucky guess as I am.

"Well, there you go," I say, slightly bowing to the woman before me in the burgundy dress. "I'm sorry for Tinsley's crass behavior." I turn to the crass woman in question and whisper, "Some of us prefer proper procedures."

"Some of us prefer solving cases," she whisper-shouts back, to my horror.

"Ladies," Sassy snips, despite the fact only one lady here is privy to her haunted vocals. "You're both pretty good crime fighters. Now, can we please focus on the suspicious widow?" She wrinkles her nose at her old friend. "If she did it, I say we shake her hand and call it a night. I'd hate to see her rotting away in some prison just because she married someone so rotten."

I nod her way because frankly, I agree.

"Elvie." I soften my voice as I look at the woman. "I'm sorry things have been so tragic for you on this trip. But I am glad that you're surrounded by so many supporters in your time of need. Especially Reed. I mean, he was Brad's best friend."

"Thank you, Trixie." She tips her head to the side but doesn't look as convinced by that last fact as I am. "Reed has been my staunch supporter for some time now."

“Oh? Before the murder?” I ask.

“Heavens yes.” Her eyes enlarge for a moment as if that were a given. “The man has many talents, and making a woman feel better is definitely one of them.”

“I can vouch for that.” Sassy blows on her nails then rubs them on her glowing dress.

“I’m glad he’s been there for you,” I tell her and I mean it to my core. There are few worse feelings than that of having a disloyal spouse. “I hear among his talents is noticing when money goes missing from accounts.” Okay, I couldn’t help myself. But it’s Elvie’s fault for practically rolling out the red carpet to that one.

Her champagne glass freezes halfway to her lips. “Pardon me?”

Tinsley scoffs in my direction. “What my colleague means to say is that we have evidence of financial irregularities.”

Oh my word, why in the world did I let her tag along?

I shake my head at Elvie with an emphatic vigor. “We are not in any way investigating your husband’s case.”

And now we can add lying to my long list of indiscretions.

“Is that so?” Elvie says with a dark laugh. “Oh honey, if you weren’t, you’d be the only two people in the room. I hate to break it to you, but this entire ship is trying to track down my husband’s killer.”

A moment pulses by as the chatter from the room fills the void.

“How about you?” I ask with a shrug. “Are you trying to solve it as well?”

Sassy zooms in as if she, too, wants to hear the answer.

“No,” Elvie says defiantly as she glares out at the water. “I wanted him out of my life. Albeit this was one scenario I didn’t think of.”

“I knew she didn’t do it,” Sassy says with more than a hint of relief in her voice.

I’m not that as easily convinced.

“Elvie”—I take a careful step in—“we know Brad was dipping into the Luscious and Delicious accounts.”

Her mouth opens and closes. “Oh, well”—she tosses her hands in the air—“at this point, so what? Yes, Brad was helping himself to my money, and do you want to know why? To help fund his affair with some floozy.” Her voice breaks as she says it.

Both Tinsley and I recoil just hearing the pain behind her words.

“I’m so sorry,” I say.

“Oh, don’t be,” she growls. “You know, I used to have this assistant. Her name was Sassy.” She gives a mournful laugh as she says it. “Well, that was what we all called her. And it’s during stressful times like these that I really miss her most.”

“Aww,” Sassy coos at the thought, patting her hand to her chest. And if I’m not mistaken, tears are rolling down her cheeks.

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“If Sassy were here”—Elvie continues—“I bet she’d tell me to put my chin up. That man cheated on me.” She sighs hard. “And yet despite the dirty details of our rocky marriage, I’m still grieving for him. I’m nothing but a chump.”

“No,” I tell her with a heartfelt sigh. “Elvie, we can’t control who we love or who we don’t. The heart decides that—and, well, sometimes it makes no sense. But despite the fact, the wound is still fresh.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” she says, looking back into the onyx abyss of the sea. “I’m grieving, and yet I feel like I’ve been entertaining guests at a party that refuses to end.”

Tinsley softens her stance. “That is basically the definition of a cruise. You summed it up nicely. Elvie, did you take that knife to Brad’s back because you were in a rage because of the affair?”

I glance at the ceiling.

Subtlety is clearly not her strong suit.

CHAPTER34

“Oh, heavens no.” Elvie practically laughs off the idea of stabbing her husband in the back in a rage-induced fury.

I wouldn’t have laughed it off. In fact, I would have done it. Heck, the time served might have even been worth the effort. A cheating ex can drive a woman to murder.

It's been done before.

But despite the fact, I shoot Tinsley a look for even insinuating it—so clearly, that is.

Elvie gives a wistful shake of the head. “I’m not into blood and gore, despite the fact I was his sidekick for that wicked podcast.” She rolls her eyes at the thought. “Besides, I found out about the affair a year ago, and, well, I confided in Reed and then decided to have an affair of my own.” Her eyes close a moment as Tinsley and I exchange a glance. “I couldn’t take Brad’s betrayal anymore. And Reed has always been so kind. I guess I was primed for it.”

Wow, I did not see that coming.

“Yesterday at the meeting”—I say, ignoring Tinsley’s raised finger—“Reed mentioned that financial disputes could cause their fair share of homicides. And you added, ‘Especially when large sums of money go missing.’ You were speaking from experience, weren’t you?”

Elvie lifts her chin. “Yes. After I discovered Brad’s theft from my corporation, I decided to do some creative financing of my own.”

“Define creative,” Tinsley demands.

“Let the woman finish,” I say.

“By stealing from myself.” Elvie sighs toward the ceiling. “From my personal savings. It’s not a crime. The amounts weren’t large enough to worry about flags. Banks these days want to know everything—where money comes from, where it goes. I already told the ship’s detective as much. I wanted that money in my private account.”

I gasp softly. So that was Ransom's source—Elvie herself.

“What about this Sassy person?” Tinsley asks in haste. “Is she on the ship? Maybeshe's mistress. Or his killer!”

“Not possible.” Elvie shakes her head. “She was neither the mistress nor the killer. Plus, she's dead.”

“That I am.” Sassy nods my way. “But Elvie is right. If I were here, in person with Elvie, I would have made her pamper herself each day until this trip came to a conclusion. And then I'd make sure she took care of herself once she got home as well. She's such a sweet soul. She doesn't deserve any of this.”

Tinsley turns my way. “So, I guess Sassy is out of the running as far as the mistress and the killer goes.” She looks at Elvie. “Do you know who the mistress is?”

She shakes her head. “Whoever she is, she remains a mystery to me. Brad covered his tracks well enough. But there were still plenty of clues for me to discover his wayward dalliance. I found the bill to his business credit card. It was loaded with hotel stays—receipts to lingerie shops, jewelry stores. And that was just the beginning. If Sassy were still alive, I'm sure she would have gotten to the bottom of it. But I was too hurt to dig any deeper. I've spent the last year trying to figure out what to do. In the beginning, I was secretly hoping it was a passing phase, but these last six months proved me wrong. I should have left immediately. I came up with so many excuses not to like the fact sometimes the devil you know is better than the one you don't. Because divorce is expensive. Because... well, I've finally run out of excuses. Sassy would have murdered them both by now.” She chuckles to herself and Sassy laughs along with her. Most likely because it's true. “She didn't care for him after we found out about the affair. And ironically, he never cared for her to begin with.”

I glance at the pretty poltergeist with a flair for all things vintage, and she nods, affirming Elvie's words.

That's right. Sassy mentioned as much.

"Why is that?" I ask. "Why didn't Brad care for Sassy?"

"Oh, she won't know," Sassy brushes it off. "Neither of us could figure it out."

"Because she looked exactly like his first wife." Elvie doesn't hesitate with the answer and manages to stun both the living and the dead into submission. "Of course, Sassy wondered the same thing, but I couldn't tell her the truth. It would have made her uneasy. Brad's first wife left him because he was unfaithful to her. But she was the love of his life—the one who got away—even in marriage. He said he'd regret cheating on her until his dying day." She turns back to the darkness beyond the window. "We both had regrets. I was the one he cheated with."

Tinsley, Sassy, and I all gasp in unison.

"That's terrible," Sassy says.

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“Well, you know what they say.” Tinsley folds her arms. “You lose him how you got him.”

“Tinsley,” I hiss at the chestnut-haired menace. “She lost him to death.”

“No, it’s okay.” Elvie lifts a hand. “She’s right. I had lost him to the affair long before he died. And that’s the real reason I was too stubborn to let him go with something simple like a divorce. I knew I’d hear that from people—especially his first wife.” She scans the crowd. “Although his first wife isn’t on this cruise.” Her eyes bounce from one passenger to the next. “But a killer is.” She nods at the two of us. “And it isn’t me. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a party to attend.”

She drifts toward the buffet and is accosted by a jovial crowd long before she ever picks up a plate.

“I believe Elvie,” I say mournfully. “Which means we’re still hunting a killer.”

“Maybe we’ve been bested,” Tinsley says as she looks out at the crowd. “Maybe they’re too clever for us.”

“Speak for yourself.”

Though in my experience, the most dangerous suspects are the ones who think they’re too clever to get caught.

The waitstaff refreshes the table laden with donuts and that sugar-glazed display manages to snag Tinsley’s attention.

“Well, I’m going to load up on carbs,” she says. “I suggest you do the same. I’m assuming an aerobic workout will be required of you as soon as you get back to your honeymoon suite.” She takes off before I can answer.

She’s not wrong.

“Ooh,” Sassy gives a ghostly moan of approval. “I’m with her. Why don’t we do a little carb-loading ourselves? You need to keep your energy up for your performance later tonight, and I’d like to tuck away a few crullers for the watch party.”

I’m about to tell her exactly what she can watch and where—and it has nothing to do with Ransom and me when a handsome devil with a thicket full of dark hair strides by.

The scene from the night of the murder comes back to me in one violent snatch, and suddenly I see Brad splayed on the floor again with that rhinestone brooch lying next to him.

A thought hits me like a freight train.

“Reed,” I say, breathless, as I jump in front of the man and grab ahold of his wrist as if he were about to fly away. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, anything.” He blinks back, looking caught off guard.

“Who was Brad’s mistress? You must have some idea.”

He ticks his head to the side. “I really wish I knew. And if I did, I wouldn’t hesitate to tell you. The only thing I do know is what Elvie and I found on his credit card receipts.”

“Oh, right,” I say. “She mentioned the hotels, the lingerie, and jewelry shops.”

“That’s how we caught him.” He shakes his head. “Sadly, he didn’t even shower Elvie with those things.”

“Brad Whipple was a mouse, not a man,” Sassy says with as much—well, for a lack of a better word—sass, as she can muster. “I’d hang him by his cookies if the jerk were still alive.”

Reed gives a robust laugh. “I’d do the same, Trixie.” He pauses to inspect me. “You know, you don’t realize it, but you just did an uncanny impersonation of a woman who I hold near and dear to my heart. I was going to make her mine for all of time, but unfortunately, she passed away not long ago.”

Sassy gasps and I quickly let go of his wrist before she says something like—

“You’re the love of my life, Reed Williams,” she’s quick to profess.

Like that.

He closes his eyes as if he heard, despite the fact I’m no longer aiding in the supernatural effort.

“Well, thank you for telling me what you can about his mistress,” I say to the man. “I hope you have a great rest of the night.”

“You as well.” He takes a step away before backtracking. “Actually, there was one more odd detail. Brad wasn’t just showering his mistress with expensive gifts. He was gifting her an education. If you can believe it, he was paying for nursing school.” He shakes his head as he walks away.

“Nursing school?” Sassy looks stumped by the news, as do I. “Why does that sound familiar?”

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“I think—” I scan the crowd—“Becky Lee mentioned her sister was in nursing school.” I rush over to the murder merch table in hopes of finding Becky Lee herself, but she’s nowhere to be found.

Instead, I run my fingers along the rows and rows of merchandise with clever sayings all lined up likedarlingducks in a row—right up until my fingers land on something hard and sharp.

I look down and a breath gets caught in my throat.

Not only does Becky Lee Darling sell tote bags and mugs—she sells brooches, too.

CHAPTER35

While Trixie’s Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Attention, amorous adventurers! While our detective duo conducts their own version of port of call inspection—and honestly, who knew ship security could involve so many private demonstrations?—let’s dive into today’s steamy inquiry.

Dear Elodie,

The cruise director mentioned something about a couples paint and sip class in the ship’s art gallery after hours. My husband thinks it sounds tame, but I’ve noticed they advertiselive models. Should we sign up?

Artistically Aroused

My creative cutie,

Tame is the last word I'd use for that particular evening activity. The art gallery after dark is like a private studio for exploring the human form. And trust me, those live models are very dedicated to their craft.

The easel placement offers surprisingly intimate angles, and that chaise lounge has inspired more artistic expression than the Louvre. Though I do recommend bringing an extra shirt. Body painting wasn't officially on the curriculum until I suggested it, and that paint can be—well, enthusiastically applied.

Painting passionately,

XOXO Elodie

Trixie

The thing about murder investigations is that half the time the killer might as well be wearing a name tag and waving a flag. But we get so caught up looking for complicated answers that we miss the simple truth strutting right past us in high heels. Once again, the we would be me.

Tonight, however, all those pieces are finally clicking into place.

I spot Becky Lee Darling slipping into a shadowed corner of the lounge, far away from the festivities here at the Midnight Murder Mingle being held in honor of those who showed up for the Whispers of the Wicked podcast cruise.

She's all alone, staring off toward the empty seats deeper in the formal dining room, just standing there like a lady in waiting. A lady unwittingly waiting for me.

Perfect timing.

My fingers still tingle from touching that rhinestone brooch at her murder merch table. And although there wasn't one that was an exact match for the one found next to Brad's body, they looked very similar, albeit in the shape of guns, deer stalker hats, and skulls and crossbones.

Sassy swoops in, her countenance glowing brighter than the chandeliers that are hardly giving off light. I get that they're going for a moody mysterious theme, but there are some of us who can't drive at night, let alone walk a straight line in the dark. And I fall squarely in that category.

Getting old is fun.

"Becky Lee?" Sassy shakes her head and a spray of baby pink stars light up the vicinity like sparklers. "I don't understand any of this."

"Hang onto your victory roll," I tell her as we speed toward the woman. "Because I'm hoping to make things as clear as crystal."

Becky Lee turns my way and does a double take. "Oh, Trixie?" She squints out at me. "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

I clear my throat. "Yes, actually, I was just commenting on how clear the crystal is. The housekeeping staff goes above and beyond in every capacity."

"That they do." She gives a little laugh. Her bun gleams in this dim light, more silver than it is brunette tonight, and she's tossed that purple knit cardigan over her teal-colored gown. "And I've appreciated every single animal they've fashioned out of a towel for me," Becky Lee goes on. "In fact, I've saved them all and lined them up on the sofa in our cabin. My husband thinks it's silly." She sighs hard as she says it and

suddenly my defenses go down.

Sassy leans my way. “I think her husband is silly.”

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I nod because I happen to agree. But murder isn't silly, and I certainly hope I'm wrong about where I'm going next.

"How are things with your husband?" I ask as I approach, keeping my voice gentle. The puzzle pieces are clicking into place so fast they're snapping, crackling, and popping off in my head.

"Fine," she says as she quickly wipes a tear from her cheek, one that I hadn't even noticed. Darn lighting. "I was just thinking about Patrick, about what the future might hold for the two of us. We're not perfect, but we've had some pretty great moments."

My heart aches just hearing it.

"I could say the same about my ex and me," I confess. "Although I did the right thing by dumping him before he gave me some exotic disease from all of his extra-marital trysts. He was a piece of work, and still is, but I can think of at least two decent things that came from our union. We share two kids. And you know what? As soon as I found out about his sexual lunacy, I didn't even stay for them. I left for me. It was the safest and the sanest thing for my heart and my soul." I nod her way, hoping she'll connect the dots in her own situation. No woman should be mistreated by a man. That's not what the Good Lord put us here for. Far from it. "My ex wasn't winning any awards for husband of the year."

"Patrick isn't winning any awards either. And believe me, I've been thinking about that talk we had outside the ice cream parlor with Bess and Nettie."

I nod. "You mentioned that you already had a solo bank account." I watch her face

carefully. “You’ve been planning to leave him for some time, haven’t you?”

Her eyes widen a notch. “Yes, I think I already told you that. But they were just thoughts, nothing more than fantasies. I mean, there are so many logistics to doing something like that. It’s such a scary step—mostly it’s an expensive one.”

“Reed mentioned that someone was stealing from the haunted house venture he shared with Brad.”

She squints my way once again, but it has nothing to do with the dim lighting this time.

I lean in. “Would you happen to know who was dipping into the funds?”

Her mouth falls open and she suddenly can’t seem to catch her breath.

Sassy claps her hands and hoots. “Judging by the dumbstruck look on her face, I say cuff her.”

I wrinkle my nose at the flirty phantasm because I don’t make it a practice to travel with handcuffs. Elodie, on the other hand, most likely has them on her person at all times. Come to think of it, she’s probably cuffed as many people as Ransom has, if not more. My money is on more.

“You know”—Becky Lee wags a finger at me—“I do remember Brad saying that it was pretty easy for him to take a loan from his real estate venture. I guess that’s one mystery solved. I mean, the guy is dead. There’s not a thing we can do about it now.”

“You heard him admit to that?” I ask, amused.

“I did. I mean, I didn’t physically see him make the withdrawals, but I heard the man

say it with my own ears. Reed must know that Brad was the one helping himself. Who else could have done it?" She bites down on her lip, and judging by the way her lips are curving, I'd bet all the chips in the casino that she's biting down on a smile.

"Becky Lee." My voice is soft once again. "You did some organizational work for Brad, didn't you? Some light accounting? Elvie mentioned it." I take a step closer. "It was you who took the money from that account, wasn't it?"

"There's the zinger." Sassy howls so loud it's as if she's cheering me on with a supernatural megaphone.

So nice yet so distracting.

Becky Lee gasps before glancing over her shoulder toward the exit. "Trixie, please stop."

"Don't you dare," Sassy snips my way. "We're getting to the good part."

The good part indeed. More like the deadly part.

"Is that when the affair began?" I press on. "Why in the world were you sleeping with Brad Whipple?" A thought hits me and I suck in a quick breath. "Was it to avoid jail time?"

A sickly moan escapes from her. "Oh, Trixie." Her eyes trace out my features. "I didn't want to do it. Don't you see? Patrick drove me to it! The man is a beast, Trixie. He's cruel and mean, and I can't do anything right around him. Do you know what it's like to wake up each and every day and have everything be all your fault?" She tosses her hands in exasperation. "And don't you dare answer that." Her speech grows pressured and her eyes grow wild. "I've seen your husband, Trixie. He's not hard to look at, and he treats you like gold. Heck, he treated me like gold when we

crossed paths.” She growls in frustration. “Yes, I worked for Brad. The guy was a slime. He was always coming onto me. And after helping myself to his haunted piggy bank a few times, he caught me.” She shrugs. “I had no choice but to do whatever he wanted. I pretended that I wanted it, too.”

I nod. “But what you really wanted was his money.”

CHAPTER36

“Correction, it’s what I needed,” Becky Lee Darling growls at me as we stand in a darkened corner of the formal dining room.

Just beyond us is a cast of thousands as they chatter away and nibble on the midnight buffet.

“Trixie, you practically said that I needed the money yourself,” she goes on. “Besides, Brad and Elvie were loaded. They didn’t even notice that money was missing. At least not at first. And, well, after Brad and I started up, I wasn’t stealing anymore. He was giving it to me voluntarily. Once he knew how bad my situation was, he wanted to help.”

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I shake my head at her. “He wanted to help himself to you.”

“Wait a minute.” Sassy inches back. “I caught Brad stealing.” Her eyes glow my way. “He knew I was going to tell Elvie. And I would have had I not succumbed to some invisible peanut I inhaled.”

My mouth contorts as I try to piece it together.

“Trixie, I had to do whatever it took,” Becky Lee pleads as she begins to back away. The chatter of conversation is nearly drowned out by the music dominating this empty area of the dining room. I doubt a living soul could hear us. And I know for a fact at least one dead soul is listening in.

I scoff at the woman before me. “You sure did do whatever it took.”

“I had to!” The words explode from her. “Look, I don’t care for orange jumpsuits, Trixie. And I’m trapped in the world’s worst marriage. But I won’t be for long. Brad helped me amass a decent nest egg. And I’m getting my act together, I swear.”

“In nursing school?” I ask as I tip my head her way.

Becky Lee freezes solid.

“Your sister isn’t taking those classes, is she?” I say, inching toward her. “You are. You were Brad’s mistress and you kept that up so he wouldn’t turn you in. He was blackmailing you.”

A sickly sound escapes her throat, something between a growl and a sob. Her bun has started to come undone, making her look wild around the edges. Like a cornered animal deciding whether to flee or fight. My guess is, she's about to attempt to do both.

"You don't understand," she hisses as she sways on her feet. "He promised to help me escape, to start over. Then he threatened to tell Patrick everything unless I kept?—"

"Kept sleeping with him," Sassy finishes with disgust. "What a prize."

I inch back, studying Becky Lee for a moment. "He was a prize you didn't want. It was getting too dangerous. You were flying too close to the sun. And with nursing school paid for, you didn't need him anymore. And that's why you killed him." My shoulders bounce as if I just spewed common knowledge. "But why something so violent? I wouldn't have pegged you for someone who would knife a person in the back."

That toxicology report of Ransom's hits me like a lightning bolt.

"Oh, Becky Lee," I groan hard. "You didn't plan on stabbing him, did you?" The night of the murder flashes through my mind in jags. "You were serving drinks that night right before the party."

"No—" She shakes her head. "You're getting the details mixed up."

"It was you, all right. You gave Brad and Elvie those glasses with Killer King and Killer Queen written on them. Oh my word, you tried to poison him first, didn't you?" It comes out scolding—as it should. "I remember him sweating and coughing."

She flinches and I know I've struck gold.

"What did you use?" I ask. "Let me rephrase that. Which poison didn't get the job done?"

"Tetrahydrozoline," she says lower than a whisper as the look of defeat sweeps across her face.

"Oh wow." My fingers rise to my lips. "Eye drops?"

Sassy gleams like a flash of lightning. "She did it! You got a confession out of her."

Not really. He didn't die from poisoning as far as I know.

"Yes, eye drops," Becky Lee snips sharp and loud as she goes from defeated to an all-out rage. "But they weren't working."

"Oh, they would have worked at the right dose," I muse. "I've seen it done before, right on this ship." An entire litany of dark memories flits through my mind. "But that kind of poisoning takes time to initiate. It wasn't working fast enough for you, so you took matters into your own hands. You took that knife from the display table and you finished the job yourself."

"I was desperate," she cries, and her voice cracks. "He was going to tell Patrick everything. He said he was going to ruin everything for me!"

"Just like Sassy Forenza almost ruined everything when she found those mysterious bank transfers?" I ask, and both Becky Lee and Sassy freeze solid. "The two of you killed her to protect your secret, didn't you? Your dirty little secret and his."

"What?" Sassy lands right next to me and her features turn sharp and angry.

“I didn’t kill her.” Becky Lee’s hands fly in the air as if it were a stickup. “He told me all about it. He did it. He acted alone, but he said because I knew I was culpable as well if I ever told anyone. Trixie, you have to believe me, Brad was an expert at getting what he wanted.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I say. “How did he kill her?”

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“Yeah,” Sassy says, affronted by the fact she was killed at all—as she should be. “How did the weasel land me toes up in the morgue?” She straightens for a moment. “More like, how did he launch me into Paradise where I’m living my best life—even if it is my afterlife.”

I shrug her way. It’s nice to know she’s having a good time.

“Oh, you won’t believe it,” Becky Lee pants, glancing around at a manic pace. “He put peanut oil in her lip gloss!”

Sassy gasps. “But I’m allergic to peanuts.”

I shoot her a look and she gasps twice as hard.

“That arrogant—” An entire litany of expletives rips from her as the lights flicker in the room and something akin to a jag of lightning goes off overhead.

The crowd screams, then quickly reverts to ooohs and aahs. Obviously, they think it’s a part of the evening’s dramatics.

“He knew about her allergy,” Becky Lee insists. “Elvie made sure everyone knew to keep peanuts away from her. Brad figured it was the perfect way to make her death look like an accident.”

“That lying, cheating, murdering—” Sassy’s rage makes every chandelier in the room shiver and quiver. “I knew something was off about those accounts, but I never imagined he’d go this far to cover it up.”

“I made sure Brad didn’t tell anyone our dirty little secrets.” Becky Lee lunges suddenly, snatching a knife from the table behind her. A butter knife, but still. I’m assuming it could do enough damage in the wrong hands. Namely hers. “And I can’t let you tell anyone either.”

“Watch out!” Sassy screams as Becky Lee slashes her way toward me. I do my best to jump out of the line of fire just as Sassy bulldozes her way right through Becky Lee, and oddly enough it causes her to stumble.

“What was that?” Becky Lee grunts as she regains her footing and darts off into the crowd. I take off after her with my heels clicking against the floor like thunder.

“Stop her,” I shout as she barrels toward the buffet, and what few people manage to hear me turn in my direction.

Thankfully, Bess and Nettie happen to be noshing on a couple of chocolate eclairs right next to that mountain of donuts as Becky Lee zooms past them.

“We’re on it,” Bess shouts, chucking her éclair into the air and trying to cut Becky Lee off at the pass. But Becky Lee veers sideways, sending a rather stunning tower of donuts flying to the ceiling.

“Not on my watch,” Nettie howls as she dives to save a chocolate-glazed cruller and causes a chain reaction that sends everything from the Felon’s Feast filet mignon to that Evidence in Cold Storage shrimp platter flying.

But it’s the fact it’s raining donuts that seems to have captured the crowd’s attention. And knowing this crowd, I completely understand why.

“My precious crullers,” Nettie wails as the deep-fried pastries roll across the floor like sugary tumbleweeds.

More screams ignite, and shrieks of terror fill the room as Wes tries to call everyone to order.

Becky Lee races past the chocolate fountain, knocking it sideways, and sends a wave of liquid chocolate splashing across the floor. And just like that, an impromptu slip-and-slide is born that sends several guests spinning—and, well, licking, too.

Becky Lee races toward the exit, but Wes blocks her path. Then in an acrobatic feat worthy of the circus, she hops onto the buffet table and traverses platters of antipasto and mac and cheese alike before attempting to dive right through the massive ice sculpture fashioned to look like handcuffs.

But she doesn't dive right through them. Instead, she dives partially through them as her rear end lodges through one of the frozen cuffs.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she squawks, stuck halfway through the icy restraints like a cork in a champagne bottle. Her legs kick uselessly behind her, while the front half of her dangles through the sculpture.

The room goes from terrified screams to rip-roaring laughter in three seconds flat.

"Well"—Nettie says, out of breath, as she staggers up next to me with a donut in each hand—"I guess you could say she put herself on ice."

A loud snap goes off as the icy handcuff gives way, sending Becky Lee sliding down the buffet table face-first, before landing in the chocolate river as she bobsleds her way toward the exit and right into Ransom Baxter's shiny black Italian leather shoes.

"She did it," I shout as I dart that way. "She confessed to killing Brad," I say and the room lights up with gasps.

“What?” Elvie stomps her way over and growls at the woman covered in chocolate on the floor. “How could you? That man adored you!”

“I’m sorry,” I say to Elvie. “But he adored her so much he made her his mistress.”

More gasps ensue, the loudest of which is coming from Patrick Darling, Becky Lee’s donkey of a husband.

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Ransom pulls out his cuffs to arrest her just as Wes steps in and grabs him by the wrist.

“Don’t even think about it, buddy,” Wes growls just as an army of security guards storm the lounge and Wes instructs them to haul Becky Lee away instead.

“Wait,” I pant as I pull Ransom close. “She was abused. I want to make sure she gets a decent lawyer. And in the least, a decent psychiatrist.”

Ransom gives a solemn nod. “I’ll make sure of it myself.”

“Thank you,” I practically mouth the words.

“All right,” Wes says, looking sternly at Ransom. “You’re coming with me.” He turns my way. “You, too, Trixie.”

Before I can say anything, Elodie rushes into the room and right to my side.

“What did I miss?” she pants while craning her neck past me at the masses who happen to be rapt at attention.

“Wes is taking Ransom and me somewhere,” I say, nodding to the captain. “Where are we going?”

“To the honeymoon suite,” he says without hesitation, causing Elodie to coo and wiggle her shoulders suggestively as only Elodie can.

“The three of you? Perfectly kinky,” she purrs. “Can I watch?”

“You wouldn’t be the first,” I grunt.

I’m about to let Wes lead the way just as a spray of miniature stars illuminates to my right, and I turn to see Sassy gifting Reed a sultry kiss on the lips. And oddly enough, it looks as if he’s kissing her back.

Sassy kicks up a heel as the smooch seems to go on forever before she floats up toward the ceiling. She turns my way and blows me a kiss as well.

“Enjoy that hot hunk of a man, Trixie Troublefield Baxter,” she calls out with a wave. And just as I blow her a kiss right back, she up and disappears in a shower of pink and red stars.

I pull Ransom in close.

Enjoying this hot hunk of a man is exactly what I plan on doing next.

CHAPTER 37

While Trixie’s Away, the Ship Will Play—The Elodie Edition

Farewell, my faithful pleasure seekers! As our cruise approaches England (and our newlyweds have finally retreated to their honeymoon suite once again to indulge in their extended security briefing), I think your temporary love guru here will sign off for the duration of the trip.

I’m happy to report that Trixie and Ransom have thoroughly investigated every possible romantic venue this ship has to offer. From the private hot tub to the midnight buffet, from the secluded deck chairs to that suspiciously stable balance

beam in the fitness center, they've left no stone unturned in their quest for evidence.

Speaking of evidence, the cleaning staff would like to thank them for finally leaving their suite long enough for a proper tidying. Though the mysterious handprints on the balcony glass may need extra attention. And someone should probably explain to the room service staff that those weren't actual crime scene outlines on the sheets.

But before I go, one final piece of advice for all you lovers at sea—life is short, love is long, and cruise ship beds are surprisingly durable. Make the most of every moment, every sunset, and especially every “do not disturb” sign.

As for me, I hear there's yet another rather handsome ghost hunter who might need some paranormal activity investigated. A girl can't let Trixie have all the fun, can she?

Sailing seductively into the sunset,

XOXO Elodie

P.S. Trixie, my love, the blog is all yours again. And I must say, you've given new meaning to the term “all hands on deck.” Bravo, my seductive star student. Bravo. Who knew solving crimes could be so steamy?

Me. That's who.

Trixie

Bess, Nettie, Wes, Elodie, Ransom, and I barely make it three steps out of the formal dining room when Tinsley materializes in front of us as if she's been summoned by the sound of handcuffs clicking.

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“What happened?” she demands, eyeing the chocolate-covered chaos behind us.
“Why is Becky Lee being escorted away in handcuffs?”

“My wife’s investigation has led to yet another arrest,” Ransom doesn’t hesitate to spill the news—and in the sweetest way.

I will never stop swooning over this man.

“Becky Lee is our killer,” I say to Tinsley without missing a beat. “She just confessed.”

“What?” Tinsley squawks. “I step away for ten minutes to deal with some ridiculous anonymous complaint about improper sprinkle distribution at the donut station, and you solve the entire murder?”

“Don’t feel too bad,” Bess chides. “Some people think donuts are pretty important business, too.” She nods at Nettie. “Case in point, your anonymous complainer.”

Tinsley’s hands ball up in fists as she gives a frustrated shriek in Nettie’s direction.

“You missed a great chase scene,” Nettie is quick to inform her as if that makes anything better. “And a chocolate fountain casualty. But don’t worry, I managed to save three donuts.” She pats her stomach as evidence of their safekeeping.

“It was an even dozen and you know it,” Bess says, linking arms with her bestie, and we all share a quick laugh as Wes leads us down the hall with both Ransom and Elodie striding by my side.

“Where are you all going?” Tinsley asks, falling into step with our growing parade.

“To the honeymoon suite,” Wes announces. “Where I plan to lock these two up until we dock. Maybe that way we can finish this cruise without any more homicides.”

“Very funny,” I say without a modicum of humor. Even though he’s probably not wrong.

“Ah yes, the honeymoon suite.” Elodie sighs as she pulls me along. “I have some suggestions for in-room activities. I just posted a new blog about creative uses for room service ice?—”

“No one asked you,” Tinsley cuts in rather terse.

“Story of my life, honey,” Elodie shoots back with a laugh caught in her throat. “And it hasn’t stopped me yet.”

“I’m stopping you, all right,” Tinsley mutters with that sourpuss expression of hers firmly intact.

I bet she’s cranky. Most likely because she’s not the one about to be locked in the honeymoon suite with Ransom. Any room would do really.

And honestly? I’d be cranky, too, if I were her.

We parade through the ship like some kind of victory march—if victory marches involved chocolate-covered evidence, contraband donuts, and Elodie’s increasingly specific and very delicious suggestions for honeymoon activities.

“I still can’t believe it was Becky Lee.” Bess shakes her head. “Although I suppose the nursing school thing should have been a clue. Nobody helps their sister study that

enthusiastically.”

“Speaking of studying...” Elodie purrs my way. “I have some extracurricular activities the two of you should consider implementing as?—”

“Do not finish that sentence,” Tinsley warns.

“What?” Elodie balks with a laugh. “I was just going to suggest some light reading. My latest article about proper use of the balcony furniture?—”

“Is a hazard,” Wes cuts her off this time. “Is it too late for a retraction?”

Tinsley nods. “Wes, you should have her handcuffed for spewing a criminal amount of innuendo.”

“Promises, promises.” Elodie winks over at Wes and we share another laugh.

We reach the honeymoon suite in a mob as Wes opens the door.

“In you go, lovebirds. Try to actually enjoy your honeymoon this time. And if either of you leaves this room before we dock, I’m firing you.”

He’s about to shove us in when Nettie waves a hand.

“Wait,” she calls out, pulling a donut out of her sleeve. “Here’s one for the road, kids.”

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“And here’s some light reading,” Elodie plucks something from her purse that looks suspiciously like a manual before thrusting it into my hands. “You can thank me later.”

“And the next murder is mine,” Tinsley announces as if she’s calling dibs on dessert. “So, you two can focus on whatever it is you’re focusing on.” She frowns my way because she knows full well what Ransom will be focusing on—and it won’t be her.

“There better not be another murder,” Wes growls.

“Although if there is”—Bess points my way—“try to make it happen near the buffet again. I’ve never seen Nettie move so fast.”

“You try watching perfectly good donuts roll to their doom,” Nettie defends her love of all things deep-fried. “It was like Sophie’s Choice but with baked goods.”

“All right. Enough talk about donuts,” Wes says. “Inside, you two,” he orders, giving us a gentle push. “And don’t come out until England. That’s the captain’s order.”

Elodie, Bess, and Nettie all shout goodbye and give a wild wave as the door closes behind us with a definitive click, and I hear the lock engage.

Through the door, we can hear our friends begin to drift away, with Elodie’s voice saying something about the proper use of the room service cart.

“I have an inkling of where she might have been going with that,” I say as I wrap my arms around my debonair, hotter-than-a-wildfire husband.

“Oh, do you?” He tightens his grasp around my waist and moves us to a rhythm all our own. “And where was that?”

“I’m better at showing than telling,” I say, nodding to the cart to our right, already loaded with a bucket of champagne on ice and a tray of chocolate-dipped strawberries.

“I’ll hold you to it,” he says, kissing a line up my neck. “Alone at last,” he whispers the words hot, right into my ear. “No ghosts, no killers, no well-meaning, donut-wielding friends.”

“Speaking of donuts.” I hold up the pink sticky treat covered with sprinkles—a rather decent amount if I do say so myself.

Ransom growls as he takes a gentle bite out of my neck. “Are you planning on sharing?”

“Yes, but I’d hate to leave a trail of crumbs in this luxury suite.” I give a little wink. “This is the part where the rolling cart comes in.”

He ticks his head to the side and looks vexingly handsome in the process. “Nice segue.”

“This night just gets nicer,” I say, leading him by the tie as I walk backward to the cart in question. “But first it’s going to get very, very naughty.”

“Well, well, Mrs. Baxter, this might be your most arresting performance yet.”

“No promises.” I grin up at him. “But I think we can find plenty of ways to pass the time until England.”

His kiss tells me he agrees completely. After all, some mysteries are better left

unsolved, but this one—this thing between us—is worth investigating thoroughly.
Very thoroughly indeed.

And we do just that.