



# Twice Baked Risky Whiskey Cakes

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**Category:** Crime And Mafia, Suspense, Mystery

**Description:** St. Patrick's Day is here—and so is a killer.

It's March in Honey Hollow and all month we'll be celebrating St. Patrick's Day! There's a parade to be had, books to read, a convention of redheads called the Redhead Roundup: An Auburn Affair, and have I mentioned Lyla Nell is turning two? Speaking of two, it's time for the twins to make their debut into the world. The twins may not be able to wait to get here, but with a killer on the loose—my thirst for justice can't wait either.

My name is Lottie Lemon, and I see dead people. Okay, so I rarely see dead people, mostly I see furry creatures of the dearly departed variety, who have come back from the other side to warn me of their previous owner's impending doom.

The twins are about to make their grand entrance, and Honey Hollow is buzzing with excitement for the St. Patrick's Day Parade and the Redhead Roundup: An Auburn Affair. It's a convention of fiery hair, and Carlotta is terrified of the entire thing—and that's before a killer makes an appearance.

As if that weren't enough, Lyla Nell's second birthday is on the horizon, and my bakery is buried in orders for every sweet treat imaginable. Between celebrating, baking, and dodging danger, it looks like March is about to test my limits in more ways than one.

With a killer lurking among the redheads, and my own family growing by the day, I'll need more than a sprinkle of luck to keep everyone safe. In Honey Hollow, when it rains, it pours—and sometimes it's raining trouble.

Here's hoping I can keep the cakes from burning and the killer from striking again. Because in Honey Hollow, life is sweet, but murder never takes a holiday.

**Total Pages (Source):** 71

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## THE KILLER

Twelve years ago—Vermont State Penitentiary...

The cuffs bite into my wrists as they lead me down the corridor, and with each step echoing off the cinderblock walls, it feels like a countdown to hell.

The fluorescent lights buzz above me. They flicker away as if they're struggling to stay alive in this desolate place, just like everyone else.

A door clangs open in front of me and I pause at the threshold and scan my new home for the next twelve years.

Cold concrete. A steel toilet. A mattress thinner than my patience.

The entire place reeks of bleach, rot, and broken lives—my broken life, to be specific.

I shake my head at the mess.

Welcome home, indeed.

The guard nudges me forward. I don't bother to look at him. I don't look at anyone. I stare straight ahead and walk into the box they've carved out for me as if I'm not afraid—because I'm not. Not of this place. Not anymore.

I've already lived through the worst part.

The door slams shut behind me with a finality that reverberates in my bones. I head over and sit on the edge of the cot and rest my hands in my lap, still red from the cuffs.

I'm still shaking, but not from fear, from fury.

I trace my fingers over the calluses forming on my palms, proof of the days I've spent trying to scrub away the betrayal like it's something that can be wiped clean with enough steel wool and soap.

But it won't wash off.

They lied. They used me. Set me up so cleanly it looked like I wrapped the ribbon myself. And the world applauded while I burned. The trial. The sentence. The mugshot they blasted on every news channel. With my hair tucked back and my eyes looking hollow, I was the face of the fall girl.

I didn't say a word. Not one. Not even when I had the chance.

Because I knew something no one else did.

This wasn't the end.

They might be free now. Smiling. Working the room with their cheap charm and whiskey-coated lies. They might think they got away with it. That they washed their hands of me as if I was a stain to be rinsed down the drain with the rest of their messes.

But they're wrong.

I'm not gone. I'm not broken. And I'm sure as heck not done.

Let them enjoy their freedom. Let them toast to their cleverness while clinking glasses in some darkened bar, so very smug and untouchable. Let them think they won.

Because I've got time.

Years, maybe. But I'll count every day like a prayer.

They made a mistake. A big one.

They left me breathing.

And I don't forget.

I close my eyes and picture their face—so polished, so smug. I remember the sound of their voice the last time they spoke to me. The lie dressed in a designer Italian suit. The betrayal dipped in sugar, which they offered so very easily.

I don't care how long it takes. I don't care what I have to become to do it.

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One day, I'll walk out of here.

And when I do?

They'll pay. Every last filthy debt.

Justice might wear a blindfold.

But I don't.

LOTTIE

PRESENT DAY...

"Lemon, bed rest was the doctor's orders. I really think you should adhere to that until the babies arrive."

I take a defiant bite of my shamrock-shaped shortbread cookie, letting the buttery crumbs fall where they may—which, given the size of my belly, means straight onto what used to be my lap.

Tonight, the Honey Hollow Community Center has been transformed all around us from its usual bingo-hall blandness into a glittering emerald wonderland.

Green streamers twist overhead, weaving between newly installed crystal chandeliers that reflect tiny rainbows across every surface. The dark hardwood floors gleam as does the green glittery décor strewn across all of the tables which happen to be

dressed in white linen. The renovation committee really outdid themselves—it's less community center, more country club now.

The lighting is low, the Irish-inspired music is loud, and the scent of my sugar sweet treats permeates the air with just the right amount of deliciousness.

“And I did adhere to bed rest,” I say a touch too loud over the music so Everett can hear me.

Essex Everett Baxter is one heck of a looker—dark hair, bright blue eyes, a body that can stop a bullet, and it's near impossible to garner a smile from him. At any given time, there are at least ten women craning their necks to get a better look at him. And well, women have been known to drop to their knees in adoration of him in public establishments.

He was a playboy before he met me and now, I'm the only star in his sky. I know that for a fact because he just so happened to say those very words to me last night. Everett always knows the exact words to say to melt me.

I nod his way. “In fact, I was on bed rest for three whole days just the way that Dr. Barnette insisted. But it happens to be dayfour and I have an event to cater. And before you go there, yes, I do have a staff and they're all here in force, but I kind of wanted to get in on the redheaded fun, too.” I nod around at the room full of crimson glory as if affirming my decision.

The Redhead Roundup: An Auburn Affair is in full swing this evening. They meet up once a year around St. Patrick's Day, and this time they've chosen our cozy little town of Honey Hollow, Vermont, to kick off their festivities.

The bustling convention has taken over the community center, and not only is there an abundance of redheaded beauties and cuties, but by the looks of the green beer and

sea of green accoutrements, St. Patrick's Day is being celebrated a little early as well.

Mayor Nash has already invited them all to participate in the big St. Patrick's Day parade coming up in just under a week's time, and I can't wait for that, too, because it just so happens to take place right in front of my bakery.

Honey Hollow never misses a chance for a parade—we once held one when a woman's sourdough starter survived for a year. In our defense, it produced really good sourdough that not even I could compete with. My stomach rumbles just thinking about it.

I pat my enormous belly with the memory as the twins each deliver a sharp kick that would make an Irish step dancer proud.

My false little labor scare three days ago had both Everett and Noah hovering over me like a couple of nervous honeybees. Okay, so the scare wasn't so little—I may have believed that I was going into full-blown birthing mode. But apparently, that wasn't the case. It was just a bout of some seriously earth-shattering, but not uterine-shattering, Braxton Hicks contractions.

"That's telling him, Lot." Noah pulls me in by the waist, or what little waist I have left. Okay, so I have no waist. I'm nine months pregnant with twins—really big twins (think toddlers).

Noah Corbin Fox is a looker, too, with his dark hair that turns red at the tips, verdant green eyes, and dimples so deep you could take a nap in them. We share a daughter, Lyla Nell, who is set to turn two next week. Noah and I were off and on—and even married more times than I can count. Suffice it to say, we're complicated. But I'm married to Everett now—and well, that only seemed to complicate things even more. It's a long and sordid story.

“In fact, I’ve got an idea.” Noah nods to Everett. “Why don’t you go on bed rest until the babies arrive? I’ll wine and dine Lottie and make sure she has a ball without you. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Very funny.” Everett takes a moment to properly glare at Noah for even going there. “I seem to recall you overreacting when you thought her water broke last month.”

“That was different.” Noah ticks his head at the memory. “I didn’t realize she was holding an actual water bottle upside down.”

“Over my pants,” I clarify.

Heck, even I thought I broke my water that day.

“Nevertheless—” Everett’s chest expands as he looks my way. “I’ll be keeping an eye on you until the babies arrive—at least while I’m at home from the courthouse.”

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“I’d better keep an eye on her instead,” Noah says. “I’ve got a clear schedule tomorrow morning.”

“Perfect,” Everett says. “I’ll free up my afternoon.”

I shake my head. “You two do realize that arguing over who gets to babysit me is completely unnecessary, right? I am a fully functioning adult,” I say as I snatch another cookie from the dessert table, another green shamrock with lots of pink and green sprinkles. “I mean, sure, I may have had an episode the other day that had all the theatrics of a primetime medical drama, but turns out, it was just a silly Braxton Hicks extravaganza. I had them all the time with Lyla Nell. It was no big deal.”

“Lemon.” Everett inches his head back a notch. “You believed you were about to eject those kids ‘like two torpedo missiles’—and those were your exact words.”

“And that belief was wrong,” I’m quick to point out. “So, case closed, Judge Baxter.”

It’s true. Everett is a prominent judge down in Ashford County with far more important things to do than keep an eye on me while I stuff my face with cookies—and pie, and pizza, and everything that every restaurant on Main Street has to offer.

And well, Noah has a pretty important job down in Ashford, too, working for the Ashford Sheriff’s Department as their lead homicide detective.

Suffice it to say, the rash of homicides in Honey Hollow has kept him busy these past few years. And me busy by proxy since I always seem to find myself tangled up in

them—and so do my sweet treats.

That wily little white fox I saw a few days ago comes to mind. It was more of a chihuahua with giant six-inch tall ears that stick straight up and a cute little beak-like face than it was your traditional fox, but despite the fact, judging by the way it appeared and disappeared in a spray of blue and pink stars let me know that it was well past its prime. And we all know what happens when those long-gone creatures—human or of the furry variety—make an appearance in Honey Hollow.

I look out at the crowd once again and wonder which one of these redheads isn't going to make it to that upcoming four-leaf clover-shaped day.

“Look, Everett”—Noah says, snapping up a cookie for both himself and me—“we’re both here, we’re both responsible adults, and we both know Lottie isn’t going to listen to reason, so you might as well grab a cookie and try to enjoy yourself. I say we divide and conquer. Obviously, you get the night shift, so I’ll spend my days with Lot.”

Everett growls in response and a sigh escapes me.

“Boys, please.” A laugh snorts from me, which sets off another round of baby acrobatics. “There’s enough of my swollen ankles and stretch marks to go around.”

True as gospel.

A loud whoop goes off and the laughter and the merriment in the community center only seems to ratchet up a couple more wild notches.

The air smells divine—a mixture of buttery pastries, whiskey-soaked desserts, and the cinnamon-apple tea I’ve been downing by the gallon. The dessert tables are the centerpiece of the refreshment area, which feature more than a few Irish-themed

treats, such as Bailey's cheesecake bites topped with candied shamrocks, whiskey-glazed donuts with green sprinkles, Bailey's brownie bites, and my *pièce de résistance*—mini Irish apple cakes drizzled with caramel whiskey sauce. Every confection either features a tiny fondant shamrock or has been dyed an alarming shade of green.

So far, March is shaping up to be pretty monumental. Not only has every redhead in Vermont (and possibly the country) descended on Honey Hollow to kick off the St. Patrick's Day festivities—which will culminate in a parade for the ages—but my sweet baby girl Lyla Nell is turning two.

That's huge.

Plus, my birthday happens to be the very same day, but honestly, I couldn't care less. When you're about to push two human beings out of your body, celebrating another trip around the sun seems rather inconsequential.

"Besides"—I say, moving along and snapping up a whiskey-glazed donut then thinking better of it and handing it to Everett before snapping up another cookie instead—"the doctor said light activity was fine," I remind them. "This is me, being lightly active."

My eyes drift back to that pile of whiskey-glazed donuts. I've already eaten six back at the bakery. And since I am cooking the glaze, I'm sure the tiny bit of whiskey that gets splashed into the mix has lost all of its nefarious powers. Besides, they really do taste divine.

Carlotta pops up, looking every bit like my doppelgänger—same honey blonde hair with touches of gray, same hazel eyes that are in serious need of some bifocals, which she refuses to don, far more wrinkles, and a far different figure considering she's wearing an emerald green dress that I would die to fit into. And ironically, that dress

was culled from my closet.

Carlotta is my biological mother who rematerialized in my life a few years back—just in time to claim her inheritance. Typical. She’s sarcastic, cunning, and all around a prickly cactus of a person who just so happens to live with Everett and me. It’s a long and sordid story.

“There she goes,” she sings as she watches me wolf down another shamrock sugar cookie. “Stuffing her face with cookies. Just what the doctor ordered. Where can I get me a doctor like that?”

Noah shakes his head. “You need to get knocked up first.”

Carlotta ticks her head to the side wistfully. “I’m afraid my baby-making days are over, Foxy. And don’t think I’m not sorry about it. I hear babies are big business these days. And to think I gave Lot away for free.”

It’s true. I ended up on the floor of the Honey Hollow Fire Department while my sister Charlie had the misfortune of actually being raised by Carlotta. All things considered, I got off pretty easy.

“Hear that, Lot?” She taps her elbow to mine. “If you change your mind about keeping the little yippers, you can make a mint—as in double the dineros! I’ve got connections if you want to make a deal.”

“Sorry to dash your dinero dreams, but I’m keeping them,” I tell her as I snap up yet another cookie—a caramel turtle wonder. “And I’m keeping the cookie train going, too. It’s medicinal. The babies demanded it—telepathically, of course.”

“That’s funny.” Noah tips his head my way. “The babies also telepathically demanded you stay home last week when we wanted to go fishing.”

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I cringe a little at the memory. Okay, so it was me who didn't feel like sitting next to a bucket of wiggly worms.

"Pregnancy telepathy is very specific," I tell him. "And highly accurate." I crane my neck into the crowd. "Have you ever seen so many people with glorious red manes in one room before?"

"Nope," Carlotta is the first to answer. "And that's exactly why I don't trust this night," she mutters while staring at the crowd as if they're all about to burst into flames. "I just know this event is going to be trouble. It's unnatural for this many gingers to be in one place at one time. It's like a fiery-haired omen. I say we pack it up, burn some sage, and call it a night."

"Carlotta," I hiss. "Would you keep it down? These are nice people. And I hate for anyone to hear you ranting and raving about fiery-haired omens and burning sage, of all things. We don't dabble in witchcraft."

"Says the wickedest witch of them all," she snips back.

I'll admit, my hormones may have earned me that title as of late, but again I'm carrying twins. Who could blame me for a little emotional outburst here and there? And well, everywhere.

A couple of redheaded women stride by and give us the stink eye as if they've heard the entire conversation.

"See that?" Carlotta harps in their wake. "They look as if they're ready to hang you at

high noon, little yippers and all. Hate to break it to you, Lot, but I'm never wrong about these things. We've had a killer show up at almost every event in this town, and now you want to tell me a whole convention hall full of redheads isn't going to end in murder? I call bull-hockey."

Noah ticks his head. "She's got a point."

"I'm not saying a word." Everett straightens as he gives a quick glance around. "But as long as you two don't see a ghost, we might be in the clear. Big might."

"Well, I don't see a ghost," I'm quick to tell him. "And I refuse to dwell on the Grim Reaper for no good reason. For once, I'd like to have a crime-free celebration." I nod up at the ceiling as if trying to make a pact with the universe. "Just one event where nobody ends up in cuffs or a body bag."

Carlotta snorts. "And just like that, you jinxed it."

Noah nods. "I one hundred percent agree."

"Noah." I swat him without hesitation.

"I'm just saying"—he offers up a shrug—"I might as well go ahead and put caution tape around the perimeter now."

Everett leans in. "I wouldn't have said that, Lemon."

"But you were thinking it." Noah nods his way and Everett presses his lips tight in response.

"You're both hilarious," I grunt just as a flash of a familiar redhead catches my eye from across the room.

Venus Finnigan waves enthusiastically with her husband Sean by her side with his red hair even more vibrant in this dim light, and I give a quick wave back.

They're the reason I'm here. Venus was kind enough to ask me to cater alongside of her own bakery, and between her charm and my inability to say no to anyone, here I am, nine months pregnant and on my feet—that I can't actually see.

Venus and Sean melt back into the crowd and I spot my mother and my sister Meg. And oddly enough, the two of them look as if they're arguing about something. I bet it has to do with the baby.

Meg just had a sweet baby girl named Piper and my mother has been watching the baby now and again while Meg checks on the strip club where she works. Meg is the one who teaches the girls their money-making moves without actually making much money herself.

Generally, my mother and Meg get along just fine, but I bet Meg caught my mother doing something goofy like the time she cut a hole in her bra and stuck the baby bottle through it so she could feel as if she was nursing. I caught her doing that once with Lyla Nell and about had a heart attack and committed matricide all in the same afternoon.

I'm about to mosey in their direction when the sight of an elegant older woman stops me in my tracks.

"Oh my goodness," I whisper, grabbing Everett's arm with a death grip.

"What is it, Lemon?" Everett is instantly alert—and well, instantly in panic mode, too. "Contractions?"

"The hospital bag is already in the car," Noah pants in a panic himself, already

reaching for his keys.

“No, it’s not that,” I say. “Look who just walked in.”

The crowd parts just enough to reveal none other than Eliza Baxter, Everett’s mother. Her silver-streaked dark hair catches the light as she scans the room with laser precision. Her eyes lock onto an older, handsome gentleman standing nearby speaking to a crowd rapt at attention. And that cold look she’s giving him seems to cause the temperature in the community center to drop ten degrees.

Without warning, the lights cut out and the entire room is plunged into darkness.

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A few shrill screams go off, along with the illumination of a few cell phones just as the lights come back.

And to my surprise, I find a cute little white fox sitting on my belly with freakishly tall ears spiked into the air. It belts out a few quick barks before disappearing in a vat of pink and blue stars.

Both Carlotta and I yelp in response.

“What is it, Lemon?” Everett asks while pulling me in.

“It was that tiny little ghost of a fox,” I say. “It was just here.” I pat my belly in the exact same spot. “But now it’s gone.”

“It might be gone”—Everett says as he scours the room—“but I have a feeling the killer has arrived.”

LOTTIE

The music swells around us, a lively Irish jig that makes my twins do a little jig of their own against my ribcage.

Everett, Noah, Carlotta, and I weave through the sea of redheads toward Eliza Baxter, who stands like a statue carved from ice despite the warmth in the community center tonight.

“Mom?” Everett says with his voice as formal as it always is when addressing the

woman who birthed him. “I had no idea you were coming to Honey Hollow.”

Eliza’s perfectly manicured hand flutters to her pearl necklace. Eliza is tall, statuesque, has a shock of dark hair, and has the standard-issued Baxter cobalt blue eyes.

Everett has them, too, as does our daughter Evie. I actually adopted Evie when she popped into our lives a few years back after being all but abandoned by her birth mother. I’m still so thankful each and every day that she’s in our lives. But I digress. Not only does Evie have the Baxter baby blues, but she has the rest of their standard-issued good looks, too.

“Everett, dear.” She sheds an easy smile. “Forgive me. This was a last-minute decision on my part.” She leans in and kisses him on both cheeks and Noah as well.

“It’s always good to see you, Eliza,” he says.

“Likewise,” she says. “Especially you.” She points my way and gives a little wink. Her silver-streaked auburn hair is swept into an elegant updo that would make my hairstylist weep with envy. She wears an emerald green dress that probably costs more than my minivan and has on a cream-colored coat that screams old money. That’s because she is old money.

Eliza is a hotel heiress.

Fun fact: Noah’s dubious father was once married to Eliza. And after he stole a bunch of her money, he faked his own death. But he’s back from the proverbial other side and somehow he’s managed to latch himself to Miranda Lemon, my own mother—the one who raised me.

“Lottie”—Eliza nods with her usual restrained warmth—“you’re looking so

very”—she cringes a moment as she inspects my painfully swollen body—“expectant.”

“That’s one word for it,” I agree, patting my belly. “The doctor says I can expect the twins any day now.”

Before Eliza can respond, a woman steps up beside her. She looks to be in her late sixties with short red hair with a hint of gray roots, wearing a stylish black pantsuit with a green silk scarf. There’s something skittish in her eyes as she quickly scans the room before landing our way.

“And this is the reason I’m here,” Eliza says, pulling the woman in by the elbow. “This is one of my bridge buddies from Fallbrook, Glinda Van Jance.” Eliza’s smile widens, genuine and warm. “Glinda, this is my son Everett, his wife Lottie, and my bonus son Noah.”

Carlotta coughs loudly.

“And Carlotta,” Eliza adds with a sigh.

“That’s right. Lizzy and I are practically besties,” Carlotta is quick with the lie. “That’s why we color-coordinated today.” Sheelbows Eliza and nearly knocks her over like a bowling pin. “Glad you got the memo, Sexy Mama.”

Sexy is Carlotta’s nickname for Everett—for obvious reasons. And apparently, it’s been extended to his mother as well. Carlotta has a long history of giving people nicknames—that they’ve earned or she’s simply christened them with. Usually, it’s the latter.

“It’s a pleasure,” Glinda says, quickly shaking everyone’s hand with a firm grip that speaks of someone used to commanding respect. And I can tell by the way she holds

herself, she certainly does that.

Carlotta grunts. “So what gives? The two of you just sit around all day playing bridge at the country club?” She locks onto Glinda. “You’re not a hotel heiress, too, by chance? Or let me guess, you came upon your wealth the old-fashioned way—by way of a wedding ring.”

“Carlotta,” I scold, but it’s useless at this point.

“Simmer down, Lot Lot,” she scolds right back before turning her attention to the poor woman in front of us. “I’m a big believer in marrying well and often—preferably to men with large life insurance policies and questionable health.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes at the thought. Carlotta has never once accomplished that questionably fiscal feat. At least that I know of.

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Glinda belts out a good-natured laugh—and thankfully so.

“Actually no, I never married,” she tells us. “I’m retired now, but I used to be a chemistry professor at Vermont State. These days the only chemistry I dabble in concerns a mixologist.”

We all share a little laugh.

“Well, they have quite the bar here tonight.” Noah is quick to point to the bar in question.

Glinda nods. “I hear they’re serving the very best whiskey.”

“Whiskey?” Carlotta perks up. “Now you’re speaking my language, sis.”

I can’t help but notice how Eliza keeps glancing over Glinda’s shoulder at the handsome older gentleman holding court across the room. He’s tall, still broad-shouldered despite his years, with sharp features and a shock of white hair tinged with reddish gold.

Carlotta follows my gaze and groans hard once she spots him. She’s pretty good at spotting a handsome man in the wild no matter what his age bracket might be.

“Hubba-hubba.” Carlotta’s entire body convulses as she says it.

“Who’s that?” Everett asks while nodding in the man’s direction.

I'm glad he asked and not me. Not only would I have asked who he was, but I'd want to know why Eliza can't seem to take her eyes off of him. Subtlety has never been my strong suit. Unlike Carlotta, Eliza isn't one to ogle men, so I am curious why he's catching her eye—and the ire etched on her face, too.

Glinda follows my gaze as well. “Oh, that's Sebastian Gallagher. He's something of a legend in the whiskey world. He just launched a new premium brand called Sebastian's Secret Reserve. He claims it's going to revolutionize craft spirits in Vermont—and the world. I'll admit, he's not hard to look at. Don't you agree, Eliza?” She elbows her friend, but Eliza is too awestruck to speak. “Maybe we should say hello,” Glinda goes on. “I mean, he crafts whiskey and I was a chemist. I guess you could say I have more than a little professional curiosity.” She gives a slight laugh, but Eliza doesn't play along.

In fact, Eliza grows so white I'm half-afraid she might faint.

She catches her breath as she turns our way. “If you'll excuse me, I think I need some air.” She practically flees the scene, leaving behind a trail of expensive perfume—and Glinda follows in her wake.

Noah shoots a look to Everett. “What was that about?”

“I have no idea.” Everett frowns in the direction she took off in. “But something seems to have upset her. I'd better go track her down.”

“Yes, for sure, go,” I tell him. “We'll be fine.” I give my belly a pat as if to prove my point.

Just as Everett disappears into the crowd after his mother, Venus Finnigan materializes before us with her vibrant blonde hair cascading over her shoulders in perfect waves. Next to her stands an elegant woman with matching blonde hair swept

into a French twist. The family resemblance is unmistakable in their green eyes, high cheekbones, and creamy vanilla locks.

“Hello, you three,” Venus says to Carlotta, Noah, and me. “Lottie, you look absolutely radiant,” she gushes. “Pregnancy really does agree with you—timestwo.”

I laugh at the thought. “If by agrees with me, you mean it’s turned me into a waddling dessert vacuum, then yes.”

Venus laughs. “Let me introduce my mother. Everyone, this is Keegan Meryl.”

The older blonde extends a hand and quickly shakes with all three of us. “Lottie, my daughter has told me so much about your bakery. And by the way, those whiskey-glazed donuts are divine.” Her voice sounds cultured and refined, and she looks glorious in a ruby-red blouse dotted with red sequins. And in a sea of green, she shines like a bright red beacon.

“I’m so glad you’re enjoying the desserts,” I tell her. “Your daughter is quite the baker herself.”

It’s true. Venus owns a bakery called Cupid’s Sweet Concoctions, out in Hollyhock. Noah and I went to visit last month, and to call her establishment a mere bakery seems like an insult. If a bakery and a princess castle had a baby, Cupid’s Sweet Concoctions would be the end result. It’s posh, pretty, and pricey as can be. But despite the dollars for donuts it demands, its success is in the stratosphere. And so is her chocolate cake.

Keegan nods my way. “Oh, I know all about my daughter’s desserts.” She pats her thigh. “And so do my hips.”

We all share a good-natured laugh.

Not to be left out of a good bodily pat-down—even if it is self-imposed—Carlotta does the same. Although her pat is more of an assault.

“My hips don’t mind Lot Lot’s sweet treats either.” She’s quick to bond with Keegan over their love of baked goods. “In fact, now that she’s filling those sweet treats with booze, I’m ready to pack up and move into the bakery full-time.”

Noah chuckles at the thought. “Everett will be glad to hear it.”

“Oh hush, you.” Carlotta is quick to wave him off. “Sexy loves our late-night hallway meet and greets. Half the time they’re in the nude.”

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“Good grief,” I mutter.

Although it’s true for the most part—with Carlotta holding up the nude part of the deal.

Venus presses her lips tight for a moment. “Um, Mom was the head curator at the Vermont State Museum of Fine Arts before she retired,” she says, expertly taking the limelight off of Carlotta and any nude visuals she might have provided—or more importantly, circumventing any future nude reprisals. “She has an eye for beauty in all forms.”

“Including handsome Irish whiskey makers?” Carlotta teases and inspires Keegan’s gaze to drift right toward the whiskey maker in question.

My, my, Sebastian Gallagher seems to be attracting his fair share of attention. It’s almost as if he’s the senior version of Everett.

Hey? Maybe that has something to do with Eliza’s startling reaction to him.

Noah clears his throat. “If you ladies will excuse me, I need to make a quick call.” He leans in and presses his mouth close to my ear. “I’m going to call for backup and scope the place out for trouble. Those ghosts of yours have never been wrong before.”

Great. Even Noah feels the doom in the air. And I suppose he should. It is his job.

Noah slips away and I turn back to Keegan. “So, do you know that man? Sebastian

Gallagher?”

Keegan’s posture stiffens. She exchanges a look with Venus, takes a deep breath, and says, “I—uh—I guess I don’t really know him.” The words hang between us in a way that makes you certain she’s not exactly telling the truth. It’s pretty apparent she knowssomethingabout him in the least.

She clears her throat. “I think I need a cup of coffee. Or perhaps something stronger.” She stalks off with her heels clicking sharply against the hardwood floor, and shockingly I can hear it above the boisterous music and lively chatter vibrating through the room.

“Sorry about that,” Venus says with a puzzled expression as she watches her mother go. “Well”—she turns to Carlotta and me with a forced smile—“are you ladies thinking what I’m thinking?” She hitches her head toward Sebastian, who stands surrounded by admirers with his shock of white hair with traces of whiskey-colored highlights.

Carlotta drools on command. “That we should introduce ourselves to the silver fox and make a few indecent proposals?” She waggles her brows. “I wouldn’t mind sharing my emeraldislewith him, if you know what I mean.”

“Eww,” I groan her way, although I’m not actually surprised by anything she says. Carlotta basically considers flirting a competitive sport. Not to mention the fact she’s in a verycommitted relationship with Mayor Nash—who happens to be my biological father. Not that it’s ever stopped Carlotta from flirting within an inch of her life—or her relationship.

“What?” she balks my way. “I’m old, not dead.” She smooths her hair out. “And clearly, I’m not the only one interested. Half the women in this room are eyeing him like he’s the last corned beef sandwich at an Irish wake.”

Venus laughs. “Well, I’m not eyeing him for those reasons. I was thinking more along the lines of finding out what has my mother in such a tizzy.”

I cast a glance his way again. “I’ll admit, he is a looker.”

Carlotta gags and gyrates. “Don’t you have enough men in your reverse harem, Lot?” She frowns my way. “Save some for the rest of us, would you?”

I shoot her a look. “I’m investigating, not collecting,” I say. “Besides, he’s old enough to be my father—and maybe yours.”

“Maybe so,” she says. “But he’s hot enough to be my next mistake,” she mutters as we approach Sebastian’s circle.

The air in the community center seems to shimmer with tension, as if the universe knows that someone in this room is about to have their time on the planet cut fatally short.

And I certainly wonder who that could be.

LOTTIE

Sebastian Gallagher is finishing up what appears to be a tense conversation with a stunning woman who looks to be in her forties. She’s a brunette with auburn highlights, physically fit, and has on a deep maroon pantsuit that screams success. Although at the moment, her perfect features are twisted into a scowl.

“You think this changes anything?” the woman says under her breath. “A new business? I know exactly who you are, Sebastian.”

He purses his lips, and if I had to guess, it looks as if he’s hiding a smile.

“Della, my love, it’s water under the bridge.” He winks and it only seems to infuriate her even more. He glances our way as we come upon them and does a double take at Venus. “Ah, Keegan’s precious daughter.”

Della turns our way with an indifferent look on her face, but she’s still notably annoyed from the encounter she just had with him. I’m starting to think this was a bad idea.

“Venus Finnigan,” Venus says in a voice that suddenly sounds more professional than it does warm.

“Carlotta Sawyer.” Carlotta quickly throws both her name and her hand out there, but Sebastian doesn’t waver his gaze from Venus.

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*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:01 am*

“I didn’t realize your mother would be here tonight,” he says it low and slightly out of breath as he quickly scans the room for her.

“My husband is on the board for the event,” she tells him, but he’s still on the hunt for her mother.

The woman standing next to him gives a hard sigh and I offer her a commiserating smile.

“Lottie Lemon,” I say, extending my hand her way. “I own the bakery here in town and brought the baked goods this evening. Or at least some of them. Venus supplied her fair share, too.”

The woman stares at my hand for a moment before shaking it and I can’t help but note her fingers are ice-cold to the touch.

“Della Crane,” she says curtly as she nods to both Venus and me. “The desserts look fabulous. And as long as either of you didn’t use Sebastian’s whiskey in your products, then I’ll be sure to sample them.”

“Oh no, I didn’t do that,” I’m quick to say. “I mean, I used whiskey in a few of the recipes.” I turn to Sebastian and cringe. “I’m sure your whiskey is amazing. It’s just not what I had on hand.”

Sebastian offers a slight smile my way. “I’ll be sending an entire box of my whiskey to your bakery come morning.” His gaze shifts to Venus. “And a pallet to yours.”

An entire pallet to hers? I can't help but stifle a laugh. Talk about preferential treatment. Clearly, Venus' mother made a huge impression on the man.

"Did you hear that, Lot?" Carlotta straightens. "You're getting a free case of the good stuff. I'll be there bright and early to help you put it away."

I shoot her a look because I know exactly what she means by put it away.

"Ah, the famous Lottie Lemon!" Sebastian clasps my hand. "Your whiskey-glazed donuts are the talk of the evening. I was hoping to meet you as well."

"What about me, Hot Stuff?" Carlotta balks at the man. "I'm Lottie Dottie's OG mama. I bet you were looking forward to meeting me, too! Saving the best and the hottest for last."

Oh, good grief. More like saving the most psychotic for last. If he's smart, he'll have a restraining order on her by morning.

He offers a nervous laugh in response.

Carlotta schmoozes her way closer to the man. "And what would a big, important whiskey man like you want to waste your liquid gold on this preggo pinata? Send it my way, Hot Stuff, and I'll make sure we both have a good time."

He belts out a belly laugh and it sounds genuine. Della rolls her eyes, and believe me, I'm trying hard not to do the same.

"Honey, I'll be sure to send a box earmarked just for you as well," he's happy to tell her—and Carlotta is more than happy to hear it. "But as for the bakeries," he gives a wistful sigh as he looks at Venus and me, "I'll admit, my intentions are not all that pure. I'm hoping to discuss a business opportunity with the two of you." He says the

two of us even though he's right back to being completely focused on Venus. "Sebastian's Secret Reserve is thinking of launching a line of whiskey-infused foods. Cookies, cakes, chocolates—all with my premium spirits."

"Interesting," I say, mostly to remind him that I'm still here, although I don't know why. Venus really seems to have cast a spell on him.

He nods to her as if she said it instead. "I'm a big believer in seizing opportunities," Sebastian continues. "Life is too short for regrets. Tomorrow isn't promised, especially at my age."

A chill runs down my spine as he says it and it has nothing to do with the twins kicking away as if they were trying to swim away from a shark.

And while Sebastian is busy ogling Venus, I can't help but notice the way Eliza is watching him from across the room. Her eyes are cold as she raises a glass in his direction—as if she's giving him a toast or a warning, I can't tell which.

Venus' phone chimes with a text, and she glances down at the screen.

"Oh, it's Sean. He needs help with the presentation setup. He's going to give a toast and give a little history of the club. Please excuse me, ladies." She squeezes my arm before leaning in close. "Don't let my mother and Sebastian cross paths if you can help it. I don't have a good feeling about this." And with that cryptic warning, she vanishes into the crowd.

Della checks her watch and sighs. "I should get back to mingling. I've got three potential clients here tonight." Her gaze drifts toward the dessert table. "After I sample some of those Irish cream brownies, of course. A girl has to have priorities." She stalks off and her high heels click against the wood flooring like gunshots.

“Well, how about that?” Carlotta slides closer to Sebastian, batting her eyelashes with all the subtlety of a fog horn—an old weathered one at that. “How about you and I find a nice, dark corner and discuss the finer points of whiskey? I’ve been told I have an excellent kisser.” She offers a demonstration by way of puckering up. But thankfully, he doesn’t seem to be falling for it.

Sebastian winces her way. “I’ve no doubt about that, madam.”

“Hey! Who are you calling amadman?” Carlotta scoffs his way and holds up her dukes as if she were ready to introduce her fist to his kisser.

“We should really let you get back to your admirers,” I tell him before cringing. “I mean, friends or clients.” I try to backtrack, but let’s call a spade a spade. I’m pretty sure I had it right the first time with admirers. “We should go,” I say, grabbing Carlotta’s arm before she can embarrass us further. Although, let’s be honest, everyone knows Carlotta will embarrass us well into the future—and quite possibly eternity. “The babies need sustenance, and those desserts aren’t going to eat themselves,” I say as I pat my belly.

Sebastian gives a rich laugh that seems to draw envious glances from the women all around us. “Enjoy your night,” he says. “I’ll be in touch about those whiskey-infused treats, Lottie.”

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I practically drag Carlotta to the nearest dessert table, which groans under the weight of Irish-inspired confections. “Could you be any more obvious?” I hiss. “On second thought, don’t answer that.”

“What?” she balks. “He’s single, I’m single, and life’s too short to beat around the boozy bush.” She snags a Bailey’s cheesecake bite and shoves it into her pie hole.

“We don’t know that he’s single,” I say, snapping up a bright green dessert plate. “And you are definitely not single.”

“I don’t see a ring on my finger.” She spikes her hand to my nose. “And don’t you get any funny ideas about yipping away to your daddy. I’m not looking for a ring either. I’m the kind of girl that likes to take it slow.”

“Ha! I needed a good laugh.” And I don’t mind laughing right in her face. “The only thing you’re slow at is trying to commit. You share two children with the man.”

“That you know about,” she says with a cheeky wink and I really hope she’s kidding.

She pops one of Venus’ sweet treats into her mouth. “Mmm, this is sinful. Try the Irish coffee cupcakes. The whiskey buttercream is straight from Heaven.”

I load my plate with mini Irish apple cakes, whiskey-glazed donuts, and, of course, a few shamrock sugar cookies. “Wow, Venus really outdid herself with these treats.”

“You outdid yourself, Lot,” Carlotta corrects, sampling a chocolate Guinness cake pop. “These taste just like your recipes. I bet Venus bought up a bunch of your

goodies and just slapped her name on them. How about we ask her to catch us outside? We can use your shamrock cookie cutters as brass knuckles.”

I avert my eyes. I’m about to say something, but my reply dies on my lips as I spot Eliza and Sebastian near the exit. His back is against the wall—literally—as Eliza jabs a finger into his chest. Even from here, I can see the fury radiating off her body like heat off a summer sidewalk. Sebastian’s easy charm has all but vanished, seemingly replaced by a mournful look in his eyes as he grabs her wrist.

I gasp and step away from the dessert buffet. “Should we go over there?” I ask, setting down my plate. And it would take something of this magnitude for me to do just that. I don’t give up on my desserts so quickly. Onever.

Carlotta follows my gaze and snorts. “And interrupt whatever that is? No, thank you. Eliza always gets the hot ones.” She winks at me. “Must run in the family.”

“Speaking of hot ones... I don’t see Everett anywhere.” I scan the room as anxiety begins to bubble up in me. Something is definitely off here tonight. And if that ghostly fox is a barometer, then it should be half past a murder by now. “Maybe I should text him? Things look as if they’re getting heated with Eliza and that man.”

“Nah, let Long Legs Lizzy have her moment. Whatever that silver fox did, she clearly has a thing or two to say about it.” A wicked grin begins to carve itself into her face. “Besides, nothing makes the hanky-panky hotter than having a good argument first. Trust me. I speak from experience.”

“Spare me the details,” I mutter. “Besides, that’s Everett’s mother we’re talking about. But regardless, I think you’re right. Maybe I should stay out of it.”

Carlotta lets out a whoop that manages to rise over the noise. “Say it again, Lot. The part about me being right. I want to record it on my phone.”

“Not on your life,” I sing, turning back to the desserts where my attention belongs.

Whatever history Eliza has with Sebastian, it’s not my place to interfere.

Twenty minutes pass in a blur of sugar and raucously loud Irish music. I sample sweet after sweet, each more decadent than the last—Irish cream fudge squares, whiskey truffles, mint chocolate grasshopper bars, and tiny soda bread pudding cups drizzled with whiskey caramel sauce.

The volume in the room only seems to increase. The music grows louder, the laughter more boisterous, and the chatter seems never-ending.

The twins seem to be performing somersaults in response to my sugar intake, and suddenly I need peace and quiet and a breath of fresh air.

“I’d better find Everett,” I say, holding my far too bloated belly as I crane my neck into the crowd. “Oh, look! I think I see him over there,” I tell Carlotta, squinting toward a tall, dark, and far too handsome figure near the hallway that leads to the bathrooms.

“Lead the way, Lady Waddles-a-Lot.”

Carlotta is lockstep with me as I push through the crowd, but sure enough the figure disappears down the hall. We follow, but instead of finding Everett, we discover a door leading outside. The cool night air beckons, promising relief from the stuffy, overcrowded room, and it’s a lure far too luscious to resist.

“Let’s get some fresh air,” I suggest, pulling her in that direction. “Just for a minute.”

We step outside and the night is gloriously crisp as clear sparkling stars dot the velvet sky. I take a deep breath, grateful for the quiet after the cacophony of noise inside.

We step further onto the small patio behind the community center and move around a hedge that shields us from the view of the parking lot. I'm about to suggest we take a seat when I stub my shoe on something soft yet immovable.

We glance down and gasp as a far too familiar face lies toes up with his eyes fixed on nothing and a knife protruding from his chest. His white shirt has been stained crimson and that stain has spread like spilled whiskey. And speaking of the devil's favorite libation, one of my whiskey-glazed donuts is in the man's right hand while the ghost of a tiny white fox sits right on one of his kneecaps. The tiny poltergeist lets out a little yip before disappearing completely.

Carlotta grabs my arm and digs her nails into it. "I told you, Lot," she shouts. "That room full of fiery redheaded firecrackers is bad luck."

Bad luck is right.

Carlotta won't have to worry about Sebastian becoming her next big mistake. Sebastian Gallagher is dead.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:01 am*

I open my mouth to scream, but before any sound emerges, a figure steps from the shadows on the other side of the body.

Eliza Baxter stands over Sebastian with her hands covered in blood.

Oh my word!

It seems Sebastian Gallagher just may have been Eliza's biggest mistake of all.

LOTTIE

Asickly metallic scent mingles with the crisp night air, creating a nauseating cocktail that makes my stomach lurch.

Sebastian Gallagher's vacant eyes reflect the security lights above, giving them an eerie glow. The pearl knife handle protruding from his chest looks more like a prop from a bad murder mystery dinner theater. Except for the fact the sanguine pool spreading beneath him is all too real.

My brain struggles to process the scene. Sebastian Gallagher is dead, while Eliza Baxter stands over him with her hands awash in crimson. So much crimson everywhere.

A scream tears from my throat, high and primal. Carlotta joins in as well and her wail rises an octave above my own.

Footsteps pound against the pavement and we look up to see Everett and Noah

sprinting toward us from the direction of the parking lot. They skid to a halt and their expressions transform from concern to shock as they take in the grisly scene.

“Lemon?” Everett wraps me in his arms in an instant before he does a double take in his mother’s direction. “Mom?” His entire body grows rigid. “What happened?”

“I’ll tell you what happened.” Carlotta manages to find her voice before either Eliza or I do. “Looks like your mama taught this whiskey-guzzling fool the ultimate lesson about crossing a Baxter—death by accessorizing.” She nods to Eliza. “That knife really brings out the dead in his complexion.”

A hard groan expels from me. “Not now, Carlotta,” I whisper her way. Not that my words have ever stopped her before.

“Geez.” Noah drops to his knees beside Sebastian and presses two fingers against his neck before sighing. “He’s gone. I need to call this in.” He pulls out his phone and quickly does just that.

“Don’t worry, Sexy,” Carlotta spouts off. “We’ll help you cover up your mama’s little homicidal hobby. In fact, we’ll cheer on Foxy as he helps bury the body.”

I’d protest, but it wouldn’t be the first time that whole bury-the-body thing happened—but that’s another story entirely. And for the record, we weren’t responsible for that person’s death either. Mostly.

Behind us, in the community center, the party continues in full swing. The muffled thump of Irish music and bursts of laughter create a surreal backdrop to the horror before us. Life and death, separated by nothing more than a hedge and a few feet of concrete. It always seems to be this way, and it’s a pattern that I don’t care for at all. But one I seem powerless to stop.

“Everett”—Eliza holds out her hands and examines the glossy sanguine liquid under the patio lights. “It’s not what it looks like.” Her voice trembles, which is so unlike her. Her hands—those perfectly manicured hands that I can guarantee you have never touched anything remotely dirty—appear to be wearing glossy red gloves. “I found him this way. I tried to pull the knife out, but it wouldn’t budge.”

“Yeah,” Carlotta snorts. “That’s her story and she’s sticking to it! Just like I’m sticking to my ‘I’ve only had one glass of whiskey’ story after I drain the whole bottle. No harm in getting ahead of my alibi.”

Everett moves to his mother’s side and wraps an arm around her shoulders. His face is unreadable, but I can tell he’s torn between the instinct to protect his mother and his ingrained respect for the law.

The exit door behind us opens with a bang as Ivy Fairbanks strides onto the scene as if she’s been waiting in the wings for her cue. Her red hair gleams under the security lights as she takes in the scene with professional efficiency. Those long legs eat up the distance between us in seconds, and soon she’s standing in front of us with that all-too-familiar scowl on her face.

“Noah,” she acknowledges her counterpart at the homicide department with a curt nod that somehow still manages to convey her undying devotion. She’s been crushing hard on Noah ever since they met. Which also explains her undying disdain toward yours truly. Her gaze slides over me with all the warmth of a January blizzard. “Lottie.”

Carlotta snickers at the woman despite the somber scene. “Fancy meeting you here, Poison Ivy. Good thing Lot Lot here keeps stumbling over bodies or you’d be out of a job. Or I guess in this case, you can thank Sexy’s mama for the corpse.”

“So much for covering up a crime,” I mutter and Everett’s eyes flash my way.

I guess the party is still on in that respect.

Noah shoots Carlotta, Everett, and me a quick warning look as well before turning to Ivy. “The victim is Sebastian Gallagher. I don’t know much more about him, but multiple witnesses inside were speaking with him. I’m sure he has ID on his person somewhere.”

Carlotta harumphs. “Why don’t you ask Baxter the Butcher to ID the body? She knows exactly who he is,” she spouts off once again, unprovoked. Although, let’s face it, she seems to be provoking the rest of us just fine. Carlotta juts her head in Eliza’s direction. “Ain’t that right, Toots?”

Eliza grunts as she holds up her bloodstained hands. “Carlotta, do you really want to get on my bad side tonight?”

Ivy shakes her head. “I’m pretty sure it’s Lottie’s bad side you want to stay away from. And don’t think I don’t see that donut in the man’s hand.” She nods my way. “It’s practically your calling card.”

My mouth falls open, but before I can say a word, Ivy plucks a ream of yellow caution tape from her bag.

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*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:01 am*

Carlotta gasps at the sight. “The woman carries crime scene tape in her purse!”

“Where Lottie goes, murder follows,” Ivy says without missing a lethal beat.

Carlotta shrugs at the thought. “She really does know you, Lot.”

I poke her in the ribs and she jumps. Clearly, she doesn’t know me.

“Don’t worry, Noah,” Ivy says as she inspects the body. “I called for backup on my way over. When I heard your voice on the dispatch, I figured you might need support.”

Of course, she did. When doesn’t Ivy Fairbanks come running at the first hint of Noah needing support? We all know exactly how she would like to support him, and it just so happens to be behind closed doors.

I’ll admit, just the thought boils my blood. I can’t help it. I’m surging with hormones—most of which need to find a Sexy outlet, and soon. I nod up at Everett as if I had said those words out loud and he offers a reassuring nod right back because it’s clear he understood my every unspoken word.

Everett gently guides his mother away from the body while saying something softly to her. I can’t hear the conversation, but his protective stance speaks volumes. If Eliza Baxter is responsible for landing this poor man in the next life, then she will most assuredly be getting away with murder. It really does pay to have a high-powered judge as your son.

One of the babies gives me a swift kick. Ooh, maybe one of the twins will be a high-powered judge someday, too. And if that's the case, I suppose I can start picking out my victim.

I cast a side glance at Ivy and give a knowing nod, and this time I don't blame the hormones at all.

People begin to pour out of the community center, drawn by our screams or perhaps just seeking fresh air. Or maybe it's the army of screaming sirens all heading this way that did it.

The first woman to round the hedge lets out a shriek that could shatter glass. More screams follow as others discover the grisly scene, and that alone inspires Ivy to move with impressive speed as she cordons off the area with her magic purse tape.

My mother and Meg push through the growing crowd as both of their faces contort with deep concern. My mother's lemon blonde locks bounce around her shoulders with each hurried step, and her green and white checked wool coat stands out among the sea of emerald party attire.

Next to her, Meg is basically a contrast in every way. My older sister is a self-professed Goth princess and, case in point, has dyed her hair a harsh shade of midnight that seems to absorb light rather than reflect it. She's dressed in black from head to toe, is wearing combat boots to keep her tootsies toasty, and has on lipstick in the darkest necrotic shade to add that extra level of the undead look she's going for.

"Lottie!" My mother rushes to my side, narrowly avoiding a collision with the caution tape. "Are you all right? Are the babies okay?" Her eyes narrow in on me. "What have you done now?"

And just like that, this night takes another step sideways.

## LOTTIE

“I’m fine and so are the babies.” I pat my belly to assure my mother of the fact as we stand just shy of Sebastian Gallagher’s body outside of the community center. “Carlotta and I just found him like this.”

My mother and Meg take a moment to cringe at the body among us.

“Well, not exactly like this,” Carlotta interjects. “Five minutes ago he was just your garden-variety corpse. Now thanks to Lot Lot, he’s Honey Hollow’s hottest tourist attraction.”

I shoot her a look. Although judging by the size of the swelling crowd, she’s not wrong.

Meg peers around the hedge at Sebastian’s body. “Cool knife. Good choice of a murder weapon, Lot. That’s a Victorian handle, right? Now that’s some vintage craftsmanship.”

“Meg.” I shake my head her way.

“What?” she grunts back. “Someone has to appreciate the finer points of homicide. You’re really honing your craft.”

“You always say the sweetest things.” Mom pats Meg’s arm before turning back to me. “This is becoming quite the nasty habit, young lady. Now that the twins are almost here, you really should find something else to occupy your time.”

I suck in a quick breath. “Mother. It’s not like I pencil it into my schedule. Tuesday—bake scones, find corpse, prenatal yoga.” I toss my arms in the air in a fit of frustration. Although I would wrotedeliver twinswith a Sharpie on every wall in the

house if I thought that they were guaranteed to arrive that way.

“Oh, never mind, honey,” she says, giving me a quick hug as best she can. “Get yourself inside, Lottie. It’s freezing out here.” Mom wraps an arm around my shoulders. “You poor thing. This can’t be good for the babies.”

Ivy strides by and stops cold in her tracks when my mother says those words. “Yes”—Ivy snips my way with those dead eyes of hers—“because finding a dead body is normally so beneficial for fetal development.” She takes off to document the scene with her phone.

“Ignore her,” I say to my mother. “And if you don’t mind, I think I’m going to stay out here for a minute longer.”

“That’s right.” Carlotta nods by my side. “Lot likes to keep an eye on her work.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:01 am*

“Have it your way.” My mother wraps her coat tighter around her body. “Come on, Meg. Let’s go.” She begins to scoot my sister in the direction of the community center once again and I pull her back by the elbow.

“Wait. What had the two of you so heated inside?” I’m pretty sure it had nothing to do with Sebastian Gallagher’s murder, but my inquiring mind demands to know. This is the exact kind of thing that can rob me of a good night’s sleep, and heaven knows I’ll be losing enough sleep soon enough times two.

Okay, fine, so I don’t sleep these days at all, but it doesn’t change the fact I love to ruminate on all sorts of odd things at all hours of the night. And I would definitely ruminate over what could have worked my mother and sister up in a tizzy. And with my quirky mother, the possibilities are endless.

Meg rolls her eyes. “I was tapped to perform in Las Vegas in a month and I’m going to accept the offer.”

I gasp at the thought. “You mean perform in the ring?” Meg was a pretty famous female wrestler for years. “Are you reprising Madge the Badge?” That was the character she played, and let me tell you, she was so popular that girls still emulate her in costume form each year at Halloween. And I’m super proud of my big sister because of it, too. When Lyla Nell comes of age, she’s so going to be Madge the Badge—and maybe it’s high time I don that costume myself.

“Yup,” Meg says. “And I’m going, too.”

“What about the baby?” I ask.

Mom gives a frenetic nod. “That’s exactly what I said.”

Carlotta belts out a wild whoop. “Who cares about the little yipper. We’re going to Vegas, baby!” She and Meg exchange high-fives.

Mom groans. “And I guess that means I’m going as well. Someone has to watch little Piper back at the room while Mommy is in the ring. I’m sure her daddy will want to be in the audience cheering you on.” She gives a reluctant shrug at my sister.

“Cool beans,” Meg says. “Thanks, Mom. I really appreciate it. It was going to cost me a fortune to kennel her for two weeks.”

“Meg.” Mom swats her, and my sister cackles as if there wasn’t a body less than six feet away.

“Come with us, Lot,” Meg says as my mother begins to drag her inside again.

“I wish,” I call out after them. “I’m guessing I’ll be a bit busy in one month’s time. You guys have fun out there; I’ll have fun right here.”

About ten different people openly glare at me and I suddenly remember where I am and which body I’m standing over. And believe me, there’s nothing fun about these dirty looks.

Noah finishes his call and steps our way. “Lottie, I need to ask you and Carlotta what you saw.”

“What wesaw?” Carlotta gyrates as if she were just electrocuted. “What we saw was Eliza the Ripper trying to perform impromptu open-heart surgery with a cocktail knife. Very innovative approach, but her technique needs work. Patient satisfaction rating is zero stars.”

A round of gasps and screams circles the crowd at her words and I don't hesitate to swat her.

"Would you stop?" I snip. "We saw no such thing. Noah, we just came outside for some fresh air," I explain while holding my belly as if it might fall off if I didn't give it the extra support. "We walked over and found the poor man like this."

"That's right." Carlotta happily corroborates my story, as she should. "And the Country Club Carver was standing over him with blood on her hands."

"Oh, for Pete's sake." I glance in Everett and Eliza's direction, but thankfully it doesn't seem they heard. Although I can't say the same for the sixty-plus people pressing up against us with looks of outright horror.

"Did you see anyone else?" Noah asks, and if I'm not mistaken, he has a pleading look on his face.

I know for a fact that the detective in him wants to arrest anyone but Eliza. She was practically a second mother to him in a roundabout way. And with Suze Fox as his primary sourpuss of a maternal figure, I'm sure he really appreciates Eliza.

I shake my head. "Just Eliza," I confirm, lower than a whisper. "But she says she found him already...well, you know." I make a vague stabbing gesture that I immediately regret—mostly due to the gasps and screams that ensue because of it.

The entire Ashford Sheriff's Department seems to arrive in droves with their red and blue lights painting the vicinity in alternating splashes of color. The partygoers are quickly herded back inside for questioning, and just like that, their festive mood is thoroughly shattered.

Venus catches my eye from the crowd. Her face is pale with shock as she clutches her

mother's arm, and poor Keegan Meryl looks as if she might faint.

Glinda Van Jance stands off to the side, and yet her expression is unreadable as she watches the sheriff's department secure the scene. The only one who is nowhere to be seen is the other redheaded woman Sebastian was arguing with earlier—Della Crane.

"I should check on Everett and Eliza," I tell Noah, who nods absently while already coordinating with the arriving officers.

Ivy walks by and just about blocks my path. "Don't even think of leaving town, Lottie," she calls after me as she strides on by, not bothering to hide her suspicion in a crowd of thousands—or at least it feels like thousands.

"I'm nine months pregnant with twins," I call back as she makes her way to the other side of the body. "I couldn't make a quick getaway if I tried!"

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Although, I'll admit, it's not looking so good right about now. A getaway, quick or slow, might just be necessary.

I waddle my way toward Everett, who happens to be sitting with his mother on a bench safely away from the chaos. That cute little ghostly fox comes to mind, but it's nowhere to be seen at the moment. And honestly, I'm thankful for that. Right now, I want to focus on the living.

Carlotta falls in step beside me because, let's face it, she's harder to shake than the glitter Lyla Nell peppered the house with.

"Well, Lot," she sighs, "I guess I won't have to worry about making Sebastian Gallagher my next mistake after all. When you've been in as many relationships as I have, you start to appreciate when fate does the dumping for you."

I shoot her a look.

"What? I collect near-miss relationships with future murder victims. We all have our hobbies."

I glance back at the body, now fully surrounded by officers and crime scene technicians.

A night that began with happy little shamrock cookies and whiskey-glazed donuts has ended with the Grim Reaper and flashing lights.

Someone in this sea of redheads turned this auburn affair into a death sentence, and

unfortunately for Eliza Baxter—she’s looking like the prime suspect.

I know for a fact the only way for Everett and me to put our focus back on the birth of these babies where it belongs is to solve this case.

And whether Everett or Noah likes it or not, that’s exactly what I’m about to do.

NOAH

Red and blue lights flash across the parking lot, painting Sebastian Gallagher’s lifeless body in slashes of alternating colors.

Another body in Honey Hollow.

As much as I’d like to say I can’t wrap my head around it, a part of me wonders what took so long.

The scent of sugar and whiskey permeates my senses along with a metallic twinge in the air.

My eyes drift to the donut in the hands of the dead man. How I wish Lottie and her baked goods weren’t forever getting tangled up in these blatant acts of evil.

But on the bright side—if there is a bright side—Lottie has singlehandedly brought each of those killers to justice. However, I can’t let her do that this time, not in her condition. And if Eliza has anything to do with this, justice might be found on a sliding scale.

The coroner kneels beside the poor man sprawled on the ground, already making preliminary notes while officers secure the perimeter. But it’s the handle of that knife still protruding from Sebastian’s chest like a pearlescent sundial that prickles the hair

on the back of my neck.

Someone thought it was fitting to end that man's life tonight. And I'm hoping with everything in me that the someone in question is not Eliza Baxter.

"Noah." Ivy waves at me with her notepad already filled with statements as I make my way over. "Three witnesses saw Mrs. Baxter arguing with the victim earlier this evening."

"Wonderful." I blow out a breath as I scan the crowd. I spot Lottie and Carlotta immediately but no sign of Everett and Eliza. It wouldn't surprise me one bit if he's already shipping her off to Europe. It's certainly something I would have considered. And if he needs help on my end... I blow out another hard breath, and this time it stretches into a white desolate plume.

I'll admit, I would turn a blind eye for a handful of people and Eliza is one of them. But Ivy is involved and so is the rest of the department at this point. In theory, turning a blind eye would be a cinch, but this is reality and things not only got bloody tonight, they got complicated fast.

"I'm handling this case solo," I tell Ivy before making my way through the crowd.

"Fox," Ivy calls out, but I don't turn around. I'm sure I'll get an earful later, but I'm not up for it tonight. I'm the lead investigator, and that means I get to call the shots—whether or not she likes them. Whether or not they lead to an internal investigation or cost me my career.

I speed over to where Lottie and Carlotta stand huddled nearby just feet away from the crime scene. Lottie looks exhausted with her hands cradling her enormous belly and I'd do anything to get her home and in bed.

“How are you holding up?” I ask while offering her a firm embrace and one of the twins kicks me in the gut because of it.

“Oh, she’s fine, Foxy,” Carlotta interjects before Lottie can answer. “Finding bodies is practically a cardio workout for her. The twins will probably pop out asking where the next corpse is hiding.”

Lottie shoots her a look, even though we both know she’s right.

“What?” Carlotta juts her neck out like a chicken. “I’m just saying, most women nest before giving birth. Lot Lot here collects dead bodies like they’re limited-edition Beanie Babies.”

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Lottie opens her mouth to protest but gags on her words because there isn't much to protest.

I lean their way. "I know I asked earlier, but I really need you to think. Did either of you see anything out of the ordinary when you arrived on the patio?" I ask, pulling out my notepad in hopes of a different answer.

"What we saw"—Carlotta announces a touch too loudly—"was the Silver Spoon Stabber performing amateur acupuncture with extreme precision. Her knife placement was excellent. But her patient outcome was poor."

An officer walking by nearly trips over the caution tape just hearing it.

"Would you knock it off?" Lottie elbows her. "You already said all that, albeit worded a little differently."

"I can't help it, Lot. I'm on a roll." Carlotta pats herself on the back. "It's not every day Sexy's mama unleashes the beast within and tells one of her exes what's what with the working end of a knife."

"He was not one of her exes," Lottie is quick to tell her. "Eliza was married to Everett's father forever, then she made the mistake of marrying Noah's conman of a father for five regretful minutes." She winces my way and mouths a quicksorry.

"No offense taken," I say. "Please continue."

"Anyway"—Lottie does just that—"Eliza was so burned by Wylie she hasn't dated

since. Besides, she said she didn't know the man." She looks my way. "We came outside for air," Lottie explains, shooting Carlotta a warning look. "We found Sebastian like this, and Eliza was standing over him because she simply tried to help the man." She cringes again, and I know for a fact she's trying her hardest to try to keep her mother-in-law out of the big house. I can't blame her; so am I.

"She claims she was just trying to pull the knife out," I say with a shrug.

"And I claim I'm only twenty-five," Carlotta snorts. "We all tell lies to make ourselves feel better."

Lottie gasps as she stares down her look-alike. "I'm going to fit you with a muzzle, first thing in the morning."

"Why wait that long?" I mutter.

I scan the crowd, looking for Everett once again, and this time I spot him with Eliza, on a bench away from the chaos. Eliza sits ramrod straight, stoic, and confident, despite the blood staining her hands.

"Let's check on them," I suggest as I guide Lottie and Carlotta across the way.

"Need me to break the ice?" Carlotta offers as we approach. "I've got more than a few killer jokes on hand. Get it? Killer jokes?" She cackles at her own ridiculous pun.

"Please don't," Lottie and I say in unison.

Eliza looks up as we approach and her expression is unreadable. Everett's face, however, is a storm of conflicted emotions. I know for a fact the judge in him is battling with the devoted son he is.

“I’m going home,” Eliza announces without preamble as she rises to her feet, and for a moment, I think maybe she’s afraid I’m going to arrest her. I’d love to assure her of otherwise, but deep down I know better.

“Whoa,” I say, pulling her in for a quick embrace. “I understand you want to leave, but I really would like to ask you a few questions first,” I say, trying to balance my heartfelt respect with the job at hand. “It’s just procedure, nothing personal. In fact, I’m willing to break with protocol to make it as painless as possible.”

“Ask away,” she replies with an icy frost coating each syllable. “I’ve already told you everything.”

“Yeah, Foxy,” Carlotta snips. “Like how to effectively accessorize with other people’s blood. Crimson is the new black. Ain’t that right, Lethal Lizzy?”

Eliza casts a glance at Carlotta strong enough to curdle milk.

I choose to ignore Carlotta’s colorful outburst and focus on the task at hand. “Did you know the deceased?” I don’t take my eyes off of Eliza.

Her lips press tight as if they had no intention of uttering a word. “I did not know Sebastian Gallagher,” Eliza insists, although something flickers in her eyes when she says it. “I was out for some fresh air—I saw him in distress, and foolishly tried to help.” She holds out her hands, still coated in crimson. “And believe me when I say, that will be the last Good Samaritan act that I indulge in any time soon.”

I tip my ear her way. “And you mentioned you tried to remove the knife?” I ask, knowing full well that I’m treading on thin ice with Everett watching my every move. He’s like a missile ready to explode, all steel and heat. A part of me is fearing for my teeth—although my vision is pretty high on the list, too.

“Yes.” She nods curtly. “It wouldn’t budge.”

“Like her alibi,” Carlotta quips loud enough for everyone to hear. “That thing is sticking about as well as a cat in a bathtub.”

Both Lottie and Everett growl her way.

“Come on, Mom.” Everett places a protective hand on his mother’s shoulder. “I’ll drive you home.”

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“That won’t be necessary.” Eliza smooths her blood-spattered dress with remarkable composure. “My driver is already out front. I need to clean up a bit first.” She lifts her hands a notch before looking my way. “You know where to find me.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

She gives a curt nod to each of us—longest to Everett, briefest to Carlotta—before stepping back into the community center.

“I think I’ll walk her out,” Everett says, giving me a look that spells out we are not done in the most aggressive manner before bolting into the crowd.

“Bloody Hands Baxter strikes again,” Carlotta announces once they’re out of earshot. “She sliced him up smoother than a country club pâté.”

Lottie makes a face but chooses to ignore her for the most part.

“Noah”—Lottie steps in close and I wrap my arms around her like a reflex—“you have to know she’s innocent. This is Eliza we’re talking about.”

Her body is shivering, her lips are trembling, and she looks all around ready to collapse.

“Lottie, I’m going to say this in the nicest way, but I need you to stay out of this one. And off your feet if possible.”

Her eyes narrow over mine and I can tell I just pulled the pin on a very hormonal

grenade.

“Oh, so you’d like for me to be eating bonbons on the sofa until the babies arrive?”

“Feel free to swap bonbons for donuts, but yes, I want you safe.” I touch the tip of her nose with my own. “Scratch that. Ineedyou safe and I need the babies safe, too. Besides, this is the last bit of time that Lyla Nell can get you all to herself. Put your feet up. Read her books, snuggle with her. In fact, I wouldn’t mind getting in on that snuggling action myself.”

Everett reappears and growls on command. “What did I miss?” He lifts a brow before eyeing my arms wrapped around his wife like a vine.

“Nothing much,” Carlotta pipes up. “Just Foxy here trying to schedule some snuggle time with Lot Lot before the yip yips take over. He’s making his move while you were busy escorting Stabby McRichpants to her getaway car.”

Everett grunts my way and his eyes narrow dangerously on me. “Keep your focus off my wife and on my mother. I want her name wiped off your suspect list ASAP.”

“You know I can’t do that,” I say with a frown because, let’s face it, I’m mad about it, too. “Not until the evidence clears her.”

“Then find the evidence,” he thunders. “Because we both know she didn’t have anything to do with this.”

“Hate to break it to you, Sexy.” Carlotta ticks her head to the side. “But his blood on her hands suggests otherwise. It’s what we in the amateur sleuthing business call not a great look.”

My phone chirps and it’s a text from Ivy requesting my presence.

I say goodnight and head back to ground zero. And as I head back to the crime scene, I can't help but feel caught between impossible loyalties—to my job, to Everett, to Lottie, and most of all, to Eliza.

The Redhead Roundup promised Irish luck and celebration, but as the night grows colder, I know only one thing for sure. By the time this case closes, the killer's luck will have run out—no four-leaf clover or pot of gold will be enough to hide them from justice.

And if Eliza is the killer, something tells me that Everett and I will be testing our luck and our devotion to the law to the killer extreme.

It's a bad day to be Eliza Baxter.

And quite possibly a bad day to be me.

I glance down at the corpse one last time.

It is definitely a bad day to be Sebastian Gallagher.

EVERETT

The morning light filters through the kitchen windows, casting a honey-colored glow across the limestone floors.

Coffee percolates in the background, filling the air with its rich aroma—a scent that would normally comfort me but fails to penetrate the fog of my sleepless night.

I still can't fathom what happened yesterday.

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Mymother trying to help a dying man?

I'm sorry, but I wouldn't believe it even if I saw it with my own two eyes and yet that's exactly what she demands I believe.

That's her story, and she sure as heck seems to be sticking to it. For now, at least.

But if there's even a hint of a lie in there somewhere, her story will tumble like a house of cards. I've done enough time on the bench to know that a lie snowballs into other lies, and soon enough that avalanche of deception eventually takes down the one looking to deceive. And how I hope that is not the case with my mother.

There's just no way I believe she stumbled upon that nightmare and the first thing that came to mind was plucking that knife out.

It's not that my mother is a bad person. She's more of a believer in letting the help aid in the needs of others, and herself. Not to mention her lifelong phobia of the sanguine liquid that runs through our veins.

There's no way I'm mentioning any of that to Noah or Lemon. It's bad enough my mother has managed to land at the top of a suspect list. The last thing I need is to give them a reason to keep her there.

"Daddy!" Lyla Nell giggles as she runs my way and I quickly scoop her into my arms and kiss her cheek. She gets her sweet demeanor and natural curiosity from Lemon, but those green eyes and dimples are all Noah. It's her ability to argue her way out of a paper bag that she gets from me.

“Morning, baby.” I sneak in another kiss to her cheek and she giggles twice as loud. “Did you sleep well?”

“I hates sleep,” she declares like the truth it is. In fact, I’d go as far as saying Lyla Nell is allergic to getting some shut-eye.

A white furry tornado times two darts past us and Lyla Nell kicks and squeals, unable to focus on anything but it.

“Cancake! Wockles!” she shouts as I set her to the floor. “Get back here!” She takes off, echoing their names through the house as she chases Pancake and Waffles, a couple of Himalayan brothers—two white balls of fluff whose fur rises in the air like confetti.

Lemon makes her way into the kitchen, her sweet belly leading the way. She looks exhausted but beautiful with her honey-blond hair twisted into a messy bun. She’s dressed for success in a blue denim dress and a cozy pink sweater that looks soft to the touch, and I quickly confirm it is as I pull her in for a kiss.

“The coffee is ready,” I tell her, sliding a mug of decaf her way, but she wraps her arms around me instead and we share another quick kiss. “How did you sleep?”

“Like a woman housing two future basketball players practicing layups on her bladder.” She gives a wry smile. “How about you?”

“I didn’t,” I admit, touching my forehead to hers. “It’s pretty hard to catch a wink when your mother becomes suspect number one in a murder investigation.”

Things couldn’t possibly get any worse.

She tips her head and a sunbeam crosses her features, lighting her up like the angel

she is.

“How did the conversation go with Meghan?” she winces as she asks.

I called my sister once I got home last night and told her exactly what happened. That went about as well as I imagined—which is to say, catastrophically.

“She immediately threatened to hire ten different attorneys. I assured her I’d handle everything on the legal end of things. Suffice it to say, she’s worried sick.” I close my eyes for a minute. “And I had no inclination to tell Evie, but she sent a whole slew of text messages around midnight. Apparently, one of her friends was at the event and saw the whole scene play out.”

“Oh my goodness.” Lemon buries her face in my chest for a moment. “Poor Evie does not need this kind of worry while she’s away at school.”

“She said she’ll be driving home as soon as her midterms are through. And I’m pretty sure there’s no stopping her from worrying.”

Thankfully, she’s at Ashford University, which allows for easy travel whenever the mood strikes her. I just wish it was striking under different circumstances.

And then there are the twins, twelve-year-old Ava and Olivia, that I brought into this world from a one-night stand. In fact, I had no clue about them up until a couple of months ago. Ironically, they knew my mother before they knew me. I’ll have to talk to their mother Haley and do my best to explain the circumstances. We’ll both want to shield the girls from all of this. They adore their grandmother, who affectionately they call Mimi Lizzy. Heck, we were all at dinner together just last week and they couldn’t idolize her more if they tried.

I nod. “And I feel the need to give Haley a call, too—just in case the girls hear

something at school.”

“What a disaster.” Lemon bites down on her lip. “Of course, she didn’t do it.” It comes out more of a question. “I mean, your mother is many things—demanding, she’s a perfectionist, occasionally ruthless in social settings—but she’s not a killer. The thought is absurd.”

A visual of my mother’s crimson-stained hands comes back to me. My mother wouldn’t so much as soil her pinky, let alone bathe her hands in it for that matter. It could have been me there lying with a knife in my chest and she’d command me to pluck it out myself.

Lemon gives my ribs a quick pinch. “Penny for your thoughts, Judge Baxter?”

My lips curve but no smile. “Not sure they’re worth that much today.”

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That, and the fact someone could be legally prosecuted because of them.

The sound of shuffling footsteps grows in volume as Carlotta saunters into the kitchen in a pink robe that's seen better decades, her hair wrapped in aluminum foil.

"Morning, offspring of a felon," she chirps with glee. "Sleep well, Sexy?"

"Carlotta." Lemon gasps.

"What? We're all thinking it." Carlotta heads straight for the coffee pot. "Besides, it's not the first time Lady Kills-a-Lot has gotten blood on her hands. Remember that charity auction where she demolished Francine Dundee's bid for that fancy-schmancy timeshare in Aspen?"

"That was metaphorical bloodshed," Lemon corrects.

"Tell that to Francine's therapy bills. And you and I both know that Francine has one too many baby chicks to afford chicken feed, let alone a fancy plumber to unclog her brain." Carlotta pauses long enough to slurp her coffee. "So, what's the defense strategy to keep your mama out of the pen? Temporary coo-coo brain? Did he insult her red-bottom heels? Was he allergic to being alive?"

I frown her way. "There won't be a defense strategy because my mother didn't kill anyone."

If I say it long enough, I might fully believe it.

Carlotta waves me off. “Whatever stops the tears, Sexy.” She moves on to the donuts sitting under a glass dome, and Lemon and I may as well be invisible from this point on. Nothing gets between Carlotta and her donuts.

Lemon checks her watch and frowns. “The housekeeper is late. I guess my scones will have to wait. I may not be able to do much at the bakery these days, but nobody makes those scones but me.” She winks as she says it.

“I’ll wait for the housekeeper,” I tell her. “You go ahead.”

“Everett, are you sure?” Lemon asks as Lyla Nell runs into the room dragging her diaper bag.

“Me want Glam Glam,” she cries as she holds her arms up our way.

Glam Glam would be Miranda’s nickname in lieu of Grandma.

“I’d better go.” Lemon lands a kiss to my lips just as one of the twins gives me a wallop, and I reward them with a belly pat.

“Don’t stay long,” I urge her. “Bed rest isn’t all that bad. Believe me, if my doctor recommended bed rest, I’d be whistling all the way to the bedroom. Think of all the relaxation you could get in. All the TV, books, and phone time you could stand. And the naps alone speak for themselves.”

“You’re tempting me.” She laughs as she picks up Lyla Nell’s hand. “But only a little. Are you sure you want to stick around?”

“I’ve got time before my first case.”

We exchange another lingering kiss as I help them to the van and wave them off.

“Try not to let the Silver Spoon Stabber skip town,” Carlotta calls over her shoulder as she jumps into her own minivan and takes off in haste right after them as if she had a bank to rob.

And after the legal pickle my mother has found herself in, I wouldn’t be surprised by anything.

No sooner do I step back through the door than my phone buzzes with a text from the housekeeper. She can’t make it today. Family emergency.

I text back a quick response wishing her well, then survey the kitchen. Coffee grounds spilled across the counter. Cat hair clumped like tumbleweeds roll across the floor.

Lemon has been working so hard at the bakery while managing Lyla Nell and her pregnancy. She deserves to come home to a sparkling clean house. That’s exactly why I insisted on hiring a housekeeper to begin with. She only makes a weekly pitstop here, but it always brings a smile to Lemon’s face. And I’d do anything to see her smile.

Heck, I bet I have plenty of time to whip this place into shape before my first case. How hard could a little cleaning be? I’ll start with the floors.

Limestone floors—are we supposed to mop those with water? I head to the cleaning closet and scan the array of bottles. My eyes land on a spray can of Woodland Whisper furniture polish. This should do. The label mentions natural shine and protective coating, both of which sound appropriate for stone.

I start at the entry and make my way to the kitchen, spraying the stuff liberally across every inch of the floor, watching with satisfaction as the limestone takes on a glossy sheen.

Time to wipe it down.

I grab a mop and make one broad stroke. Before I know it, my feet fly out from under me.

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The world tilts sideways.

Pain explodes across my back as I land hard on my spine with a teeth-rattling thud.

My cell phone jumps out of my pocket and skitters across the room like a frightened mouse, coming to rest well underneath the refrigerator.

I try to move and all I can do is groan.

Pain sears through my spine like a white-hot knife.

I can't move.

Things just got worse.

LOTTIE

The scent of cinnamon and fresh coffee hits me the moment I push through the door of the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery with my arms full of squirming toddler and a belly full of more of the same.

Lyla Nell has decided that walking is for peasants today. Lucky for her, my enormous belly doubles as a shelf—or in this case, a seat.

The bakery is decked out to the nines in St. Patrick's Day glory with shamrock garland draped every which way, cutouts of leprechauns dancing along the walls, and green-frosted everything in the display case. The place hums with morning chatter

and the hiss of the espresso machine.

The crowd of customers is thick and so is that aforementioned heavenly scent of coffee.

The bakery happens to be conjoined with the Honey Pot Diner, the restaurant that I own along with my sister Charlie. The Honey Pot is cute and cozy and even has a life-size resin oak tree that acts as the centerpiece. In fact, its branches spread out from the Honey Pot and across its ceiling and mine, connecting both businesses like a botanical umbilical cord. Each branch is wrapped in magical twinkle lights, with green ones added for this shamrock-shaped season. Right now, the effect is part enchanted forest, part Irish pub fever dream.

I spot my mother at a table near the window, surrounded by a small army of caramel-haired females. My sister Lainey is there with her girls—rambunctious two-and-a-half-year-old Josie and tiny Mimi, or as her birth certificate reads, Miranda Lottie Donovan, hardly a month old and already commanding attention like a seasoned Donovan diva.

Carlotta strides in next to me and cups her hands around her mouth. “Listen up, folks! Breaking news—Lot Lot’s hoity-toity Murder-in-Law will be going up the river soon enough! But rest assured, she’ll be going to the big house in style!”

I suck in a quick breath just as Carlotta jumps out of swatting range.

She turns to me with a wicked grin. “Hey, Lot Lot, do they make designer jumpsuits for the criminally fabulous? Orange Chanel, perhaps? Prison-yard Prada?”

A titter of nervous laughter circles the room.

“Very funny,” I snarl her way just as my mother comes over and wrestles Lyla Nell

right out of my arms—or from off my belly as it were. “Keep it up, Carlotta, and I’ll need bail money myself.”

“Oh, Lottie, don’t engage,” my mother says as she kisses Lyla Nell on the forehead. “And please stop picking Lyla Nell up. She’s a very big girl and she has two perfectly good legs. Yes, you do!” She rubs her nose to Lyla Nell’s and the two of them break out in giggles. “Who is Glam Glam’s little doll?”

“Glam Glam,” Josie shouts from her high chair with a deeply affronted look on her face.

“Oh, you know I’ve got more than one,” my mother trills as she lands Lyla Nell in a waiting high chair of her own. “After all, I’m a professional grandma now. I’ve got this.” She gestures to the spread before them—cinnamon rolls the size of salad plates and shamrock lattes complete with green foam art. That was my idea. Come to think of it, all of it was my idea.

“Morning, Lottie,” Lainey sings and I do my best to give her a quick hug—albeit awkward and more of a chokehold while she bounces little Mimi against her shoulder. “Mom said you know all about Meg’s Vegas trip? I am definitely going. Please tell me you’re going, too!”

I pinch off a bite of her cinnamon roll—so soft and gooey. “You already know the answer to that. And I can’t believe you’re going. You’re insane.”

Mom gags. “Well, if I wasn’t going before, I am now.” She tosses her hands in the air. “I volunteer to babysit in the hotel—with lots of room service, of course.”

Lainey gasps. “Hear that, Lottie? We’ve got a free sitter! You have to come for sure now.”

A quick laugh bubbles from me, albeit a mournful one. “I’m pretty sure the twins won’t let me go to the bathroom, let alone all the way to Vegas—with or without them in tow.”

Carlotta bops over. “Are we talking about my upcoming Vegas trip again? The one where I’ll finally fulfill my lifelong dream of becoming a showgirl—or at least getting arrested impersonating one?”

“Carlotta, you don’t even know who’s invited,” I point out. “This is Meg’s big trip.”

“Details, details.” She waves me off dismissively. “I’m a package deal. Where trouble goes, I follow. Or is it the other way around?”

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I'm not sure exactly what she said, but it sounds about right.

I head to the counter to greet my bakery brigade where Suze, Noah's mother, is busy arranging pastries with military precision. Her stocky frame moves with efficiency, and her short blonde hair with those long, impractical bangs sweeps into her eyes. Her smile tightens when she sees me—forced and pointless, the usual fare. Suze doesn't much care for me, but her paycheck seems to ease the pain of our interactions.

Next to her, Lily Swanson arranges colorful macarons into a cookie rainbow. The dark-haired beauty is currently involved with Alex, Noah's younger brother, and helping raise his baby boy Levi—a situation that sounds like the plot to a romance novel and thankfully works for them, and not just in the parenting department but in the romance department, too.

Fun fact: Lily isn't in my fan club either. But as long as she smiles for my customers, that's all I care about.

And then there's Effie, our resident queen of comebacks, who just so happens to be busy at the register. Her coffee-colored eyes sparkle as she banters with customers. Her sarcasm is legendary. It's less of a skill and more of a superpower.

“Morning, sugar slingers,” I call out with a wave.

“Oh, look, it's our killer boss.” Suze chuckles to herself as she says it. “I heard all about that poor man last night.” She rolls her eyes. “This is exactly why I avoid public outings when you're involved, Lottie. I've cautioned Noah to do the same, but

that boy has never listened to me.” She picks up a green frosted cupcake and sticks a chocolate gold coin into the buttercream. “I heard there was a community center showdown with none other than Eliza Baxter. The husband-thief herself.”

I sigh. For the record, Eliza didn’t steal Wiley from Suze—he left of his own accord—but facts rarely get in the way of a good grudge in this town.

“Now, Suzie Q”—Carlotta interjects—“let’s tell the truth. Eliza didn’t steal your man. She just borrowed him until she realized he was a defective model and threw him back into circulation.” She leans my way. “I came within an inch of my hoo-ha from having my own fortune stolen by the Feckless Fox.”

I avert my eyes at the thought. Carlotta has no fortune to speak of. Unless, of course, she’s somehow found a way of siphoning from my own. Other than that, she already blew through the money Nell left her in the will. Nell would be my grandmother who left me the bakery, the Honey Pot Diner, and an entire list of other real estate endeavors. Carlotta got cash—which she quickly made disappear. Funny how she’s yet to disappear, though.

Suze’s eyes narrow to dangerous slits. “At least I had a husband to lose. Some of us can’t even manage to keep a man around long enough to learn his middle name.”

Carlotta gags and scoffs. “I’ve got Harry! Harry as in Mayor Harry Nash, my girls’ baby daddy.” She looks my way and squints. “What’s Harry’s middle name again?” She waves me off. “Never mind. Everyone knows middle names are overrated,” Carlotta fires back. “And so are husbands, from what I hear. They’re like appendixes. You don’t notice them until they cause trouble, and you’re better off once they’re removed.”

A titter of laughter breaks out in the bakery and I can’t help but join in.

Although I very much love my husband. I love Noah, too. It's complicated.

I'm about to warn Carlotta not to mention internal organs around my customers when a familiar spray of blue and pink stars glitters near the walkway that leads to the Honey Pot Diner. And I certainly know what that means.

"Duty calls," I whisper to myself, already moving toward the connecting doorway. "Hold down the fort, ladies."

"Where are you off to now?" Suze shouts after me. "I'd like to know the places to avoid." She titters to herself as she says it.

Very funny.

"She's off to see the dead about a dead guy." Carlotta laughs, and oddly enough, evokes a few laughs from Lily and Suze as well.

I'm already racing toward the Honey Pot Diner, determined to catch that slippery supernatural trickster before he or she causes another round of magical mischief in my bakery.

Some women chase dreams. Some chase men. I chase the spirit of a long-gone fox with a penchant for dead men and terrible timing—and I wouldn't have it any other way.

LOTTIE

The moment I cross the threshold into the Honey Pot Diner, the temperature drops a few degrees.

Not the usual someone left the door open chill, but the unmistakable icy fingerprint of

the otherworldly. And oddly enough, this is the first time that icy fingerprint has made itself known.

I scan the room, my eyes following the trail of glimmering stars floating like radioactive dust through the cozy establishment.

The Honey Pot Diner is already brimming with customers, mostly those enjoying eggs and bacon with a side of the Honey Pot's famous red velvet waffles—made to order in my bakery. And boy, the scent of bacon is calling me like a salty, sizzling siren song.

It's bright inside from the morning light pouring in through the giant bay window, and the sound of easy-listening music coming from the speakers puts just about everyone in a jovial mood.

Everyone except for me.

There—next to the oak tree centerpiece—that adorable furry fox sits patiently with its luminescent eyes fixed on me as if I'm late for an appointment. Its translucent fur shimmers with an internal glow that trails with pink and blue stars that quickly dissolve into nothing.

I speed that way and nearly bump right into my sister.

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“Charlie,” I say, gripping my belly and inching back, just about losing my balance.

“Whoa, sister,” she says with a laugh as she does her best to keep me from tipping backward. “Why don’t we get you a seat? What are you in such a hurry for, anyway? If you’re looking for Keelie, she took the afternoon off. Apparently, there’s some ritzy birthday party for a three-year-old today. All the who’s who of Honey Hollow under five will be there, or so I’m told.” She wrinkles her nose at the thought.

And that nose wrinkling is pretty much Charlie’s take on motherhood, too.

Charlie and I are nearly identical in every way—same hair, face, eyes, and ability to see right through to the other side, but I’m older by a year.

It turns out, we’re something called transmundane, further classified as supersensual, which means we can see the dead. But not all the dead, mostly just those the man upstairs sends back to help solve a crime or two.

Mostly.

And bymostly, I mean just me. Charlie has yet to have a supernatural sidekick sent her way. I guess you could say I’m the unlucky one in the family who fate seems to have tapped as a supernatural sleuth. But there are other ghosts we see on the regular, too—like the happy family of ghosts taking up residence in my mother’s B&B.

Charlie wasn’t raised by the Lemons like I was, but pretty much my mother, Meg, and Lainey have all adopted her by proxy, too.

“I’m not here for Keelie,” I tell her. Even though I so have some serious tea to spill with her. She will never believe what Everett’s mother, of all people, has managed to tangle herself up in.

Keelie has been my bestie ever since preschool. We’ve shared all of our secrets with one another, with the exception of the fact I can see the dead. I couldn’t tell her. The girl is afraid of the dark. The last thing I wanted was for her to be afraid of me. “I’m here for that cute little thing.” I nod to the precious white fox with ears almost the same size as its body.

Charlie gasps and takes me by the hand straight to a table for two right next to where the wily fox sits, shimmering away like a miniature galaxy of stars.

“Does this have something to do with that man Eliza hacked down last night?” Charlie asks as we quickly take a seat across from one another.

I shoot her a look for even thinking it, let alone saying it out loud in a public establishment.

“Never you mind,” I whisper her way before leaning toward the tiny specter in question. Upon closer examination, it not only has snow-white fur, but a cute little snout, and little pink lips that curve into what I swear is a smile. “What’s your name, sweetie?”

The tiny fox bounces from the trunk of the tree right onto our table, facing both Charlie and me.

“My name is Sebastian, but you can call me Sebby,” he says in the cutest little masculine voice you ever did hear.

“Aww,” both Charlie and I coo in unison.

“Wait.” I shake my head at it. “Are you telling me that Sebastian named you after himself?”

The little cutie pie gives a quick nod. “And why not? A perfect name from one perfect gentleman to another. He always called me Sebby. After all, that’s what his own family called him.”

“Interesting.” I lean back and lift a brow at Charlie.

She shakes her head. “He named his pet after himself? That says everything I need to know about the man.”

“Oh, I was no pet.” The tiny thing inches back as if he were affronted. “I was family myself. Once Sebby took me in, well, his family took me in as well. What Sebby wanted Sebby got. And when he was a teenager, he wanted me as his friend.” He glances toward the window and sighs. “Of course, that meant never seeing my own family and friends ever again, but it was worth it in the end. I ate steak and French fries, along with Mama’s chocolate silk whiskey pie. The meals were plentiful and we stayed up far too late each night watching questionable television.”

Charlie perks up. “Ooh,that chocolate silk whiskey pie does sound good.”

“I am definitely putting it on the menu,” I tell him. “Sebby, you know you’re here to help solve Sebastian’s homicide, right?”

“That I do,” he practically sings. “And the sooner we land the killer behind bars, the sooner I can hit the bar with Sebastian in the sky.”

I make a face. “This is the first time I’ve heard anything about a bar up there.”

“Oh, there is one,” he insists. “In fact, there are several. And the wine most certainly

does not taste like water, if you know what I mean. Miracles still abound.”

“Good to know,” Charlie says, looking as amused as I do.

“One more thing, Sebby,” I say, leaning in his way. “There’s a woman who is currently sitting at the top of the suspect list. Her name is Eliza Baxter.”

“At the top of the suspect list?” he practically squeals so loud both babies jump at once in my belly. I’m not sure if my twins will be transmundane like Lyla Nell is—and believe me, that’s been sort of a problem already. Or if they heard the little guysqueak because they’re touching me, or rather residing in me. As it stands, if anyone touches my flesh, they can hear straight through to the other side, too.

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“Why, let’s arrest the wealthy little fiend and be done with it.” Sebby floats up a few inches along with his insolence. “Wait until I get my paws on her. How dare she shove a knife into the man who was my brother from another mother.”

I shoot him a wry look. “We are definitely not arresting Eliza,” I practically hiss. “She’s innocent. I think. Anyway. No matter what anyone says—no matter what evidence we stumble upon...” I pause a moment to glance over at Charlie whose eyebrows have crested into her forehead. “Eliza Baxter is innocent. There’s a real killer out there and it’s our job to find them, and fast.” I place my hands on my belly. “Like very fast.”

Sebby salutes me with his paw. “I’m on it, Lolita.”

I inch back. I don’t remember telling him my name.

“My name is Lottie,” I correct, enunciating it for his benefit.

“That’s not what Carlotta told me,” he counters.

“Wait...you met Carlotta?” I squint his way. “Never mind. It’s Lottie. Carlotta is seldom right about anything.”

“But she’s fun, much like my Sebastian was,” he’s quick to tell me. “And besides, I like Lolita. It has a nice ring to it.” He begins to float toward the ceiling once more. “I’ll see you soon enough. I hear there’s an entire forest of little foxes out beyond the lake. If you’ll excuse me, I have a little catching up to do with my kind. Ta-ta for now!” And with that, he floats right out of sight.

“Wonderful.” I frown in his wake. I go to stand and Charlie grabs me by the wrist.

“Hey, did you get the invite to Vegas?”

I give a quick nod. “But as much as I love Meg, I don’t think I can swing it.”

She looks momentarily confused. “Is Meg participating in the Vegas Flavor Frenzy, too?”

I gasp a little at the mention of the event. “I forgot all about that. Is that coming up? I mean, Meg will be in Las Vegas for a wrestling match, but I doubt it’s at the very same time.”

“The Flavor Frenzy is in a month,” she tells me. “I’ve already committed to the Savory Sizzle in Sin City. You should sign up for the Sin City Sugar Showdown.”

“Oh, Charlie,” I moan. “The Vegas Flavor Frenzy is huge.” The event itself is parceled off into two different events, the Savory Sizzle for the savory culinary lovers and the Sin City Sugar Showdown for those of us with a sweet tooth. “I’m so glad you’re competing. It’s been a dream of mine forever to compete myself. But as much as I’d love to come along”—I place my hand over my belly—“I’m sort of cooking up a little something with my husband. You know I can’t travel with the twins. Maybe next year—or in eighteen years more likely.”

“Bummer,” she says, leaning in and giving me a hug. “But I understand. And just for the record, you would have slayed the competition.”

“Aww, thank you.”

“No, I mean it.” She winks. “Vegas should pen you a thank you note for narrowly avoiding a tragedy or two.” She slinks back to the kitchen before a reply can work its

way up my throat.

“Haha, I’m not laughing,” I mutter as I walk back to my bakery and right into another one of my favorite blondes and nearly knock a box of my sweet treats right out of her arms.

“Venus,” I say with a laugh. “Sorry. I seem to lead with my belly these days whether I want to or not. And what did you pick up?” I try to peer into the corner of the box, but I have no clue what deliciousness lurks beneath the cardboard.

“Cookies and cupcakes,” she says with a laugh. “I’m on my way to my niece’s birthday party. My sister-in-law called this morning and requested that I bring the desserts, but I was instructed not to bring them from my bakery. She said she didn’t want this to be all about me on her daughter’s special day.”

“Oh,” I wince as I say it. “Well, I appreciate the business. How about I give you a couple more boxes? On me.”

“I’ll take them.” She laughs again. “But only under one circumstance. You come along with me. As much as I love my sister-in-law, she and her friends can be a bit much. Bring Lyla Nell! It’s going to be quite the party.”

Carlotta materializes as if she were a ghost herself. But face it, I’m not that lucky.

“Did someone say party?” Carlotta perks up at the thought.

“I sure did.” Venus nods. “And you should come along, too, Carlotta. The food is being catered by six different restaurants, and there’s going to be an open bar.”

“I’ll grab my coat.” Carlotta takes off to do just that and I frown in her direction.

“Venus, you really don’t have to extend the invite our way. It’s my pleasure to gift you the desserts.”

“Believe me, you’ll be doing me a bigger favor by showing up. Have I mentioned my niece is turning three?” She rolls her eyes. “And yes, you heard me right. An open bar at a party for a three-year-old. Trust me when I say, this will be a birthday party to end all birthday parties. My sister-in-law and her friends are all about one-upping each other. It’s sort of a blood sport at this point.”

A thought comes to me.

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“A birthday party for your niece? I guess your mother will be there—I mean, Carlotta could say hello to her as well.”

“Oh, she will. And she already loves Carlotta!”

“In that case, you’ve got yourself a few tagalong guests.”

It turns out, I’ve got a party to cater, and my very first suspect to question.

Bring on the cake, and the interrogation.

LOTTIE

If there’s one thing I know for certain, it’s that nothing good ever comes from a children’s birthday party where there’s an open bar.

I had just agreed to Venus’ invitation seconds earlier when Carlotta emerges from the bakery office in a red sequined blazer, gold hoop earrings the size of hula hoops, and a pair of silver stilettos that I know she didn’t leave the house in this morning.

“Ready, set, go!” she announces, snatching a mini cheesecake off the counter and popping it into her mouth like it’s the exact vitamin she needed to get through this day.

Come to think of it, I might need one, too, so I snatch one up myself.

Her sassy heels catch the light like a dying star and I arch a brow. “I didn’t realize we

were attending a Vegas residency.”

She tosses her hair and swipes on bright red lipstick in one Herculean move. “Lot Lot, when there’s an open bar, I am the entertainment.”

Venus snorts out a laugh. “Oh, my sister-in-law and her friends are going to love you.”

“Or request a restraining order,” I mumble.

“I don’t doubt it.” Carlotta straightens the lapels of her glitzy jacket. “And I plan on leaving with at least one man’s phone number and a possible marriage proposal.” She shoots me a look. “Just for funsies, of course.”

“And I’ll start writing my apology letters as soon as I get home,” I say, picking up a few more boxes filled with desserts to bring to the party.

“No way, no how.” Carlotta swipes them from me. “You’re the size of a houseboat right about now, Lot Lot. A houseboat that’s guaranteed to sink all of these yum yums to the ground. They’ll be safe with me. Plus, this way I can sample a few on the ride over.”

“Did you just compare me to a floating home?” The part about sampling desserts on the ride over was a given.

“Affectionately.”

Come to think of it, that level of affection is on brand for Carlotta.

Lyla Nell, Carlotta, and I jump into my van and follow Venus on the way to the party.

Before we left, I was tempted to go home to change, but Venus assured me that both Lyla Nell and I were dressed more than appropriately. Carlotta's level of dress or undress is always questionable.

As expected, the car ride is loud, chaotic, and entirely composed of Carlotta making up increasingly ridiculous reasons why she should be the one to cut the birthday cake.

At least now I know what to expect next week when we're celebrating Lyla Nell's second birthday.

"I have the most experience with knives," Carlotta goes on, touching up her lipstick in the sun visor mirror.

"Yeah, and that statement makes me super comfortable handing you a blade in a room full of toddlers," I deadpan.

It's happened before and it wasn't pretty. Both Noah and Everett had to tackle her to the ground in an effort to spare us all from the knife-twirling routine she claims to have perfected.

"You know if you weren't with me when we found the body, you'd be sitting at the top of the suspect list right along with poor Eliza," I tell her. "Because if anyone in Honey Hollow was going to take out a whiskey tycoon with a single stab wound, my money would have been on you."

"Wow, thanks, Lot Lot," Carlotta beams with pride.

"That wasn't a compliment."

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Carlotta ignores me as we pull into a ritzy driveway that looks more like an old English cobbled road than something that leads to a mere garage. “Ooh, is that the house?”

I look up at the architectural wonder that could double as a castle.

“I guess it is,” I say.

“Yay! Birdy party!” Lyla Nell chirps from the backseat and claps her hands like mad.

“I have a feeling it’s going to besomeparty,” I say under my breath.

I knew Venus’ sister-in-law had money, but this house looks like it came prepackaged with its own Bravo reality show. And something tells me there will be enough drama to furnish one.

The estate is massive with a glistening white mansion with ivy curling up the pristine stone walls sitting right in the middle of it. White columns frame the entrance like it’s the actual White House, and gold-accented balloons in the shape of stars float above the driveway.

A valet in a tuxedo approaches as we park, and once he takes the minivan the three of us team up with Venus again.

“This cannot possibly be a child’s birthday party,” I mutter as Venus leads us closer to what can only be described as a mansion on steroids.

The driveway is lined with what appears to be an entire line of ice sculptures made to look like Disney princesses, along with a fancy red carpet—an actual red carpet—that stretches from the curb to the front door.

“Told you.” Venus nods toward the madness while balancing her own tower of bakery boxes. “My sister-in-law, Vivian, believes in both making memories and spending her husband’s money. Mostly the latter.”

“Will a three-year-old even remember any of this?” I ask as Lyla Nell attempts to climb me like a tree—a rather bloated tree about to have mini trees at any given moment.

“Vivian takes enough pictures to make sure everyone will remember them into perpetuity,” Venus sighs. “She does yearly photo albums. Monthly milestone shoots. Weekly Instagram posts with custom hashtags. You know the type.”

“She’s the exact type I wish I could be,” I say. “I’m sort of disorganized with those kinds of things. In fact, I’m bringing Lyla Nell’s baby book along to the hospital so I can hurry and fill it out before the twins arrive.”

She belts out a laugh. “Don’t worry. I’m the same, Lottie.”

“I don’t have any pictures of my rugrats either,” Carlotta grunts. “It’s bad enough I gotta see ’em every day.” She stops short and gasps while staring at something in the distance. “Is that a champagne fountain I spy?” she squeals with far too much glee. “Now this is my kind of children’s party. Take note, Lottie. You’ll be having a lot of these. And just FYI, I like my champs in any color.”

“Please behave,” I warn her. “We’re here as guests, not to get thrown out of a toddler’s birthday party.” Or get wasted on champagne, but that’s sort of a given on her part at this point.

“When have I ever not behaved?”

Honestly? She looks genuinely curious.

“Would you like the list chronologically or alphabetically by offense?” I shoot back and that seems to have silenced her into admission.

I hold Lyla Nell’s hand while Carlotta balances those boxes from my bakery—or at least the ones that survived her snack raid on the drive over.

“My kids are already here,” Venus says, leading us up the walk. “My girls just adore Lyla Nell. They’ll be thrilled to dote all over her.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I say. “Lord knows I can’t chase after her.”

To our right a catering truck, a live pony wearing a gold tiara, and a man dressed as an actual leprechaun stand ready for whatever level of insanity is about to unfold.

“This is a party for a three-year-old, right?” I ask, just to be sure. Maybe she’s been saying thirty-year-old all along and my pregnant brain just heard what it wanted to hear. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Venus groans. “She’s three going on CEO of a luxury cosmetics empire. My sister-in-law takes competitive parenting to new and terrifying heights.”

Carlotta claps her hands. “I love it. This is exactly the level of ridiculousness I live for.”

Before I can beg her to refrain from speaking for the next few hours, a butler in a full tuxedo nods our way and opens one of the massive double doors to the castle in front of us.

“Welcome, ladies,” he rumbles. “You can find the bar to your right.”

Carlotta grins. “I’m going to need three martinis and the name of whoever owns this palace so I know who to sue in the event I have an unfortunate, fortunate fall. And I do foresee Lady Luck smiling down on a potentially broken leg tonight.”

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The screams of a thousand toddlers emanate from inside and Venus groans.

“Welcome to the battlefield.”

LOTTIE

A woman meets us in the foyer before we can properly step inside, revealing a stunning beauty who I’m guessing is Venus’ sister-in-law.

The woman is gorgeous. Sculpted features, impossibly svelte frame. Vivian has the polished look of someone who considers being a mom a full-time job but also employs three nannies. Her highlights look as if they cost more than my monthly budget, and her smile has the warmth of a tax audit.

The sound of chatter and laughter pours out into the entry and the sound of classical music is layered just above that. Brass and marble abound every which way you look, and honestly, it feels as if we’re about to step into a mausoleum.

“Venus! You made it!” Vivian air-kisses both of Venus’ cheeks, careful not to disturb either of their makeup. Her gaze lands on the bakery boxes. “Oh good, you brought the treats.” She squints to read the label emblazoned with the name from my bakery and makes a face.

My mouth falls open. What was that face for?

“I got the desserts from the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery,” Venus says quickly. “This is the owner, Lottie Lemon, and her adorable daughter, Lyla Nell. And this is?”

“And I’m the mandatory fun portion of this bakery entourage,” Carlotta announces, as if this tenuous connection justifies her presence at this exclusive gathering. “Carlotta is the name; crashing fancy parties is my game.”

She’s not lying.

“I go wherever the free booze is,” she continues, apparently unable to tell a fib.

Vivian’s face remains frozen in a quasi-smiling mask. “Well, please, come in. Everyone who matters is already here.”

She turns, leading the way just as Venus mouths I’m sorry to me.

“I can see why you wanted me here,” I whisper to her. “Emotional support.”

She gives a mournful laugh. “You’re onto me.”

We glide through the entry and the scent of roses and something sweet wraps itself around us as the sounds from the party only grow in volume—and the mansion seems to be growing, too.

“This place is the size of a shopping mall,” I whisper, this time to myself.

It looks as if the entire first floor has been converted into a literal fairy-tale wonderland. Real trees—not potted, but apparently uprooted from unsuspecting forest and reinstalled indoors—create a woodland effect in the massive living room. A carousel sits in the middle of the grand room as waiters in tuxedos pass out hors d’oeuvres on gold trays, and a harpist plays Disney songs in the corner, adding to the already chaotic cacophony of screams and shrill laughter.

I hold onto my belly. “I feel like we’ve stepped into the fever dream of a toddler

influencer.”

Venus leans my way. “Trust me. You haven’t seen anything yet.”

The room that’s the size of a shopping mall only seems to expand as Venus leads us through it.

“Wow,” Lyla Nell chirps, clearly mesmerized by all the pink fluffy clouds up above us that look as if they’re made from cotton candy, the thousands of arched balloon sculptures, and all of the little kids driving around in miniature cars, making it feel as if we’ve accidentally stepped onto the highway.

“Wow,” Carlotta parrots. “This place looks as if it was designed by someone with unlimited access to Fantasyland and a blank check.”

Venus nods. “The theme appears to be Enchanted Forest Princess Tea Party, but with an aggressive commitment to luxury.”

True as gospel.

She leads up to an entire wall that opens up to a backyard that belongs in the French countryside. There are bounce houses by the dozen, a petting zoo, carnival rides, a midway with prizes, rows and rows of food vendors, and I think I see a pop-up jewelry store and a full-blown cosmetics shop.

But it’s the glorious pastel creature with a horn spouting out from the top of its head that snags my full attention.

“Is that an actual live unicorn?” I ask as both Lyla Nell and I gasp at once.

“It’s supposed to be.” Venus shrugs. “It’s a Shetland pony with a horn attachment and

rainbow dye job,” she confirms. “PETA has already been notified, I’m sure.”

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“Pony!” Lyla Nell gives my hand a firm squeeze. “Mommy, I want pony now!”

“We’ll get in line in a minute,” I tell her as we make our way to the lawn.

Carlotta is already making a beeline for the champagne fountain when Venus and I bump into her sister-in-law once again.

“The children’s activities are also being held in the east wing,” Vivian tells us with a dismissive wave. “Adults can enjoy themselves at the club in the back at the Enchanted Forest Princess Open Bar. The guest of honor will make her appearance for cake in approximately ninety minutes. Plan your time accordingly.”

I don’t know what to be more baffled by—the club or the lack of attendance by the guest of honor.

“The birthday girl isn’t at her own party yet?” I ask, unable to hide my confusion. “She must be napping,” I say, answering my own question after the fact.

“She isn’t napping.” Vivian blinks at me as if I’ve asked why water is wet. “She’s having her hair and makeup done, of course. And her final dress fitting isn’t for another thirty minutes. The seamstress had to make last-minute adjustments to the butterfly wings.”

Of course. What was I thinking?

And butterfly wings? Something tells me they really work, too.

Someone calls for Vivian and she takes off.

I take a look around and shake my head. “Butterfly wings? Final fittings? Unicorns and carousels? I don’t have any of that on order for Lyla Nell’s birthday party next week. I was just going to have a cake after dinner. I feel like a failure of a mother.”

Venus laughs so hard that her entire body shakes. “Oh, Lottie. Don’t let this set the bar for anything in your life. If anything, Vivian sets the bar that I try to avoid. Half the time my kids don’t even get a cake. They get pizza with a candle in it. My brother might be wealthy, but let’s just say his dream of marrying a socialite has turned into a bit of a nightmare for him.”

We share a dark chuckle over that one.

“Lottie?” someone calls out and I spot both Keelie and Lainey standing in line for that magical unicorn. Keelie has her son little Bear with her and Lainey has Josie dancing next to her while Mimi sits strapped across my sister’s chest. Little Bear will be three, along with Josie, come this August, so I guess they meet the primary demographic.

We make our way over and I quickly give them both a hug before introducing them to Venus.

Lyla Nell races to Bear and Josie and the three of them hug and scream as if they don’t see one another just about every single day. I’m thrilled they’re so close.

“What are you girls doing here?” I ask, thankful to see them. For some reason, just having Keelie and Lainey here makes it feel as if I’m still on Earth and haven’t been transported to some exotic planet.

Keelie bubbles with a laugh. “Fondu is in Bear and Josie’s class.”

“Fondu?” I squint her way.

“That would be my niece,” Venus says with a grimace. “Let’s just say my brother lets Vivian do whatever Fondu pleases, to whomever.”

“The kids just love her,” Keelie goes on. “Bear calls Fondu his little cheesy girlfriend.”

I shoot Keelie a look that says Heaven help.

If the fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree, I foresee very expensive expectations in his future.

Lainey nods. “Bear and Josie just love this party.” She leans my way. “Rumor has it, the goodie bags alone could pay off my mortgage.”

“Ooh,” I muse. “Don’t tell Carlotta.”

“Oh”—Lainey perks up once again—“and did you hear they’ll be doing facials and complete glam makeovers?”

Keelie makes a face. “I’m bummed about it, too.”

“Why would you be upset?” I ask. “You love to get all glammed up. I’ll do it, too. It’ll be fun.”

“Actually—” Venus cringes my way.

“It’s only for the kids,” Lainey finishes for her.

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Keelie nods. “And that’s why I’m bummed.” She gives an impish shrug. “But at least I qualify for the diamond art mani-pedis.” She leans in hard. “They’re using actual diamonds.”

I look at Venus and she nods to affirm this.

“Well, then there’s no stopping me from getting my nails done, too,” I say. “Regardless of the fact I can’t see my feet.”

We all share a laugh at that one just as I spot a certain older blonde sitting all by her lonesome on a picnic table laden with an assortment of flowers. And by the looks of things, she’s trying to make a bouquet of some sort.

Venus looks my way then follows my gaze. “Oh, that’s my mother,” she sighs. “She insisted on having a horticulture table set up for the kids. I tried to tell her that toddlers weren’t all that into greenery that they couldn’t stomp on, but she insisted.”

“My mother loves horticulture, too,” I tell her.

Venus is about to say something else when her phone chirps. “It looks like I’m needed in the east wing. Vivian has asked my girls to hold Fondu’s train for the big procession.” She gives a little shrug. “What can I say? She’s all about grand entrances.”

She no sooner takes off than I turn to Lainey and Keelie. “Would you girls mind watching Lyla Nell for a minute? I think I need to get off my feet for a while.”

They're both happy to do it and I'm more than happy to boot scoot my way to the flower power table and have a little chat with one of my suspects.

Time to dig into the dirt and see if her story comes up roses, or if I've finally found my killer in full bloom.

LOTTIE

I waddle—because let's be honest, I'm way past the point of walking gracefully—over to the flower-laden picnic table where Venus' mother, Keegan Meryl, is currently engaged in a one-woman battle to create an acceptable bouquet.

The sweet scent of roses mingles with lavender and something citrusy, creating a fragrant oasis amid the chaos of screaming children and clinking champagne flutes. A gentle breeze carries the melody of the harpist from inside, competing with the carnival sounds from the backyard attractions—and Keelie screaming with joy now that she's up at bat with the unicorn. That's exactly why I love my bestie.

By the look of sheer concentration on Keegan Meryl's face, you'd think she was defusing a bomb instead of arranging carnations. Her red hair catches the sunlight as she snips a wayward stem with surgical precision. She's beautiful, much like her daughter, and in this light, she looks exactly like Venus plus twenty years.

"Mind if I join you?" I ask, accidentally miscalculating the distance of the bench and landing with apfftthat sounds borderline inappropriate.

Oh, who are we kidding? I can no more control my bladder these days than I can other questionable bodily functions and poor Keegan had to hear my malfunction firsthand.

She gives a little laugh once my body decides to break the ice or break other things as

it were.

But who cares about a little public humiliation? My feet throb with relief the moment they're no longer supporting the combined weight of twins, this particular bakery owner, and the approximately seventeen cupcakes I've sampled today. Sure, I might regret them, but boy, were they good.

Keegan's blue eyes sparkle. "Oh! Lottie, of course. Sit, sit." She flutters a hand toward me. "You don't need help, do you? Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, no. And please excuse my body's dramatics. It's just its way of announcing that I'm very, very pregnant."

Her mouth lifts at the corners. "Yes, well, you certainly have a glow about you."

"Ha! That's just the result of being approximately two percent human, ninety-eight percent pastry at this point."

We share a quick laugh and it feels like a win in my favor.

Keegan Meryl is polished and elegant, the kind of woman who looks like she has a standing weekly appointment for facials and imported tea, but she's also sharp, and I'm getting the feeling she's very controlled. And that's certainly something that would work in the favor of a killer looking to get away with murder.

"You're not inside enjoying the Enchanted Forest Princess Open Bar?" I ask, gesturing toward the house, where the sounds of screaming toddlers and clinking champagne glasses harmonize in a caustic symphony.

Keegan purses her lips. "Believe it or not, I prefer a quieter setting."

“As a mother of almost three, I can already relate.” I nod, plucking a sprig of lavender from the assortment in front of her. “This party is really...”

“A lot,” she finishes for me. “Vivian has never been one for subtlety.”

That earns a genuine laugh from me. “So, I’ve sort of noticed.” I wrinkle my nose.

“There’s a Shetland pony in a tiara being shown up by a unicorn.”

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We share another quick laugh.

She hums in amusement before setting down a pair of floral shears. “Are you actually here for the festivities, or is this more of an accidental attendance?”

“Bingo on the latter. Venus was kind enough to extend the invite. I provided the desserts for the party sans the cake.” I glance back at the house just in time to see a seven-tiered wonder being wheeled out of the house. “Wow,” I muse. “I wonder where she got that?”

“Paris,” Keegan sighs. “Actually, she flew in an entire herd of pastry chefs from the City of Lights and they worked nonstop for three days straight to finish it—to Vivian’s standards, of course. And because they had to keep revising their project, there was no time for other desserts to be made.”

“Oh, I get it. That’s where I came in. I’m sorry Venus wasn’t allowed to contribute. She really does the most spectacular sugar work I have ever seen. Everything in her shop looks as if it was made in a magical castle.” Hand to heaven, that is the truth.

“Well, Vivian won’t allow for another family member to steal the spotlight. It was a part of the contract she drew up when she married my son.”

She says it so nonchalantly it sounds almost sane.

Almost.

“I’m sorry to hear it.” I cringe a little. “But well, Venus made such a compelling case

for me to be her emotional support friend. And where my desserts lead, I follow. This is all so fun for me to see and take in. And my little girl is here and she's having a blast, too."

I decide to leave Carlotta out of the fold for obvious reasons. Speaking of which, I cast a quick glance around and suspiciously I can't seem to spot her. That alone sends my stomach in knots. Carlotta is like a bomb waiting to go off at all times, but when she's out of sight, it's practically a countdown to detonation.

"Oh, I'm so glad you brought your daughter along," Keegan says while arranging a sprig of baby's breath into a bouquet that looks like it belongs in a bridal magazine. "Fondu loves collecting little friends."

Something about the way she says collecting disturbs me on an intrinsic level.

I'm about to deep dive into the real reason I'm here when a spray of pink and blue miniature stars appears, shimmering in the sunlight like itty-bitty fireworks. And soon enough, Sebby materializes in all his otherworldly foxy glory, perched on the edge of the picnic table with his tail swishing with glee.

Here's hoping we can join forces and shake the truth out of our first suspect. And for Venus' sake, I hope Keegan Meryl points me in the direction of the real killer—so long as the real killer is not Eliza Baxter.

LOTTIE

"What did I miss, Lolita? Has she confessed?" That cute little white fox floats before me right here at little Fondu's over-the-top birthday party as I'm about to shake down her grandmother. "Is it time for my big reunion in the sky with Sebastian?" His tiny voice is practically vibrating with anticipation.

However, I can't help but frown at his little moniker-based faux pas—the one he has with me. I really should have a talk with Carlotta. Besides, why is Carlotta always shmoozing with the dead who come back to help me? Mebeing the operative word. She obviously doesn't have anything in common with this cute little fox.

And why do I have to be Lolita?

I shake my head his way, covertly letting him know he hasn't missed a beat and he breathes a sigh of relief, sending more miniature stars flying through the air. He's so stinking adorable, I'd love nothing more than to keep him forever—and teach him my proper name.

“Well, that's a good thing. Go on and take your time solving this one,” he chirps. “I've just met the most enchanting vixen by the koi pond. Turns out, the afterlife dating scene here on the planet is better than I expected.”

And now I see exactly what he and Carlotta have in common.

I suppress an eye roll and turn my attention back to Keegan, who seems to be studying me with great intensity.

“Keegan”—I lean in—“last night you seemed to know Sebastian Gallagher.”

The woman's hands freeze mid-arrangement. Her eyes dart around as if checking for eavesdroppers among the party guests.

Wow, if ever there were a look of admission, that would be it.

“I've heard about him, of course,” she says, pinning her cornflower blue eyes to mine. “I'm pretty sure more than half the people in the community center knew of him. I like to keep my finger on the pulse of society, if you will. And I've always

been a big fan of whiskey.” She dips her chin. “By the way, those whiskey-glazed donuts of yours were a real hit.” She winks my way and a chill runs up my spine.

“Wait a minute,” Sebby squeaks. “Wasn’t that the last thing that my Sebastian nibbled on before kicking his way to the light?”

I clamp down on my lips to keep from saying yes out loud and simply give a little nod.

As much as I’d like to play along and even ship a box straight to Keegan’s home, I just don’t feel as if I’ve got time to beat around the whiskey-glazed bush.

“Keegan, you knew that man on a personal level, didn’t you?” I press gently, looking her right in the eye as I ask the question and don’t let go.

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She gives first by way of lifting her chin as if I struck her.

“Yes, I did,” she says with a sigh. Her fingers trace the edge of a rose petal. “I’m sorry, Lottie. I realize that my true relationship with the man will come out in the end, but I can’t say a word to you without speaking to my children first. They would never forgive me.”

Her true relationship?

I blink, stunned.

This isn’t at all what I expected. I thought she might have known Sebastian as an acquaintance or a friend, but her tone suggests something far more serious.

“She’s going to confess!” Sebby cries. “Stop her, Lolita! Muzzle her, fill her piehole with flower petals, push her into the champagne fountain and maybe hold her head down a little while too long. I still have a few wild oats to sow.”

I shoot the homicidal fox a look for even suggesting it. While my present condition might be conducive to a temporary insanity plea, I wouldn’t risk even the most curtailed prison stay in lieu of missing time with my precious babies—and I include Lyla Nell and Evie in that number, too.

I clear my throat as I look at the woman. “I completely understand,” I say, even though I don’t. “Family comes first.”

“Indeed,” she says, tossing a wreath she just fashioned out of chamomile flowers.

“Although sometimes family is precisely the problem.”

Sebby flops dramatically across the table. “What does she mean by family? She wasn’t Sebby’s family. His sister had a much more pronounced snout.”

“Believe me”—I say to the woman—“I know all about family trouble.”

Were her words a dig at my relationship with Eliza and what happened last night?

I shake my head at the thought. Regardless, I’m not here to point a finger at the innocent even if she feels the need to. And if she feels the need to, then it makes me feel as if she’s twice as guilty for trying to get the limelight off of her and onto someone else. A much easier target, might I add, considering Eliza’s inadvertent red gloves she was sporting last night.

“Keegan, could you at least tell me if you know who might have wanted Sebastian Gallagher dead?” I press not so gently this time.

Keegan looks my way and her eyes are as sharp as the shears in her hand. “Who didn’t?” she says with a laugh. “Sebastian had a gift for making enemies.” She leans forward, lowering her voice. “I know your relation to Eliza. I’m sorry, Lottie, but not only was the woman at the scene of the crime, but I think she may have had a very good motive.”

My heart sinks for a moment. “What would that be?” I gird myself for whatever lie is about to sail from Keegan Meryl’s mouth. It’s clear she’s dead set on pushing my focus onto poor Eliza and off of her.

She shakes her head and her blonde hair catches the light. “If my suspicions are right, then that’s her story to tell, not mine.”

“Oh, come on!” Sebby protests, his tail puffing up in indignation. “You can’t just drop a bomb like that and clam up. That’s like serving a cupcake with no frosting!”

I wholeheartedly agree.

A sudden commotion erupts from the direction of the house. The unmistakable opening strains of “Pomp and Circumstance” blare from what must be professional-grade speakers, causing at least a thousand birds to take flight from nearby trees.

Keegan rises while dusting off her immaculate garden dress. “It seems the guest of honor is making her entrance.”

I somehow manage to make my way to my poor feet, too. These days the twins make the otherwise simple maneuver something between a yoga pose and an Olympic event.

The music picks up in volume and the crowd begins to scream and clap.

“This should be interesting,” Sebby says. “A three-year-old with her own procession. What a time to be alive. Or dead in my case.”

We turn toward the house just as a hot pink spotlight hits the back patio. A small figure appears at the top of the grand outdoor staircase, draped in what looks like enough pink tulle to upholster a small country. Little Fondu—and I will never say that name without craving bowls full of melted cheese—stands frozen, clearly overwhelmed by the sea of expectant faces below.

Poor thing.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” booms an unseen voice that sounds suspiciously like it belongs to a game show host—or at least the ghost of one. “I present to you the

birthday princess, Miss Fondu Rose Sparrow-Meryl!”

“Sparrow-Meryl.” Keegan nods my way before I can even make an internal quip about the rhyming sensation. “That’s why my daughter-in-law chose to marry my son. She said she always wanted her surname to have a good beat to it. She’s all about aesthetics.” She ticks her head when she says it and suddenly, I feel sorry for both the Sparrows and the Meryls.

Polite applause breaks out, punctuated by the click of expensive camera lenses as the tiny princess begins her procession.

That’s when I spot Carlotta near the bottom of the stairs with two martini glasses in hand, engaged in what appears to be an intense debate with the unicorn handler.

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“Oh no,” I moan because, let’s face it, I’ve trained to spot a Carlotta catastrophe a light year away.

As Fondu takes her first tentative step down, Carlotta makes a sweeping gesture that sends her martinis flying—right onto the pony in front of her.

The animal rears onto its hind legs, its unicorn horn tilting precariously before he launches into the air like a glittery missile with a magnificent rainbow mane.

The tiny horse takes off with a start and screams abound, and Vivian unleashes an entire litany of unholy expletives—some far more creative than I have ever heard Carlotta string out and that’s saying a lot.

The crowd screams.

The birthday girl screams.

At least six different waiters make a mad dash after the rainbow-colored cutie, soon followed by several of the mothers, then an entire herd of children, and before we know it, the entire party has devolved into a chaotic conga line led by the quasi-mythical creature.

Keegan tosses her bouquet aside and lifts her dress at the knees as if she, too, were about to engage in a full-blown sprint. But before she can take a step, the unhinged unicorn dives right into the seven-tiered birthday cake with a satisfying thud.

The cake explodes, the conga line comes to an abrupt stop, causing the masses to

tumble backward like a row of perfectly set dominos, and more expletives ring out all around.

“My masterpiece of a party!” Vivian wails as she shakes her fists at the sky. Then in three angry stomps she lands in front of the mother of all this destruction, none other than my own biological mother, Carlotta. “YOU!” Vivian’s scream could shatter crystal.

Carlotta backs away with her hands raised in surrender. “In my defense, that unicorn is a boozier if ever there was one.”

Chaos erupts—mostly from the owner of said boozier. Vivian lunges forward, with her designer heels sinking into the manicured lawn as she charges toward Carlotta.

The birthday girl begins to wail twice as loud. The unicorn is busy eating its fill of what looks like a luscious vanilla cake with raspberries and cream filling before he decides he’s had enough of the sugary nonsense and trots directly through the buffet table, sending canapés flying like tiny edible frisbees.

Shoot.

I knew I should have loaded up while I had the chance.

“I should probably...” I gesture vaguely toward the escalating disaster.

Keegan hands me a hastily assembled wreath of clovers. “For luck. Something tells me you’ll need it.”

Sebby chortles as he strides by my waddling side. “And here I thought the afterlife was where all the good parties happened! I’d better help clean up the mess. Dead or alive, I’ll never say no to cake.” He takes off and I’m tempted to follow along and do

my part in cleaning up the mess, too. After all, I have not and will not ever say no to cake.

And I won't say no to bringing a killer to justice as well.

I've already established the fact that Keegan is hiding something. And ironically, she seems to think that Eliza is hiding something.

Carlotta runs this way with Vivian hot on her heels.

"Throw me the keys, Lot Lot!"

I do just that, and Carlotta misses and my six-pound keyring pegs Vivian right in the forehead.

"Oh geez!" I'm about to waddle her way or in the least make a run for it myself when my phone pings.

It's a text from Evie.

Mom something's happened to Dad. He's missing. I think he's been kidnapped.

NOAH

The precinct is far too boisterous today, and my desk is far too messy. It's not anywhere near quitting time, but my mind left the building about an hour ago.

I glance at the new file that materialized this morning, the one with Sebastian Gallagher's name stamped across it.

How is it possible that Eliza Baxter, of all people, is the only viable suspect so far in

this case?

Could someone have set Eliza up?

But why?

She says she didn't know the man. Although according to footage from the community center, she clearly had words with him. But I've known Eliza long enough to realize that if any stranger gets on her bad side, she will most certainly have words with them.

In fact, a lot of people seemed to have words with Sebastian Gallagher that night, and my homework is to question each and every one of them. It should be easy—each one was a redhead, with the exception of Eliza.

Now all I have to do is ask around if anyone saw where the redheads went.

I've never felt so conflicted in all my life about a case. Part of me wants to follow procedure and let the evidence lead where it may. The other part knows Eliza wouldn't kill a man, no matter how much he deserved it.

My phone buzzes on my desk and I pull it over to see a text from Lottie.

Noah, I can't seem to get ahold of Everett! Evie has been trying to get in touch with him all afternoon and I've been trying for the last twenty minutes. I'm starting to think her theory about Everett being kidnapped is accurate. Help!

"What?" I squint at the phone for a moment and read the message again.

I text right back.

Where are you?

She answers right away.

At the bakery. And don't bother going to the courthouse to track him down. I called and they said he was a no-show today. I called Red Satin, his mother, his sister, and Haley as well, and no one has any clue where he might be. Noah, I'm worried. Very, very worried.

I growl at the screen just reading it. The last thing that Everett or I want is very, very worried Lottie Lemon. A very, very worried Lottie is a Lottie who makes rash decisions, like confronting murderers or breaking into suspicious warehouses.

I tell Lottie to stay put, grab my coat, and try to call Everett as I race out the door. It goes straight to voicemail.

I have no doubt Lottie has done her due diligence, so I don't bother going to the courthouse and head straight for Honey Hollow. I'll admit, I sped all the way and twice was tempted to put the siren device on the roof of my truck just to part the Red Sea so I could make it to the bakery faster.

Visions of Everett in trouble—or worse, Lottie going to find Everett in trouble—propel my foot to press harder on the accelerator.

A parking spot opens up out front of the Cutie Pie Bakery and I grab it before jumping out of my truck and racing inside. The bell above the door jingles merrily, completely at odds with the anxiety coursing through my veins.

The warm scent of sugar and cinnamon hits me like a brick wall, and it's a stark

contrast to the tension on Lottie's face as I spot her sitting at the counter with a small crowd gathered around her.

"I'm here, Lot," I say, making my way to her and pulling her in. Her body feels so tight, she's wound tight like a spring. "Where's Lyla Nell?"

"Back there with my mother." Lottie hitches her head toward the front, and sure enough, I see Miranda seated with Lyla Nell as the two of them share a platter of green frosted cookies.

At least someone is enjoying themselves. I'm about to look away when I do a double take.

Why in the world does Lyla Nell's face look as if she was trying out for the circus?

On second thought, a circus clown might have less makeup.

And is she wearing false eyelashes?

"Well, well, Detective Hercules arrives in record time," my own mother announces from behind the counter. Her blonde bangs sweep across her forehead as she gives me that knowing look, the one that somehow manages to be both judgmental and simultaneously smug. "I clocked you at twelve minutes from when Lottie texted. That's impressive even for you, Noah."

"Mom"—I start to defend my herculean timing, but Lily cuts me off.

"Maybe Everett finally came to his senses," Lily suggests, arranging a tray of macarons with far too much precision for someone who isn't avoiding eye contact with me. "Maybe he realized what he signed up for with that Lemon of his and took off before the double trouble arrives."

“Lily,” Lottie gasps.

“What?” Lily shrugs. “Some men aren’t built for fatherhood. Especially not men like Everett. He’s built for speed when it comes to the female gender and doing things to said females behind closed doors that are illegal in at least sixty states.”

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I shake my head at Lottie because it's just not worth correcting.

My mother tips her head. "Or maybe he came to his senses and is hoping Noah will jump back on the Lottie Express and take over for him, which, as evidenced by how quickly he got here, has already happened."

"Newsflash, Mom"—I nod her way—"I never left."

"Oh, please." Carlotta waves a dismissive hand as she pipes up, and it's only then I notice her face is colored in like a rainbow and her nails are glittering in a blinding manner as if she had dipped her fingernails in glitter. "You're all being ridiculous. Has anyone considered that Sexy might just be at home taking a snooze?" She examines her nails, and they shine so bright they could probably stop traffic. "Did you ever think of that, Lolita?" She cocks her head at Lottie. "Maybe he wants some peace and quiet before the little yippers arrive, and he knows having a ditch day is the only way to get it?"

"A nap?" Lottie's voice climbs half an octave. "Everett doesn't nap or snooze. He doesn't even sleep. I'm pretty sure he just powers down for four hours and reboots. He has more energy than Lyla Nell does on any given day."

Carlotta rolls her eyes. "Everyone naps, Lot Lot. Even the perpetually wound-up judgmental types. Especially them."

"I'll check the security cameras and see if his truck is in the driveway," I say, doing just that.

Sure enough, Everett's sleek black truck is parked in its usual spot, looking like it hasn't moved all day.

"Oh no." Lottie's face goes pale. "Something really terrible must have happened if he never left the house. I bet he needs our help. What if he fell? What if he's unconscious? What if?—"

"He's not alive," Lily finishes for her, and all eyes narrow on her. "What? I'm just saying. It's happened before—especially when Lottie is concerned." She shrugs at her boss. "You do have a certain effect on the mortality rate in this town."

"Grab Lyla Nell," Lottie calls out, already waddling toward the door with surprising speed for someone carrying two entire humans. "We're headed home."

I don't argue, I simply just follow orders. I scoop up Lyla Nell from Miranda with a hurried explanation and help strap her into Lottie's minivan. Carlotta jumps in the passenger seat while I jump into my own truck and we race across town all the way to Country Cottage Road.

I pull into the driveway, brake hard, and jump out of the truck before the engine stops rumbling. In less than three seconds I sprint to the front door, fishing out the key Lottie gave me years ago. My cop instincts kick in as I approach with caution, listening for disturbances, and checking for signs of forced entry. But all rational thought dissolves when I hear Lottie's panicked breathing behind me.

I swing the door open and race inside, immediately losing traction on the stone floor. My boots slide as if I'm trying to stealhome at the World Series, and my arms do the windmill in a desperate attempt to stay upright.

"Everett?" I call out so loud my voice echoes across the walls and two balls of white fluff scatter in my presence.

“Noah?” Everett shouts back. “KEEP LEMON OUT OF THE HOUSE!”

EVERETT

“Geez,” Noah shouts as he glides his way into the kitchen and nearly passes me by as if he were floating on air. “Everett?”

“Right here,” I grunt, still flat on my back from the fall I took this morning.

“What the hell?” Noah barks. “What’s happening to the floors? I think you need to fire your housekeeper.”

“Believe me, I’m on it.” I blow out a breath. “Only in this case, the housekeeper is me. The real housekeeper had a family emergency, so I thought I’d pinch-hit. I’m an idiot who thought I could clean limestone without professional training.” I groan, not bothering to move. “I’ve been down here since this morning. My phone is under the fridge. Please tell me, you’re not letting Lemon set foot in this place.”

“Lottie, make sure you stay outside,” Noah calls out. “Everett tried to clean and turned this place into an ice rink.” He slogs his way over and winces at me. “So, what’s going on?”

“I thought I’d spend the day counting the speckles on the ceiling. You’re the big detective. What do you think is going on? I did a somersault and landed flat on my back, threw it out in the process. I can’t move two inches without a hot poker shooting up my spine.”

Noah’s eyebrows hike a notch. “You know Lottie thinks you’ve been kidnapped, right? She’s mobilized half the town.”

“Of course, she has,” I sigh. “I’d get up to deal with the fallout, but I’m pretty sure

my L4 vertebra has lodged itself somewhere near my kidneys.”

“I’ll call an ambulance.”

“No, don’t do that. I just need you to help me up. As long as I can make it to the couch, I should be fine.”

I lift my hand his way, but before Noah can ice skate over, a gray-headed hurricane glides into the room howling and screaming, and all around having a good time.

“Carlotta,” Noah shouts. “Slow down, you can really hurt yourself in here. Case in point, the judge splayed out on the floor.”

But Carlotta is oblivious to his threats because she already has enough inertia going to launch her to the moon. Unlike Noah, she doesn’t attempt to slow down. She barrels forward with her arms flailing like mad.

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“Sexy! You’re alive,” she screeches, sliding across the freshly polished floor like a bedazzled hockey puck.

“Carlotta, stop,” Noah and I shout in unison, but it’s too late.

She crashes into the kitchen island, sending perfectly arranged copper pots and pans raining down from the overhead rack. And it sounds a lot like someone dropped a drum set down a flight of stairs.

Carlotta, not being one to fall gracefully, pinwheels backward and directly toward me.

“Geez.” I wince.

I can’t move, can’t dodge—I’m more or less a helpless target.

She lands directly on top of me, knocking what little breath I had left completely out of my lungs. And somehow—because the universe has a twisted sense of humor or Carlotta has very good aim—we end up face-to-face, lip-to-lip.

For one horrifying microsecond, Carlotta and I are all but kissing on the kitchen floor.

“Get off of him,” Noah gruffs as he attempts to pluck her away, but not before I get new pain from her elbow in my sternum, adding to my collection of injuries. “All right, Carlotta, stop trying to steal first base.”

“Please,” Carlotta huffs, trying to right herself but only managing to dig her knee into

my thigh and I grunt hard because of it. A few inches north and I'd be in a whole different world of hurt. "I've had better kisses from my great-aunt Mildred's taxidermied poodle," she snips as she claws her way to her feet. "Put a little oomph into it next time, Sexy. It's like you don't even care."

"Everett, is everything okay?" Lemon shouts from the front door and I shake my head at Noah.

"Tell her I'm fine."

"He's laid up, toes to the ceiling, can't move, and his phone is under the fridge," Noah says with a deranged grin. "He greased the floors with enough furniture polish to host the Stanley Cup finals right in your living room."

A groan comes from the other room. She's not thrilled, but then neither am I.

"I can't live like this," Carlotta says with her hands on her hips. "Where am I supposed to go?"

I lock eyes with Noah, who shakes his head frantically.

"Go with Noah, across the street," I reply without hesitation, ignoring his dagger-filled glare. "His cabin is plenty big enough to house you, Lemon, and Lyla Nell for the night until I can get someone out here to strip the floors—or rip them out."

Carlotta tips her head my way. "That's Sexy flexing his funds."

Noah chuckles my way. "And yet all the money in the world couldn't save you from yourself."

As Noah helps me to my feet—every joint in me protests the movement—I realize

that surviving eight hours stranded on my kitchen floor might have been the easy part of my day. The real challenge will be surviving the night knowing Lemon will be in his bed instead of mine.

Hopefully, Noah will have enough sense to let her have his bedroom to herself. But something tells me he won't.

Where is a killer when you need one?

NOAH

I can't stop smiling as I settle behind my desk.

It's the next afternoon, and my mind keeps replaying last night on an endless loop. Who knew Everett's little foray into domestication disasters would turn out to be the best thing to happen to me all night, all month—heck, all year?

The original plan was for Carlotta to bunk at my place, too, but she took one look around at the tower of empty pizza boxes and declared it an affront to her aesthetic sensibilities before promptly vacating the premises. Within twenty minutes, she'd called Mayor Nash and sweet-talked her way into his bedroom. Some people would call that a lucky break. I call it divine intervention.

That left just Lottie and Lyla Nell in my cabin—exactly where they belonged, even if it was just for one night. After dinner (pizza from Mangias, our favorite) and bathtime for Lyla Nell (which somehow resulted in more water on me than on her), Lottie crawled right into my bed and so did Lyla Nell.

I had the privilege of reading them both a bedtime story, and once they fell asleep, I did, too. It was bliss sleeping in the same bed as Lottie again. And having Lyla Nell sleeping between us felt like heaven on top of that.

I chuckle at the thought, shuffling papers I'm not actually reading. The case files on my desk should have my full attention, but they don't stand a chance against the memory of Lottie's sleepy smile this morning when she found me making pancakes.

Everett fared just fine himself, from what I heard. Evie came home from college and spent the night mopping the floors and tending to her laid-up father. They, too, split a pizza along with a bag full of Chinese food from the Wicked Wok. I don't feel sorry for him in the least.

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In fact, Evie had Everett's doctor do a home visit, and they prescribed a few days of bed rest.

And Lottie didn't bother hiding her delight at that prescription. How the tables have turned—Mr. I Never Stop Moving finally forced to lie still while his very pregnant wife waddles circles around him. Poetic justice at its finest.

Regardless, getting Everett out of the picture for one night felt... wonderful. Necessary. Like coming up for air after being underwater too long.

Too bad there isn't some specialist I could consult about making this a more permanent arrangement. Maybe someone with experience in, shall we say, removing moving obstacles.

I shake my head at my own dark joke. I'm kidding, of course.

Mostly.

A brisk knock interrupts my felonious daydreaming, and before I can respond, the door swings open. Eliza Baxter herself strides in wearing a long cream-colored coat, her dark hair swept neatly into a bun. Speaking of someone with a potential talent for problem-solving of the permanent variety—or at least that's what the facts have determined.

"Eliza?" I stand, and she waves me to sit back down before doing the same across from me.

“Good afternoon,” I tell her. “What can I do for you?”

She frowns my way and sighs. “It’s not what you can do for me. It’s what I can do for you.”

I inch back, amused and yet slightly alarmed. “What would that be?”

Eliza meets my eyes with her steely gaze. “I’m here to confess.”

LOTTIE

The bakery hums with the whir of the industrial mixer battling with the chime on the front door, along with the happy chatter of customers who can’t seem to start their day without a sugar rush by yours truly.

The scent of fresh cinnamon rolls mingles with the thick, heavenly scent of fresh brewed coffee, and it creates that signature Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery perfume that no department store could ever bottle. Although if it could, it would make a fortune.

I balance a tray of shamrock-shaped cookies with my forearm while my bump—now visible from space—keeps those sweet treats at a precarious distance from my body.

I make my way behind the counter and begin boxing them up for a custom order. Effie, Lily, and Suze are all busy as well.

Everything seems to be selling this morning, but those whiskey-glazed donuts have sold out twice already.

It’s sort of a known fact around here that if a body turns up with one of my sweet treats on or near the poor soul who lost their life, well, that sweet treat turns into an instant bestseller. And because of that fact alone, I can see why the conspiracy

theories would fly about yours truly as well. Not only do I discover the bodies, but my desserts always seem to beat me to the punch.

“Good morning, Lottie,” Effie calls out while sliding a tray of chocolate muffins into the display case like the expert she is. “How is Bed Rest Boy holding up?”

I snort out a laugh.

Everyone was worried over the fact that Everett might have indeed been kidnapped, so I let them know exactly what happened in a group text last night.

“Poor Everett,” I say. “He’s taking it about as well as a soufflé with a slammed door. For someone who spent weeks lecturing me about taking it easy and staying off my feet, Everett has the bed rest tolerance of a toddler on Halloween night. He’s already threatened to go to the courthouse a half a dozen times, and it’s not even noon.”

Lily laughs as she puts the finishing touches on three shamrock shakes—two for a customer, and by the looks of it, one for her. That mountain of whipped cream sitting over pastel green vanilla mint ice cream is waking up my appetite—not that it ever went to sleep.

“Men are always the worst patients,” Lily insists. “My grandmother used to say a man with a cold thinks he’s dying, but a woman with pneumonia still makes dinner.”

“Amen to that,” Suze says with a nod.

“That’s the truth.” I nod, pulling another platter of my shamrock cookies out of the refrigerated shelves. “Thank goodness Evie came home. She has him properly terrorized into compliance. I caught her threatening to superglue him to the mattress if he tried getting up one more time. Thankfully, Evie doesn’t have any morning classes so she was able to ‘daddysit’ as she put it.”

“Like father, like daughter,” Suze quips from the register. “That girl is the only one who can tell a man like that what’s what. She must get that from me.”

Suze has certainly told a man what’s what before, but I’d like to think Evie gets her confidence around both men and women from me—and, of course, Everett.

I bite back a response about what else Evie might have gotten from Suze—or rather her influence. No sense poking that particular bear before I’ve had my third cup of coffee of the day, even if it is decaf.

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The bell above the door jingles, and in struts Carlotta, looking like she stepped off the cover of a magazine—if magazines featured women in red sequins with too much perfume at eight in the morning. She’s still wearing the same clothes from yesterday, but her skin has a certain glow that suggests a good night’s sleep was not on her agenda. Both of which are typical for her.

“Someone looks like they enjoyed their sleepover at the mayor’s house,” I say as I pull a couple of whiskey-glazed donuts off the rack behind me and set them on a plate for her.

Carlotta plops down in front of me and wastes no time in taking a bite. “Please, Lot. Harry and I are far too sophisticated for sleepovers.” She wolfs down half her donut. “We prefer the termadult recreational evening.”

Suze chortles at the thought. “Is that what the kids are calling it these days? We used to call it getting lucky.”

“Not that it’s anyone’s beeswax”—Carlotta continues, gulping down another quick bite—“but we ended up at the casino down in Leeds and got lucky there.” She waggles her eyebrows. “As in we found a dark corner and got lucky with each other. Then I won three hundred bucks at the slots—turns out, I’m good at pulling things.”

Lily nearly chokes on her shamrock shake.

“I think those four-leaf clover cookies are really starting to pay off, Lot,” Carlotta continues, unfazed. “Hand over another dozen, would you? I need all the luck I can get before round two tonight.”

Suze is quick to oblige, packaging up cookies as if her own finances depended on it. Most likely she's eager to get Carlotta out of the bakery because aside from the morning and afternoon rush, it's Carlotta who keeps this place on its toes.

"Lottie"—Lily cranes her neck past me—"where's Lyla Nell today? Don't tell me you finally enrolled her in preschool."

"She's probably in the back," Suze says with a frown. "Barking orders at the kitchen staff as if she owns the place." She shakes her head my way. "You and Noah are raising quite the saucy bossy young miss, I'll have you know. Unlike little Levi and Willow Grace—now those two are simply angels sent straight from heaven."

Now it's my turn to frown.

It's no secret that Suze has never cared for Lyla Nell, and it has more to do with the fact she's never cared for me than it does anything with my sweet babe. But now that Suze has two other grandchildren under her belt, it's clear she'll be favoring them from here on out.

"Suze"—I start—"Levi is eight months old and Willow Grace is eightweeksold. They've hardly had a chance to bark out orders at anyone. Besides, Lyla Nell can be an angel when she wants to."

I bite down on my lip because she is rather expressive about her needs. That's called confidence, isn't it?

I glance at Lily. "I haven't enrolled Lyla Nell for school yet." I'm about to tell her exactly where Lyla Nell is when Lily starts in.

"Are you kidding? Alex and I have already enrolled Levi," she's quick to tell me with a bright green ice cream mustache on her lips from that yummy shamrock shake she's

been teasing me with. “The waitlist is years out. I doubt you’ll ever get Lyla Nell in.”

I suck in a quick breath. Drats. I should’ve jumped at the chance last year when Lainey and Keelie were pressuring me to do it.

“So where is Little Yippy?” Carlotta asks while holding up another whiskey-glazed donut. “Did you finally come to your senses and drop her off at the Honey Hollow Fire Station?”

I make a face. “She’s at the B&B with my mother, insisting on a makeover. I think that birthday party did her more harm than good. It took Noah and me almost an hour to chip the diamonds off her fingers and toes last night. They were choking hazards, you know. But Noah thinks it should be enough to pay for her college fund.”

“Forget the future—it can’t get here soon enough.” Carlotta dismisses with a wave. “I want to talk about the here and now. Where are we headed off to today? Please tell me it’s somewhere with cocktails. Or suspects. Or preferably both. Gin for the win!”

I’d like to know where we’re headed off to myself.

Eliza Baxter, where are you, and what do you know?

I sigh, resting one hand on my belly while the twins do some serious Irish step dancing on my bladder once again.

Out there somewhere between shamrocks and suspects, I have a feeling Eliza Baxter holds the missing piece to this homicide, whether she realizes it or not.

LOTTIE

Isnatch up a shamrock cookie to take the edge off these constant hunger pangs right

here in the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery.

“I think I need to talk to Eliza,” I tell Carlotta in answer to her question. “But I have no idea where to find her. I sent her a text this morning, but she hasn’t answered.”

“I know where you can find her,” Suze says with a smug certainty in her voice that makes me stop mid-bite with my own shamrock cookie.

“You do?” I nibble away, but I don’t dare take my eyes off the know-it-all before me.

“Of course, I do. With a state this size, everyone knows everyone’s business.” She flips the bangs out of her eyes. “She’s headed to the Leprechaun Jubilee out in Fallbrook this afternoon.”

“The what now?” I ask.

“The Leprechaun Jubilee,” Suze repeats, looking more than a little delighted to know something I don’t. “It’s an annual St. Patrick’s Day extravaganza that takes over the Fallbrook fairgrounds each year. They’ve got everything from Irish soda bread competitions to Blarney Stone tossing contests. There’s Celtic ax throwing, traditional Irish music, and enough craft beer to drown a leprechaun. Plus, those ridiculous shillelagh showdowns where grown men try to outdo each other with those Irish walking sticks—all while wearing kilts.”

“Aren’t kilts a Scottish thing?” I ask.

“Who cares?” half the bakery says in unison.

“Don’t forget the food,” Lily chimes in. “My cousin’s boyfriend runs one of the shepherd’s pie stalls. Says he makes more in that one weekend than he does in a month at his restaurant.”

“And the whiskey-tasting pavilion is epic,” Effie adds with an all-too-knowing smile. “My brother Nico judged it last year. He couldn’t remember his own name by the end of the day, but he swears it was worth it.”

“They also have that Irish Whiskey Cake Challenge where people compete to eat these decadent, golden-brown cakes soaked in premium Irish whiskey,” Suze continues. “Last year, Mayor Nash and Wiley nearly came to blows over who finished more. Wiley was winning until Mayor Nash accused him of dropping slices in his pants. It was the most ridiculous display of male competition I’ve ever

seen—well, until they moved on to the Bailey’s Cream Puff Sprint and transformed their suits into what looked like cocaine kingpins caught in a sting operation gone horribly wrong.”

“Cocaine kingpins aside—do you know for a fact Eliza will be there?” I ask, almost amused.

“She and just about anyone with or without Irish descent.” She shrugs. “That’s according to Wiley, who heard it from Todd at the hardware store, who’s dating Eliza’s second cousin’s hairdresser. Ever since she snatched my husband away from me, I’ve been keeping tabs on the little hussy.”

I press my lips tight.

I don’t even bother questioning Suze’s oddball intelligence network. It sounds frightening in its accuracy.

“Well, Carlotta”—I say, already mentally mapping the fastest route to Fallbrook—“it sounds like we’re headed to an Irish paradise. Between all that red hair and all that Irish whiskey, that place is going to be nothing but a good time.”

Carlotta’s eyes light up like she just found a diamond in her whiskey-glazed donut. “Day drinking and detective work? Lottie, you really know exactly how to show a girl a good time.”

Effie slides a to-go shamrock shake my way. “Are you sure about this, Lottie? Everett and Noah will have a conniption if they find out you’re cooking up theories instead of cooking up pastries.”

“What Everett and Noah don’t know won’t hurt them,” I say, accepting the shamrock shake with a heartfelt thanks, and don’t waste a second before sucking half the

whipped cream right off the top. “Besides”—I say, coming up for air and with a dot of whipped cream on my nose—“I’m just going to talk to my favorite mother-in-law. It’s completely innocent.”

Suze shoots me a look. “I always knew you liked her better.”

“Oh, please”—I can’t seem to stop myself from rolling my eyes—“you’re not even officially my mother-in-law. Noah and I are technically divorced, remember?”

To be truthful, I hardly remember. Noah does his best to make me feel as if we’re still together in just about every way. Case in point, waking up together in the very same bed this morning. He’s good, I’ll give him that.

“Semantics.” Suze waves dismissively. “Once you’ve endured my daily critiques, you’re family for life. There’s no escape clause. There’s no resignation letter strong enough to break that bond.”

I blink over at the woman. For someone who has gone out of her way to make sure I know how glad she is that I’m out of her son’s life, she sure has a funny way of showing she cares.

Carlotta belts out a laugh. “If enduring criticism made someone family, I’d be related to half the men in Honey Hollow—and almost all the women.”

“I was referring to my helpful suggestions”—Suze says—“not criticism.”

“In that case—” Carlotta smirks. “I’d only be related to a quarter of them.”

I wipe the whipped cream from my nose. “If we’re ranking mothers-in-law, Suze, you’d definitely make the top five.” I bite back a smile.

Under normal circumstances, I would have bitten my tongue, but I've got all of these feral hormones coursing through my veins and heaven knows the mood swings they cause have to be directed somewhere.

"Top five?" Suze looks stymied. "But you've only got two of us."

"Exactly," Lily says with a grin. "What Lottie is trying to tell you is that you're solidly in second place." She winks my way and I just shake my head.

Keep laughing, Lily, I want to say. Soon enough, she, too, will be Suze's daughter-in-law and then we'll see what's so funny.

"Don't worry, Suzie Q," Carlotta says, reaching for a third whiskey-glazed donut. "Second place just means you're the first loser. That's practically winning in your case."

Suze narrows her eyes on Carlotta. "Remind me again why I haven't poisoned you yet?"

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“Because I make your life look good by comparison,” Carlotta says, taking yet another daring bite out of her donut. “It’s called public service. You can thank me anytime.”

“We’re out the door in ten seconds,” I tell Carlotta while grabbing my purse. “And try not to flirt with random strangers or stray unicorns this time.”

“I can’t make any promises, Lot. Redheads are my weakness. All that pent-up anger from years of sunburns? Makes for explosive chemistry.”

“I’ve seen pictures of Mayor Nash when he was young,” I tell her. “He was certainly a redhead.”

“That’s why I’m saving all my best moves for him.”

Carlotta and I say a quick goodbye to the staff as we dart for the door—Carlotta speeds, I waddle.

Something tells me that Eliza Baxter knows something about Sebastian Gallagher’s last night on Earth.

And I’m going to do everything I can to get her to talk—even if it takes some Irish whiskey to do it.

LOTTIE

Shockingly, it only took Carlotta and me less than fifteen minutes to get to Fallbrook.

With normal afternoon traffic, the trip should have been double that.

“It’s as if we were in a time machine,” I say, stymied by how fast we arrived at our destination. “I swear, I wasn’t going any faster than usual.”

“I hate to break it to you, Lot, but your foot weighs ten times as much as it usually does. You’ve been breaking speed limits and the sound barrier for the last six weeks.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake. Why haven’t you said anything?” I give an exasperated sigh as I slide into the first parking spot I see and kill the engine. “You do realize I drive with precious cargo on board.”

“Yup, as in me,” she says, snapping off her seatbelt. “Besides, I don’t mind speeding. It just means we get to where we need to be that much quicker. I’m not a fan of wasting time. Speaking of which, let’s dive into this redheaded playground and see what’s cooking. I’ve always said a redhead in the streets means a firecracker in the sheets—purely scientific observation, of course.” She smirks my way. “And before you get all hoity-toity on me, relax. I called Harry and told him to put on a red wig and meet me here.”

“There’s a small mercy. I think.”

We get out and waddle our way into the St. Patrick’s Day festivities—and I do mean we’re both waddling. Me for obvious reasons, and Carlotta, well, I highly suspect the dozen whiskey-glazed donuts that Suze slid her way as we left the bakery has something to do with it. She didn’t share a single one with me. Not that my sweet babes need to appreciate the taste of whiskey so soon in their young lives.

“Would you look at this?” I shake my head at the happy-go-lucky sights and sounds all around us. Think Ireland meets St. Patrick’s Day on steroids and lots and lots of redheads. And have I mentioned the redheads have shown up in fiery numbers today?

Again, it's worth noting that the Red Sea is alive and well and surging all around me in human form.

"Sweet mother of Jameson," Carlotta clucks as she surveys the festival grounds with wide eyes. "The Leprechaun Jubilee looks as if St. Patrick's Day had a wild night with a room full of redheads. It's like every redheaded cousin from fifty miles around decided today was the day to proudly display their Kiss Me, I'm 1/64th Irish heritage. I haven't seen this much Irish pride since your daddy got drunk and thought the great love of his life was a bottle of whiskey."

I nod. "Things would have been less complicated that way."

The Leprechaun Jubilee is exactly what would happen if a St. Patrick's Day pinata exploded all over the county fairgrounds. Everywhere I look, there's something aggressively Irish—from emerald green banners flapping in the spring breeze to inflatable leprechauns tall enough to require FAA clearance.

The air smells like a delicious culinary brawl is taking place between competing food vendors with sizzling corned beef, freshly baked bread, and the unmistakable malty siren song of beer that by the looks of it, has been dyed an unnatural shade of green.

"Now this"—Carlotta points hard to a group of men staggering around each with a pint of green beer in their hands—"is what I call a proper celebration. None of that namby-pamby Easter egg hunt nonsense. These people know how to party."

She's not wrong. The festival grounds pulse with Irish folk music blasting from multiple stages, creating a cacophony of competing fiddles and tin whistles. Children dash past with faces painted green, chasing each other with plastic walking sticks that I'm certain will result in at least one emergency room visit before the day is over.

But what really catches my eye is the hair.

“So. Much. Red. Hair,” I say with a heavy sense of awe. “It looks as ethereal as it does vivid.”

“Yuppers. It’s like walking through a forest where all the trees have been replaced by flame-topped humans with a surprising capacity for beer consumption.”

“More like we’ve stumbled into a secret convention where all the world’s redheads finally get the appreciation they deserve,” I correct as Carlotta and I wade deeper into the crowd. “I’ve never seen so much gorgeous auburn in one place—it’s like walking through a sunset.”

“Nah. It’s more like someone dumped a crate of Halloween wigs onto the fairgrounds,” she shoots back. “It’s a buffet of fiery hotness. And I may need to sample everything on the menu.”

“We’re here to find Eliza, not to hunt for your next questionable moral judgment,” I remind her, although I know it’s futile. Once Carlotta is in hot pursuit mode, she’s pretty much unstoppable.

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“Why can’t I do both, Lot? You know I’m an excellent multitasker.”

Before I can come back with a rebuttal, a spray of pink and blue stars suddenly materializes to our right, followed by the appearance of that cute little fox, Sebby, who looks positively delighted by the festival atmosphere.

“Lolita!” he happily greets me, and it only makes me frown at Carlotta for the moniker-related slight. His ghostly tail swishes with excitement. “This place is crawling with redheads! Sebastian always said redheads were the exact trouble he was looking for, but he never mentioned they traveled in packs.”

“That’s how I prefer my men to travel,” Carlotta adds. “All the way to my bedroom.”

“I prefer them traveling that way all the way to my den,” Sebby says. “Of course, with the females of the bunch.”

I’m about to say something when Carlotta raises a finger my way. “Before you go getting all self-righteous on us, just remember you got two baby daddies and you slept with both of those men just this week alone.”

I roll my eyes. Even though it’s technically true, I’ll never admit it.

She nods my way. “Not to mention the fact the universe sent you a fox to help solve a case that happens to land on the same month the next batch of yippers is set to deliver—and those yippers happen to belong to Sexy. I think the universe knows things we don’t, like maybe the fact Foxy is the daddy of one or more of those rugrats crawling around in that giant belly of yours.”

“Oh, he is not.” I go to swat her, but she ducks out of range. I steer Carlotta away from a group of men throwing axes at shamrock-painted targets. Carlotta and axes can be a lethal combination. Carlotta and men aren’t such a great combo either. “Suze said that Eliza was volunteering at some booth.”

We meander through rows of vendors selling everything from Kiss Me, I’m Irish T-shirts to authentic Celtic jewelry that looks suspiciously like it was made in a factory in China. After nearly being trampled by an impromptu Irish dancing flash mob, we finally spot a white tent with the words Fallbrook Sourdough Society emblazoned across the top.

And to my delight there, behind a table laden with crusty loaves, a wooden cutting board, and an array of gorgeous knives—some with etched silver, some with intricate carvings, some looking as if they’ve seen sharper days—stands a tall woman with razor-sharp cheekbones, auburn hair pulled back into a bun, and a ruby red smile for everyone to see.

Glinda Van Jance doesn’t look as if she belongs in a tent full of bread. She looks like she should be negotiating hostile corporate takeovers or modeling scarves in Milan.

“Lottie Lemon,” she calls out when she spots us. “What brings you to the land of leprechauns and green booze?” She chortles out a jovial laugh as if she, too, has imbibed the emerald spirit.

“Just soaking up the Irish culture,” I say as I waddle my way closer to the bustling booth. “Glinda, this is Carlotta, my?—”

“Her favorite mama.” Carlotta snatches up the woman’s hand and gives it an aggressive shake.

“Of course, I remember Carlotta.” She gives a nervous laugh. “It would be a crime

not to.” She cringes because I sense she realizes Carlotta is a crime in and of herself. “Can I interest you ladies in some sourdough loaves? They’re fresh baked right here on the premises.”

“Yes,” I say, far too fast and eager. I can’t help it. The twins were practically rooting me on with their tandem kicking. “And I was also looking for my mother-in-law. I heard Eliza Baxter might be around. Have you seen her?”

Glinda’s mouth falls open. “I sure have. She just stepped away to deliver a special loaf to one of the judges’ tents,” Glinda explains, gesturing vaguely toward the other side of the fairgrounds. “She’ll be back shortly. In the meantime, can I interest you in the ancient art of sourdough first? Ireland has a long history of sourdough bread. In fact, we even have sourdough Irish soda bread.”

Before I can say yea or nay, Glinda is already lifting a glass jar containing what looks suspiciously like beige goop. But I’m more than familiar with the contents.

“There are some very old secrets in this jar,” she says with a laugh.

That jar might be bubbling with secrets, but here’s hoping Glinda Van Jance bubbles out a few of her own.

LOTTIE

“This”—Glinda Van Jance announces while holding up the sourdough starter in a glass Mason jar with the reverence usually reserved for religious artifacts—“is Agatha Crustie. She’s my personal starter, going on seven years now.”

“Seven years?” I muse. “I’m impressed.”

Sebby moans from deeper in the tent as he shoves his face into a round loaf that is

suspiciously disappearing before our very eyes. “Tastes like home,” he sighs.

And I’m left to wonder which home. I’m betting it’s the heavenly one.

Carlotta sniffs at the jar in Glinda’s hand. “Let me get this straight, Toots. You named your bread batter?” she asks, peering dubiously at the bubbling mixture.

“Of course!” Glinda looks scandalized that there might be an option not to. “Every proper sourdough starter deserves a name. It’s a living thing, after all. Every yeast colony has its own personality.”

“I named my first yeast infection, too,” Carlotta muses. “I called it Richard, after the man who gave it to me.”

“Oh my word,” I hiss as I swat her arm relentlessly. “Please ignore her,” I’m quick to tell Glinda. “She might have had a stroke that got rid of any filter she may have once owned.”

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I know darn well that Carlotta wasn't born with a filter of any kind. And because of it, I'm standing here today. I guess I have Carlotta's misfortune to thank for my life, Lyla Nell's, and that of my twins. It really is a sick and twisted world.

Glinda's eyes and mouth both round out. "Well, that's... um, creative. Although our sourdough names tend to be more pun-based. We've got members with starters named Doughleen, Marilyn Mondough, Becky with the Good Bubbles, Sir Lawrence of Doughrabria, Edgar Allen Dough, Vincent van Dough, Stinky Bubbles, Bread Pitt, and my personal favorite, Clint Yeastwood." She cringes in Carlotta's direction as she says that last part, fully expecting a dicey comeback.

Let's face it, I expect one, too.

"Welp"—Carlotta holds up a finger—"if we're naming things that rise unexpectedly and need constant attention, I've got a whole black book full of suggestions that would make your sourdough club clutch their pearls so hard they'd leave marks."

And, of course, Carlotta does not disappoint.

"Sebby," I growl so loud half the women in the bustling booth turn this way. And in no time the supernatural specter is front and center and at attention **WITH A HALF-EATEN LOAF CLUTCHED IN HIS PAWS!**

"Gah," I shout as I grab it and shove it in Carlotta's piehole as fast as I can.

Perfect.

Sebby floats above the scene, examining the jars of starter dough with fascination. “In my day, bread was just bread. Now it has more names than European royalty. Though I must say, there’s a rather fetching red-furred vixen by the cider stand. If you’ll excuse me...” He dissolves into a shower of stars, off to pursue his supernatural love interest.

Oh my word. Much like Carlotta, Sebby is proving to be useless and perhaps more trouble than he’s worth.

“I’ve named my sourdough starter, too,” I chime in. “Mine is called Little Dough Peep. I keep it right next to my coffee maker.”

Carlotta snorts. “Is that what that goop is? I thought it was the result of Sexy trying to cook something without adult supervision. It looked like it was plotting revenge.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake. When has Everett ever touched an oven?” Good grief, did I really say that out loud? “So Glinda”—I manage to redirect my attention back on the poor woman—“I just love your name. It’s so unique.”

“Eh.” Carlotta shrugs. “It’s ripped right out of Oz.”

Glinda laughs. “That’s exactly where I got it. Oh, I just loved The Wizard of Oz when I was a little girl.”

“Me, too,” I tell her. “I was obsessed and watched it on repeat.”

Carlotta grunts, “Sounds like I showed up right on time.”

I take a moment to frown at the woman. Carlotta didn’t show up in my life until a few years ago.

I shake my head at the woman before us. “Glinda, how do you know Eliza again? Are you in the same social circles?”

“We play bridge together once a week,” she’s quick to remind me.

“Oh, that’s right. She did mention that the other night.” I wince. “I swear, these babies have gobbled up every last one of my brain cells.”

Glinda and Carlotta share a boisterous laugh, but I don’t really see anything funny about it.

Glinda’s perfectly manicured fingers tap against the counter. “Oh, well, as far as Eliza goes, we also worked together through a few community service projects. You know how it is in small towns—everyone ends up volunteering together eventually.”

Carlotta hitches her head to the side. “Fallbrook may be the town where everyone volunteers together, but in Honey Hollow, we homicided together. Ain’t that right, Lot?” She slaps me hard over the back. “You might even say Lot Lot here is the leader of the homicidal pack.”

Glinda’s eyes widen once again. “Lottie, weren’t you the one who found Sebastian?” She shakes her head. “I mean, obviously it was Eliza who found him first, but then you showed up on the scene.”

I nod. “That’s exactly what happened.” There’s no point denying it. “And speaking of Sebastian Gallagher? Did you know him, too?” I keep my voice casual, as if I were asking about the weather.

The briefest shadow passes over Glinda’s face. “Not well. Our paths crossed occasionally at charity events. The whiskey business and all that. He was always donating bottles for auctions. He seems quite generous. Those bottles don’t run

cheap.”

“Ah, whiskey.” Carlotta perks up. “Now we’re talking my love language.”

“Oh?” Glinda turns to Carlotta. “Do you have an interest in distillation?”

“Just in the consumption,” Carlotta assures her. “But I’ve been known to mix a mean cocktail. My Bloody Mary once made a man propose on the spot.”

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I lean her way. “Is that the man you shot?” I’ve heard stories.

Carlotta gives a knowing nod my way and I quickly drop it.

“Distillation is a fascinating process,” Glinda continues, and there’s something almost wistful in her voice. “I mean, the chemistry of it is what draws me in—converting sugars to alcohol, controlling the environment. One wrong calculation and the whole batch is ruined. Or worse.” She shoots a cold glance at the sky.

“Worse?” I prompt. “Don’t tell me that whiskey has something in common with sourdough starter—one wrong move and the entire thing can blow up on you.”

“Something like that.” She laughs. “Bad booze gives you bad hangovers. You learn to appreciate quality when you’ve had time to—well, reflect on the alternatives. “Speaking of quality”—Glinda pivots, reaching for a cloth-covered basket—“I’ve got a fresh batch coming out of the portable ovens. Would you like to try some? With proper Irish butter, of course.”

The loaf she unveils sends a waft of yeasty perfume into the air that makes my mouth water instantly. My cravings kick into overdrive as she slices the still-steaming bread, revealing a perfect crumb structure with bubbles the size of quarters—which reminds me, I haven’t had a fried pickle in a hot minute. I’ll have to rectify that, and soon.

“The fermentation process does produce trace amounts of alcohol, but it’s baked off during cooking,” Glinda says. “Go on, Lottie, it’s perfectly safe.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” I say.

She hands me a piece that’s still warm enough to melt the butter into glistening pools. I take a bite and nearly groan out loud. The contrast between the crusty exterior and the tangy, chewy interior is nothing short of miraculous.

The bread is warm, the butter is delicious, and suddenly it’s painfully obvious a single slice—heck, a single loaf—just won’t be enough.

“This”—I declare between bites—“might be worth going to prison for.”

Glinda belts out a laugh, pausing mid-slice while her knuckles whiten around the handle of a knife just for a heartbeat. “Well, that’s quite the endorsement. Although I can assure you, no laws were broken in the making of this bread.”

“Glinda”—I lean in and snatch up another warm slice while I’m there—“did you see anything the other night that you thought was suspicious?”

She gives a cool glance around and leans my way. “I did. I saw three things that made me think twice after the fact. I saw an older blonde woman having it out with him. And she looked plenty mad.”

“Was that Venus’ mother, Keegan?”

“Keegan, yes.” She snaps her fingers my way. “I was briefly introduced by her son-in-law. I guess he was heading things up.”

I rack my brain trying to think if I saw Keegan getting testy with the deceased but come up empty.

Glinda gives both Carlotta and me another slice of oven-hot sourdough. “Then I saw

Eliza having words with the man. Whatever he must have done or said to her really set her off. Eliza is one of the most even-keeled women I know.”

“Same,” I say through a mouthful of warm, buttery sourdough that makes my life feel complete.

“And let’s see”—Glinda squints at the sky—“oh yes, there was a redhead, real pretty thing that looked as if she wanted to throttle him. She’s a popular realtor out here.”

“Della Crane,” I say. Did I know she was a realtor? Oh goodness, I really should start taking notes. That or deliver these babies. It would be nice to have a brain once again, but then again, I suspect I won’t be sleeping much for the next eighteen years anyway. “I saw that as well. Anything else that you found suspicious?”

Her lips purse as she glances around once again. “I’ll be honest, the man was as handsome as the day is long. It wouldn’t surprise me at all to learn he was in a love triangle of some sort with those women. You know the type, far too handsome for his britches so he plays the field.”

“Don’t they all.” Carlotta shakes her head as she helps herself to another slice. She glances to our left just as an older man with a thicket of crimson locks stops to admire the sourdough display. “Well, howdy-do.” Carlotta doesn’t waste any time before she begins flirting. “So, is your hair that color all over, or just where the public can see?”

I’m about to intervene before Carlotta gets us kicked out of the booth when something across the crowded fairway catches my eye.

I gasp at the sight and grab ahold of my belly.

The twins had better hold on. We’re in for a bumpy ride.

LOTTIE

My gasp is loud enough to draw Glinda's attention, and possibly shift one of the twins into my chest cavity.

"What is it?" Glinda asks, scanning the crowd for whatever caused my sudden mini heart attack, and a heart attack is right. "Did you find Eliza?"

"No," I flatline. I wish. "What I did find is my husband—who is supposed to be flat on his back at home."

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And he just so happens to be hobbling through the crowded festival like a wounded leprechaun with not one but two tall gnarled wooden walking sticks of some sort propping him up. And next to him, looking far too pleased with himself is Noah.

By the looks of it, they haven't spotted me yet.

"Here they come," I mutter.

"Who are they?" Glinda squints in their direction. "Boy, they are a couple of lookers."

"Those are Lot Lot's stalkers," Carlotta answers for me. "And as their Irish luck would have it, they've both been married to Lot Lot at one point or another. Lottie Dottie here may look tame, but she's got some serious game—and far too many little yippies if you ask me." She cups her hands around her mouth. "Well, well! Looks like Sexy decided bed rest was for lesser mortals. And he's brought backup," she teases. "Nothing says 'I don't trust my preggo wife' like bringing along the ex-husband to help with surveillance."

"I bet they tracked my phone," I say, wagging the offending device their way. "I knew I should have left it at the bakery."

"Rookie mistake." Carlotta nods. "That's why I leave mine with random men at bars. It keeps everyone guessing."

Everett spots us as if on cue and his face cycles through an impressive range of emotions—relief, confusion, suspicion, and finally, that special brand of exasperation

he seems to reserve just for me.

Noah, on the other hand, simply crosses his arms and nods with that “I knew it” look on his face that makes me want to pick up a sourdough roll and peg him with it.

Everett reaches us first, wincing with each step, but I’ll admit, he looks darn good doing it. Darn hormones. Okay, fine—hormones aside, judging by the women giving both Noah and Everett a second look, they both look too darn good for their Irish britches.

“Funny running into you here, Lemon.” Everett’s lips curve but as always, he’s far too stubborn to give a smile. “I thought you were spending the day at the bakery.”

“I had a change of plans,” I say as sweetly as I can. “Funny running into you as well, since you’re supposed to be horizontal and immobile. I guess bed rest isn’t so fun when you’re the one being forced to the confines of a mattress.”

He frowns as if he wants to acknowledge this but knows better.

“The doctor said light movement would help.” Everett is smooth with the half-truth.

Carlotta belts out a laugh. “Since when is navigating a busy, dizzy, redheaded love-fest light movement?”

Noah clears his throat as they close in on us. “The real question is, why my mother called in a panic saying you’d gone off to hunt a killer again.”

Both Carlotta and Glinda gasp at that one.

“Your mother has an overactive imagination,” I tell him. “That and she still has it out for Everett’s mother for seemingly stealing her man. Speaking of which, I was just

stopping by to say hello to Eliza, that's all."

Everett's chest rises and falls. Of course, both he and Noah realize that my hello to Eliza would have been followed up with an entire litany of questions, but that's beside the point.

Everett's eyes widen at the mention of her.

"My mother?" He inches back. "What would she be doing here?"

"Peddling sourdough," Glinda says while offering both Noah and Everett a slice of fresh baked bread and the crock of butter to go along with it.

They're no fools. Within three seconds both sides are buttered and they're moaning in gratitude.

Glinda leans my way. "You don't really think Eliza is a killer, do you?"

I openly glare at Noah for obvious reasons. Way to get the homicide rumor mill going. Not that Eliza didn't do a good enough job on her own.

"No way," I tell Glinda. "The woman is innocent as the day is long. I was actually going to hit her up for some old baby pictures of my husband. I'm putting together a scrapbook for the twins before they're born. Just a little side project I've taken on with all my free time."

Both Noah and Everett raise a brow my way.

Okay, so it's a bald-faced lie—both the free time and the scrapbook. But the scrapbook is an idea I've been thinking about. The free time is more or less akin to mythology at this point.

Maybe when Keelie and I move into a nursing home together one day we'll have a little time on our hands. Maybe.

Sebby materializes between Noah and Everett, waving his ghostly paws in an adorable manner. "She's here! The whiskey woman is coming this way, and she has murder in her eyes!"

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“I knew it,” Carlotta crows. “I just knew Lizzy Baxter was a killer at heart. They don’t make up playground chants for just any ol’ someone. Ask me how I know.”

“What playground chant?” Glinda looks pale with terror.

Carlotta leans her way. “Lizzy Baxter took an ax and gave her husband forty whacks. When she saw what she had done, she gave the next one forty-one.”

“That’s absolutely horrific.” Glinda’s hand flutters to her throat as if she might be next.

“Kids are brutal.” Carlotta shrugs. “But they’re rarely wrong about who’s got murder in their blood.”

Eliza closes in on us with her dark hair swept back into a bun with a white apron stamped with shamrocks tied over a lime green dress—a designer dress, no doubt.

“Everett?” she scoffs at her son as if she’s surprised to see him. “What are you doing out of bed?” Without waiting for an answer, her gaze lands on me. “And Lottie, what a surprise.” Maybe so, but her tone suggests finding a roach in her morning coffee would be less surprising. She winks over at Noah instead of offering up a reprimand, sarcastic or otherwise.

Noah Fox might be getting off easy, but there’s no way I’m letting Eliza off the hook for anything.

She knows something.

And heaven forbid she may have done something.

Either way, I need to get to the bottom of this before a couple more of her grandchildren are born.

LOTTIE

Before anyone can trade another barb, a sudden surge of festival-goers pushes through the sourdough tent, nearly knocking over a display of artisanal bread baskets.

“Oh goodness,” Glinda exclaims, rushing to save the precious loaves of sourdough from being trampled. “You’ll have to excuse me. The one o’clock rush is always chaotic. People want something to soak up all that green beer.” She throws us an apologetic smile. “Lovely seeing you all. Eliza, don’t forget to take a few fresh loaves for the rest of the judges!”

Glinda takes off to appease the bread-seeking crowd while Eliza turns to us with all the enthusiasm of someone sitting down for a root canal.

She takes a moment to frown my way. “I should be going as well. I’m helping with the whiskey cake-eating competition at the main pavilion,” she says, checking her elegant silver watch that most likely cost as much as this entire shamrock-shaped shindig did to put on. “The Boozy Bite Bonanza starts in fifteen minutes, and I’m needed at the judges’ table.”

“A whiskey cake-eating competition?” Noah perks up at the mention of the sweet yet boozy treat. “What a coincidence. Everett and I were just about to sign up for that.”

Everett nods to his mother. “I suspect it might take my mind off the back pain.”

Carlotta chuckles at the thought. “Because nothing says spinal recovery like a little

competitive eating. Nice try, Sexy.” She straightens with a jolt. “Wait just a whiskey pickin’ minute...Whiskey? Cake? Competition? Why, those are my three favorite words in the English language! I’m in.” She nudges me. “What better way to fatten up those twins than with booze-infused baked goods?”

“Ooh,” Sebby muses. “Multitasking at its finest. I’ll be on your team, Carlotta, since Lolita seems to have two extra helpers on hers.”

“Let’s show these leprechaun lovers how it’s done,” she tells him. “I’ve been a gold digger since before it was trendy.”

“I can vouch for that,” I say.

Eliza’s lips purse like she’s just bitten into a lemon. And since she’s looking right at me, I’m feeling like the Lemon in question.

“As a baker, Lottie, you should know that the alcohol bakes out of the batter,” she informs me while lifting her chin. “It’s perfectly safe. Care to show these three who’s boss? The cakes were provided by a competitor of yours out in Hollyhock.”

“Cupid’s Sweet Concoctions?” I ask and she affirms the fact with a nod. “Then I’m in, too.”

Venus Finnegan’s mother might be on the suspect list, but that won’t stop me from gobbling up all of the desserts I can get my hands on that her daughter bakes. Not to mention she charges over twenty bucks a slice for just about any cake in her shop. In that respect, this competition is a prudent financial decision.

Eliza’s cool smile widens a notch. “My money is on you, Lottie.”

The compliment, while completely unexpected and perhaps slightly backhanded,

catches me off guard.

“Why, Eliza”—I say with a laugh—“if I didn’t know better, I’d say you were trying to get on my good side.”

A ghost of a smile flickers across her face. “Consider it a peace offering. Now, shall we?”

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Less than five minutes later, Eliza ushers us into the Shamrock Sweets Pavilion, a massive green-and-white striped tent with a wooden sign proclaiming the 13th Annual Boozy Bite Bonanza hanging over the entrance. Inside, the air is thick with the heady scent of whiskey, cinnamon, and the nerves of competitors preparing to test their stomach capacity.

Long tables line the center of the tent, covered in green tablecloths and set with stacks of plates. A banner stretches across the back wall showing a cartoon leprechaun with disturbingly elastic cheeks stuffed with cake. Banjo music competes with the excited chatter of spectators who seem to have gathered for what is apparently one of the festival's main attractions.

"Wow. This is quite the production," I say as we're led to our assigned spots at the competitor's table.

"Honey Hollow might have the market cornered on murder, but Fallbrook knows how to throw a proper all-the-booze-you-can-eat contest," Carlotta says, eyeing our competition. "Don't worry, Lot. They all look like a bunch of namby-pamby crybabies who can't hold their liquor. We've got this in the bag."

I pet my belly and nod. "The babies and I are starved. These people don't stand a chance."

We're all quickly seated and I catch both Noah and Everett rolling up their sleeves as they land on either side of me. Carlotta and Sebby end up across from me and I can't help but notice the troubling way Carlotta is opening her mouth and twisting her jaw.

“Carlotta, knock that off,” I snip her way. “Someone is going to think you’re having a medical episode and call this whole thing off.”

“Quit your witchin’, Lot,” she snips back. “I’m just stretching my jaw in a few warm-up exercises I learned from some of the girls down at Red Satin Gentlemen’s Club.”

“What would the girls down at Red Satin need to stretch their jaws for?” I ask. “They’re strippers?”

“It’s called a side gig, Lot,” she shoots back. “Not everyone lives in your happy little murderous bubble.”

My eyes widen in an instant. “Never mind. Please don’t extrapolate.”

Sebby lands on the table next to Carlotta and his ghostly tail swishes with excitement. “I’ve got a hot tip for you ladies. The secret is to compact the cake with your tongue against the roof of your mouth before swallowing—saves valuable chewing time!”

He no sooner says it than I’m left to wonder if I’ve ever chewed cake in my life. I’m more of an inhaler myself.

“Welcome, contestants!” A booming voice draws my attention to the front of the tent, where a man dressed as a leprechaun—complete with a fake orange beard and an alarmingly tall green hat—stands on a small platform. “I’m your host, Lucky Larry, and this is the thirteenth annual Boozy Bite Bonanza!”

The crowd erupts in cheers. Apparently, competitive cake-eating is the height of entertainment in Fallbrook. With the state of the world, I really can’t blame them.

“The rules are simple,” Lucky Larry continues. “You have exactly five minutes to consume as much of our famous whiskey cake as possible. No hands allowed—face-

first eating only! The contestant who consumes the most cake will be declared the champion and win our grand prize—a year’s supply of O’Malley’s Premium Irish Whiskey and the coveted Golden Fork Trophy!”

Carlotta practically vibrates with excitement. “A year’s supply of whiskey?” she shouts with glee and the crowd cheers twice as hard. “Well, butter my sourdough biscuits and call me lucky! My liver has been in training for this since 1975!”

The servers begin placing enormous platters of cake frosted in whipped cream in front of each contestant. The whiskey scent is strong enough to make my eyes water—or maybe that’s just hormones again. Either way, I’m suddenly questioning exactly how much alcohol evaporates in the baking process.

All of it as far as I’m concerned at the moment. Nothing is going to keep me from shoving my face in the first cake that lands in front of me.

“Remember, doll,” Sebby whispers to Carlotta. “It’s not about chewing—it’s about swallowing whole chunks at a time. Pretend you’re a snake unhinging your jaw to consume a mouse!”

I lift a brow Carlotta’s way because we both know she’s not far from it.

Lucky Larry raises a green flag. “Competitors ready? On your marks... get set... **WHISKEY!**”

The tent erupts in cheers as twenty faces simultaneously plunge into a lusciously delicious whiskey cake. Lucky for me, the whiskey is faint, the whipped cream is indulgent, and the vanilla cake is moist as can be. I try to follow Sebby’s disturbing yet effective advice, but I end up gobbling down in large gulps just the way I like it.

“Carlotta, what are you doing?” Sebby shouts as she moans through every bite.

“You’re doing it all wrong! There’s no savoring in food-eating competitions. This isn’t a wine tasting.” He tosses up his front paws. “Fine. If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.” He face-plants into the cake, and within seconds the sweet treat dissolves before my eyes.

One of the twins gives a swift kick, then the other, and I get the hint. It’s time to kick this into high whiskey cake-eating gear.

And I do just that.

One cake after the other.

“TEN SECONDS REMAINING!” Lucky Larry shouts.

With a final heroic effort, I manage to shove in one more mouthful just as the timer goes off.

“STOP! FORKS DOWN!” Lucky Larry shouts, despite the fact no forks were harmed in the gulping down of these liquor-based concoctions.

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I sit back, breathing heavily with a mouth coated in whiskey. Carlotta looks blissfully tipsy despite the alcohol being baked out. I'll be the last to explain science to her.

Noah appears slightly green around the gills. And Everett, somehow, has managed to keep his dignity intact, with hardly a crumb on his shirt or a hint of whipped cream in his five o'clock shadow.

The judges move down the line, hemming and hawing, and tabulating.

I'm so full that a part of me wants to say I'll never eat cake again, but I think the twins and I know that's not true.

Finally, Lucky Larry approaches the microphone, holding a golden trophy in the shape of a fork that looks tackier than most of Carlotta's holiday outfits—and that's saying a lot since most of those are mine.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner! By a margin of just two whole whiskey cakes, our champion is... LOTTIE LEMON!"

"What?" I sit up a notch with a start.

"Oh, knock it off, Lot Lot," Carlotta snarls. "Don't act so surprised. Anyone with a free-loading pair of tenants taking up residence in their midsection has an unfair advantage. You weren't eating for one—you were eating for a small Irish village. If they gave medals for competitive breeding while competitive eating, you'd win that, too."

Noah glances over at Everett. “And I guess we’d get an honorable mention.”

The crowd erupts on my behalf, and I’m ushered to the front to receive my trophy and a certificate for a year’s supply of whiskey that I happily claim despite the fact I’m nine months pregnant.

Sure, there are gasps and even a few boos, but little do the naysayers know that I’ll be taking those bottles straight to my bakery.

“Congratulations,” Eliza says with genuine surprise as she hands me the golden fork. “I had no idea you had such—capacity.”

Everett wraps an arm around my shoulders. “I’d like to think I helped in a roundabout way.”

A laugh bubbles from me. “Well, the twins were hungry,” I say, patting my belly. I turn back to the unfortunate suspect at hand. “Eliza, do you have a minute to grab a bite?”

“Are you still hungry?” She rakes her eyes up and down my body as if I’m about to commit a crime.

“No, but I’m thirsty,” I tell her and Noah shoots me a look that says nice save. Okay, so it was a total cover-up. I can totally go for some corned beef brisket right about now. “Besides, Everett and I would love to spend a little time with you.”

“I’d love to, dear, but I promised the festival committee I’d finish cleaning up. There’s an Irish dance competition in this venue next. In fact, it starts in five minutes.”

Before I can protest, she slips into the crowd, leaving me standing with a golden fork,

cake all over my face, and the distinct feeling that Eliza Baxter is much better at evasive maneuvers than anyone gives her credit for.

And it makes me wonder if she's just as good at evading a homicide.

But one way or another, I'm getting answers from Eliza Baxter—even if I have to eat my way through every contest in this festival to corner her.

NOAH

I dive into the crowd right after Eliza and catch her by the elbow before she can leave the venue.

The tent reeks of whiskey and sugar as a mob dressed in far too much green meanders around us, and with far too much green beer in their hands, too.

Someone is playing fiddle music that feels a little too darn loud and a little too darn cheerful for what's about to go down.

“Not so fast,” I say, steering her behind a tent pole for a little privacy. From here, I can still see Everett and Lottie across the way. He's helping to wipe the cake off her face while Carlotta says something that has Lottie laughing and Everett frowning. Lottie is cradling that golden fork trophy she just won, and by the look on her face, she's proud of the fact, too. I can't blame her. I'm proud of Lottie, no matter what she does.

Eliza's expensive perfume cuts through the scent of the whiskey cake, and it reminds me of brewed tea steeped far too long. Her face is calm, but her eyes certainly aren't. They're calculating. Worried. And from what I can tell, glancing for the nearest exit.

“Eliza”—I soften as I step in close—“don't you want to let Everett and Lottie in on

that little secret you spilled in my office?" I offer a pleading look because deep down she must know it would be best for everyone involved if they knew the truth as well.

"No." Her jaw tightens and I can see Everett hovering in her features like a ghost. "I'm not ready." She glances at Everett and Lottie. "Not here. Especially not with the twins on the way. Not to mention Lottie and Lyla Nell are due to have a birthday in a couple of days. Let them have their fun. I'm certainly not signing up to ruin it for them."

A gust of cold air pushes into the tent and briefly clears the sugary scent that's starting to kick my appetite back into gear. That whiskey cake was amazing, and despite the fact I knocked back my fair share, I wouldn't mind another bite.

"Why does this have to be all about me, anyway?" she scoffs with her voice on edge now. "It was years ago. Decades. Noah, we're talking ancient history."

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“Because right now, you’re my number one suspect, Eliza. And as much as I hate to say it, you’re probably Lottie’s number one suspect, too. You and I both know she’s investigating this whether Everett and I want her to or not.”

That gets her attention. Her face goes pale in an instant.

“Look”—I sigh as I say it— “you’re like a mother to me. I want you to know that if you have anything else to say regarding Sebastian’s death, then I’m a safe place for you.”

For a split second, there’s a dash of genuine fear in her eyes. Then in an instant it’s gone, replaced by cold, hard anger.

Eliza stares daggers at me, then looks across at Everett. He’s wrapping his arms around Lottie, grimacing from his back pain but smiling at something she said. They look happy. Normal.

“I’m sorry, Noah.” Eliza closes her eyes for a moment. “I’m not having this conversation again. Not now. Maybe not ever.”

As soon as she says those words, she walks straight out of the tent without looking back. Without so much as a goodbye to Everett or Lottie.

I watch her leave, then look back at Lottie holding up her trophy for a photo. Everett has his arm around her, and Carlotta is being Carlotta.

They have no idea what’s coming.

EVERETT

Mangias Italian food.

Wicked Wok Chinese takeout.

A toddler who's decided her new life goal is to launch lo mein across the living room.

And Carlotta with chopsticks. All here in my living room with far too much noise happening at once.

Some might say this is bordering on a nightmare. But that wouldn't be me. I wouldn't want it any other way than it is right now—sans the searing pain in my back.

Noah sits across from me, digging into a pile of garlic knots while feeding every other one to his golden retriever, Toby.

Evie sits next to Noah, happily plucking dumplings off his plate while he pretends not to notice. Lyla Nell is covered in marinara, cheerfully feeding Waffles a noodle. And Carlotta? She's holding her chopsticks as if she's about to stab a man. It would not surprise me.

"Dad, you need to elevate your legs more," Evie fusses, shoving another pillow under my knees. She's been home from college for exactly twenty-four hours and has already rearranged the entire living room into what she calls an optimal healing environment. It looks more like a triage center if you ask me.

"I hurt my back, not my leg," I point out, but it's useless. The pillows keep coming.

"Come on, Dad, you know the body is all connected," she informs me with the confidence of someone who took a single anatomy class. "The position of your legs

affects your spinal alignment.”

I don’t argue. It’s easier that way. Not to mention that actually made sense.

Lemon waddles in from the kitchen with a precarious stack of takeout containers teetering on her belly, looking just one wobble away from disaster.

“Okay, who ordered the beef with broccoli?” she calls out. “And where’s my sweet and sour chicken?”

“I’ve got something sweet and sour right here,” Carlotta announces, holding up a bottle of whiskey that definitely wasn’t part of our delivery order.

Noah pops up behind Lottie, relieving her of the containers before they empty their contents at her feet.

Of course, he does. He’s been playing hero all evening, opening containers, pouring drinks, and generally being annoyingly helpful while I’m trapped under what feels like every pillow in the house.

“Lemon, take a seat,” I suggest. “You shouldn’t be carrying anything after we trekked around at the fairgrounds.”

“I’m pregnant, not incapacitated.” She pins a brief smile on her face and it lets me know I’m walking on thin ice, which is tantamount to what I had transformed the floors in this house to.

Thankfully, Evie was able to reverse the curse, as she put it. And reverse it she did.

Lemon will be back in our bed tonight. And regardless of whether or not I’m there with her, I’m just thankful Noah won’t be anywhere near her in a horizontal position.

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“Besides”—Lemon adds, patting her belly with pride—“I just proved I have the strongest stomach in this entire family. The twins and I can handle anything thrown our way.”

“Says the woman who couldn’t get off the toilet for twenty minutes after we got home,” Carlotta shoots back.

“Oversharing, Carlotta,” Lemon mutters.

Lyla Nell bops my way with her pigtails bouncing in turn. With each passing day, she looks more like Noah and she wears his face better than he can ever hope to.

“Daddy haveboo-boo,” she announces as she grabs an afghan and proceeds to tuck me in.

“Thank you, baby,” I say, bending over to drop a kiss on the top of her head. “I feel much better now.”

“Daddy’s face needs pillow, too!” She proceeds to cover my face with a throw pillow, which I’m fairly certain is attempted murder. Must be the Noah in her trying to smother me.

“All right,” Lemon says as she plucks the pillow off my face. “Let’s finish dinner.”

Within minutes another round of Chinese and Italian food abounds. The scent of garlic, ginger, and tomato sauce creates a bizarre but not unpleasant fusion, and it’s one we’ve never turned down before.

“Why did we order from two different restaurants again?” Carlotta asks no one in particular. “Because we’re a bunch of hungry geniuses, that’s why.” She belts out a laugh and we all hold up either a container of Chinese food or a pizza slice to toast the fact.

Lemon nods. “Not only that, but you can’t expect a pregnant woman to choose between pasta and lo mein. I think one of the twins prefers Mangias and the other prefers the Wicked Wok.”

“I keep telling you, one belongs to Foxy,” Carlotta says without missing a beat. “Why do you think the universe sent this handsome little fox to help out with the case?”

“She’s got a point,” Evie says and I shoot her a look that says *Et tu?*

Noah nods. “And I think the universe is making a point, too, Lot.” He winks my way. “And just throwing this out there, but the name Noah works for a boy or a girl.”

“Then you better find someone else to procreate with, buddy,” I tell him.

“Speaking of names,” Evie says, pulling out her phone. “I’ve been working on a spreadsheet filled with names you could use for the twins. I’ve got boy twin names, girl twin names, and names that will work together if you get one of each. I have it all organized by origin, meaning, and compatibility with Lemon-Baxter.”

“You made a spreadsheet?” Lemon looks genuinely touched.

“Of course, she did,” I say proudly. “That’s my girl.”

“I made one, too,” Noah offers, as if anyone asked him. “But mine is more of a list.”

“Of course, you did.” I frown his way.

“I’ve been playing the baby name game, too,” Carlotta shouts, waving her chopsticks dangerously close to her eyes. “What about Gin and Tonic? That’s a pair of classics that never go out of style.”

“We’re not naming our children after liquor,” Lemon flatlines.

“Fine,” Carlotta huffs. “We’ll stick to Jack and Daniel, then. It works for both boys or girls.”

“It still falls under the liquor category,” Evie points out.

“Semantics,” Carlotta dismisses. “You say liquor, I say liquid inspiration.”

Lyla Nell does her best to crawl into Lemon’s lap. “Babies names, Elsa and Anna!” She giggles up a storm and claps her hands.

“Aww,” Lemon coos. “Those are beautiful names.” I’m just not sure.

Lyla Nell’s little mouth falls open. “Mickey and Minnie?” She tries again.

“Better yet, Bonnie and Clyde?” Carlotta adds while slapping her thigh.

“Or Romeo and Juliet?” Noah suggests with a straight face.

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“Tragedies need not apply,” I tell him.

“Fair point.” He shrugs. “Maybe you’ll find some good family names. You could honor someone important to the both of you.”

Before either Lemon or I can respond, Lyla Nell begins to chase Pancake and Waffles, and somehow manages to grab them both by the tails. Toby makes a run for it and hides out behind one of the dining room chairs. He knows she’s coming for him, too.

“All right, missy,” Lemon says. “It’s bathtime.”

“I’ll give her a bath,” Evie volunteers. “Mom, you should have your feet up, too.”

“Yup,” Noah agrees. “You and Everett are a couple of bookends, Lot.”

“Very funny,” she says, tossing a throw pillow at him. “I’ll help, Evie.”

They manage to herd Lyla Nell upstairs, and Carlotta stands to her feet with a groan.

“Come on, Sebby,” she says, hitching her head at thin air, although both Noah and I realize that there is most certainly something there. Apparently, in this case it’s a fox. “Let’s raid the fridge for cheesecake, then we’ll head down to Red Satin and you can watch all the foxy ladies. Harry and I are meeting there for nachos.”

I wait until she’s out of earshot before flicking a pillow at Noah and he catches it midair.

“No, neither of the twins is mine,” he says, flinging it back my way. “But I’ve still got joint custody of your wife’s common sense—and her heart.”

“And the common sense would somehow be related to you?” I ask, amused. “You do realize that I can still muster the strength to injure you.”

“All right, Toby, time to head across the street.” Noah laughs as he rises from his seat and Toby shows up front and center, and so do Pancake and Waffles. Lyla Nell has been a bit rough with them as of late. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn they, too, would like a little respite across the street.

“You’re not going anywhere until you tell me what you and my mother were discussing,” I say a little rougher than intended. “I couldn’t get so much as a hello out of her.”

And yet Noah seemed to extract a whole conversation. I was watching long enough to observe the fact. She looked worried, almost pleading with him about something.

Noah’s eyes widen a notch before his lips clamp shut. He shakes his head my way.

“I’m sorry, buddy. But that conversation was strictly confidential.”

He wastes no time showing himself to the door, and I’m left with more questions than answers.

Carlotta darts out the door right after him and I decide to make the painful trek upstairs.

Lemon and I put Lyla Nell to bed and kiss Evie goodnight as well. “Come here, Judge Baxter,” Lemon says as she coaxes me into bed. “I think we need to examine some evidence that proves not all your parts are out of commission.” Her smile is

equal parts sweet and wicked.

“Not even a broken back could stop me from delivering a verdict on that motion,” I tell her, wincing as I slide between the sheets. “Some cases deserve personal attention from the bench.”

And I am more than happy to oblige.

LOTTIE

It’s the very next day and I’m at the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery, right where I belong.

The afternoon rush has finally ended, leaving behind the lingering scent of sugar, yeast, and desperation—the last one being entirely mine.

The bakery counter looks like it survived a small cyclone, with display cases half-empty and enough green sprinkles scattered across surfaces that from a distance look like a freshly mowed lawn.

I collapse into a pastel chair at my favorite corner table, the one with the wobbly leg that only I know how to balance just right, and stare at the mountain of custard-filled donuts I’ve accumulated as my reward for surviving another day of smiling at customers while housing two tiny humans who seem determined to practice their kickboxing against my poor bladder.

And honestly? I’m beginning to think they’re settling in for the long haul. By this time with Lyla Nell, I was having nonstop Braxton Hicks contractions. And well, those seemed to have curtailed a week ago. It’s as if my babies have staged a coup of my uterus and have decided that my body will be their home for the next eighteen years.

Speaking of the twins, I pull out my to-do list, which has grown to such epic proportions that it might as well qualify as the Great American Novel.

St. Patrick's Day is a mere day away, followed immediately by my birthday and Lyla Nell's birthday—on the very same day. Then there's the small matter of, oh, giving birth to twins any day now. Although I think we've already established the fact the birth in question is more or less a hypothetical event.

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Which might actually be a good thing because I'm so far behind on everything that 'behind' has become my permanent state of mind.

"At least I ordered Lyla Nell's birthday gifts online last night," I mutter to myself, taking a bite of a donut. The custard oozes out the other side, landing on my ever-shrinking lap. Perfect. Just perfect.

A spray of blue and pink stars lights up the area in front of me, and within seconds the cutest little white fox appears with his tiny nose and extra-long pink ears.

"So nice to see you, Lolita," Sebby says, hopping down to the table and taking up a custard-filled donut for himself. "It's come to my attention, that this St. Patrick's Day celebration of yours is going to be one nonstop green extravaganza. The Emerald Isle brought to life right here in little old Honey Hollow!"

"You bet it is," I say, licking the custard from the bottom of my donut before it makes a break for it. Just the thought of all the excitement that will bring has me already exhausted.

"And did I mention"—he pauses a moment to wolf down the glazed, custard-filled wonder before snatching up another—"that the foxy ladies will be out in force? My kind of foxy ladies, of course. Those enchanting woods just beyond town are positively teeming with vixens ready for a spring fling. Something about the full moon coinciding with your human celebration makes for quite the supernatural soirée."

"I'm glad someone here is having the luck of the Irish," I respond, adding buy

wrapping paper to my to-do list. How did I forget to order that last night? Do they ship wrapping paper? Oh, forget it. I'll dig out some gift bags that I saved from Christmas. Lyla Nell won't care if Santa's face is plastered on half of her gifts. She loves Santa.

Come to think of it, that might lead her to believe that he supplies her birthday gifts, too. Although let's face it, those gifts I ordered were lukewarm at best. It might be prudent to let Santa take the heat.

A thought comes to me. "Sebby, how exactly are you and those foxy mamas... You know what? On second thought, I don't think I want to know."

"Wise choice," Sebby agrees. "Spectral liaisons are a complex topic that would make your human brain short-circuit faster than plugging a toaster into a bathtub."

Some of those things that happened in my bedroom last night were complex enough to short-circuit even the most promiscuous human brain.

Everett Baxter really does have an entire litany of night moves that could make even an aerialist question their expertise in human flexibility.

"Thanks for that lovely image regarding the bathtub," I say, crossing off pink streamers and adding sanity to the bottom of my list.

At least Lyla Nell is napping at Glam Glam's right now, giving me a precious hour of peace to plan both our birthdays. Not that my birthday requires a single thing. I'm content letting everyone forget all about it and shining the spotlight right on my sweet baby girl.

My mother jumped at the chance to have uninterrupted Glam Glam time, which I'm pretty sure is code for 'let's see how much sugar I can feed my granddaughter before

sending her home.'

But beggars can't be choosers, and right now, I'm begging for just enough time to figure out how to organize a birthday party while nine months pregnant with the world's most active twins and hunting a killer on the side.

Just another whirlwind day in Honey Hollow.

Speaking of whirlwinds, I spot one just about to enter my shop.

LOTTIE

The bell above the door chimes, and Venus Finnegan glides in looking as put-together as I am pulled-apart.

Her blonde hair is swept into a perfect updo, her spring dress unwrinkled despite the March wind—with pink and white daisies printed over it. It's almost as adorable as she is.

"Lottie," she sings with a wave. "Just the baker I was hoping to see," she says, approaching my table with the grace of someone whose center of gravity hasn't been hijacked by two tiny humans.

"Venus, what brings you by? Here for more of my addictive sweet treats?" I say it with a wink because we both know her sweet treats might just be twice as addictive.

Sebby swipes a custard-filled donut from my plate. "I love your donuts."

"Right on the money," Venus trills again. "I'm here picking up a few dessert platters. I ordered and paid for them online. I'm taking them to my sister-in-law's. My baked goods are still strictly verboten. Plus, she loved your cookies at Fondu's birthday

party and she's hosting a small get-together tonight. It's sort of a do-over without the exploding cake and traumatized pony."

I give a mournful laugh at the thought. "Well, your niece had quite the memorable party." I leave out the fact that I've had nightmares about that unicorn horn flying through the air like a mythological missile.

"Memorable is one word for it." Venus rolls her eyes.

"I'll say," Sebby agrees.

"Try being related to the mastermind behind it all." Venus gives a mournful chuckle. "I'm locked in for a lifetime of memorable moments. Anyway, the platters are for the do-over party. Only family this time around. Fondu's other grandparents missed the main event due to the fact they were 'trapped' on their yacht in the Bahamas." She says trapped in air quotes.

"The struggle is real," I say with a little a laugh.

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I wave over at Lily and ask her to retrieve Venus' treats for her.

And while Lily heads to the back to gather the order, I decide to seize the moment. After all, I'm running out of time in more ways than one.

"Venus"—I begin carefully—"I was wondering if you spoke to your mother about..." How in the world am I supposed to ask if her mother spilled some big, dark family secret yet?

"Anything?" She blinks my way.

Sebby tosses up his front paws in frustration. "You know, Lolita, you might get further along in your cases if you simply finished your sentences."

I shook him a look before wincing over at Venus because I can feel the truth bubbling its way up my throat. "About Sebastian Gallagher?"

"Good going, Lolita." Sebby brazenly munches on a donut in front of the nontelevisual among us. "Now ask if she's the killer. But if she is, don't arrest her until tomorrow night. Like I said, I've heard great things about this leprechaun lunacy about to take place on the big green day."

But I don't so much as glance at the spunky little specter. I can't take my eyes off Venus.

Her smile freezes and suddenly looks a little brittle around the edges. "Sebastian Gallagher?"

“Yes.” I give a quick glance around. “At Fondu’s party, your mother said she had something interesting to say about him, but she wouldn’t extrapolate.”

What she really said was I realize that my true relationship with the man will come out in the end, but I can’t say a word to you without speaking to my children first. They would never forgive me. I inadvertently frown at Venus. If I didn’t value our relationship so much, I wouldn’t be beating around the bush.

Venus’ eyes round out in horror and her perfect composure cracks just enough to confirm that I’ve hit a nerve.

“She’s going to say it.” Sebby floats her way. “She’s going to confess!”

That’s not where I see this going, but perhaps a confession on behalf of her mother would be on order.

Lily chooses that exact moment to return with a stack of pink bakery boxes, completely oblivious to the tension crackling in the air.

“Here you go, Venus,” Lily announces with the somewhat faux cheer I expect her to give to each and every customer. “Suze added a few extra macarons on the house. She says they turned out too pretty to sell to regular customers.”

I try my hardest not to avert my eyes. I happened to think all of my desserts are equally pretty, and I certainly like to sell them to customers. That’s what keeps the lights on and Suze’s bank account lined with green. Although I will agree to giving Venus a few freebies. After all, I brought Carlotta to her niece’s birthday party, and we all know how that went.

“Thank Suze for me.” Venus accepts the boxes with a smile that looks forced.

Lily takes off and Venus turns back my way. “I’m sorry, Lottie. I don’t know of any connection between my mother and Sebastian.”

My lips invert because that’s not what I asked. I simply asked if her mother said anything about him. She’s the one that brought up the connection.

She turns to leave, then pivots my way again.

“I just thought of something.” Her lips twitch as if there was a whole other direction she wanted to take this conversation. “Remember that redheaded woman who was arguing with Sebastian that night when you and I came upon them?”

“Della Crane?” I perk up, nearly forgetting all about my custard donuts. Well, almost.

“That’s the one. She was in my bakery this afternoon. I happened to overhear her chatting with her friend. She said there was a big Irish feast tonight at a place called O’Reilly’s Pub and Diner. The woman couldn’t stop raving about it. She asked if her friend wanted to meet her there at five, but her friend said she couldn’t make it. Della said she was going anyway. She said they have the best shepherd’s pie this side of Ireland.”

“Shepherd’s pie does sound delectable,” I say, nibbling on my thumb.

“I thought so myself.” Venus looks rather proud for even suggesting it.

And don’t think for a minute I don’t realize that I’m being manipulated. But, well, she’s good, I’ll give her that.

She shrugs. “If you really want to solve this case, and I know you well enough to know that’s true, I’d hunt down Della Crane and see exactly what she has to hide. The argument she had with Sebastian the night he died looked pretty brutal.”

Her phone pings, and she frowns at the screen. “I’m sorry, I’m being reprimanded for being late. My not-so-sweet sister-in-law says, if I don’t show up in the next twenty minutes, she’s replacing me as Fondu’s godmother with her Pilates instructor.”

“Sounds like you’d better hurry.”

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“I’ll see you tomorrow for the big parade,” she says with a wave. “Erin go bragh!” With that, she’s out the door in a whirl of perfume and let’s be honest—deflection.

I pick up another custard donut while considering Venus’ convenient subject change. But before I can think too deeply about it, the door bangs open again and Carlotta marches in, heads straight for my table, drops into the chair across from me, and grabs a donut without so much as a hello.

“Don’t eat that donut,” I tell her just as Sebby snatches it from her lips.

“Hear that?” he says her way. “Lolita only shares her donuts withme.”

“You shouldn’t fill up on them either,” I tell him, picking up my mile-long to-do list. “We’re going to dinner.”

Venus might think that Della Crane is hiding a few secrets, but it’s painfully obvious that Venus is hiding a few secrets of her own—or more to the point, secrets that belong to her mother.

Nevertheless, someone somewhere knows something about Sebastian Gallagher’s death, and I’m hoping that someone is Della Crane.

LOTTIE

O’Reilly’s Pub and Diner looks like St. Patrick himself bought out a party supply store and went completely feral.

Green streamers drip from the ceiling like vines in a jungle, shamrock cutouts are plastered over every inch of the walls, and every single person in here—without exception—is drowning in emerald and looks as if they lost a fight with a leprechaun. Think tall green hats, lots of fake orange bears, and a sea of emerald in every single hue.

The dark oak furniture gleams under the dim lighting, giving the whole place a warm, ancient feel despite the aggressive holiday decor. The music is loud, decidedly Irish, and the thicket of people are chattering and laughing so loud it mimics the sound of brewing thunder.

The scent of corned beef brisket hangs thick in the air like a carnivorous fog, mingling with the yeasty tang of beer and the unmistakable aroma of deep-fried everything. And judging by the enthusiastic Irish jig the twins are performing over my bladder, they most certainly approve. Boy, they're going to miss my bladder one day.

"I think I just gained five pounds walking through the door," I mutter to Carlotta as we step inside.

"That's why I never bother looking at the scale," she shoots back with her eyes already scanning the bar patrons like a predator assessing the herd. "I find it's best to live in blissful, caloric ignorance, Lot. And that's one of the reasons I don't feel bad about hanging out at the bakery and eating all the dessert I want."

"So, I've noticed."

A spray of pink and blue stars appears and soon that cute little furball with the big funny ears and fluffy little tail materializes.

"Is this the bar?" He startles as he takes a good gander at the place. "And look at all

of the beautiful human women with bright orange beards! I haven't seen a good beard on a woman since Sebastian's mother."

My mouth falls open at the inadvertent slight, although I suppose he's just telling the truth.

Carlotta shrugs. "Once a year I ditch the electric shaver and let what the Good Lord gave me run wild," she says, scratching at her imaginary beard.

However, once a year during No-Shave November that beard isn't so imaginary. Carlotta really does let loose and let her facial locks fall where they may. That's one of the worst parts about the two of us looking so much alike. Come November everyone knows exactly what I'd look like with a beard. Spoiler alert: It's not a good look.

"Remember," I say to Carlotta. "We're going to slowly dig into this with her."

It takes approximately three seconds to spot our target.

Della Crane sits perched on a barstool toward the middle of the counter, her vibrant red hair standing out even in this sea of fake orange beards and leprechaun hats. She's wearing a tight green T-shirt that reads Kiss Me, I Might Be Irish, and despite the fact that Irish heritage might be wishful thinking, she certainly has a taker.

"There she is." I nod in Della's direction. "And she's not alone."

A man in a shamrock-patterned tie leans toward her, and by the looks of it he's far too close for casual conversation. From Della's rigid posture and forced smile, I'd say his pseudo-Irish charm is failing spectacularly.

"Watch and learn, Lot Lot," Carlotta whispers it like the threat it is. "This is going to

be Irish poetry in motion.”

Before I properly threaten her right back within an inch of her bearded life, Carlotta saunters over to the bar and deliberately bumps into Shamrock Tie Guy, causing him to spill his green beer down the front of his white dress shirt.

“Oh, for shamrock’s sake,” Carlotta shouts with an Oscar-worthy performance. “Are you always this clumsy? Let me help you with that.” She proceeds to dab at his shirt with a napkin, managing to make the stain both larger and somehow swing around to both of his armpits. Now that’s not a good look either.

“I’ve got it,” the man says, backing away as if Carlotta might be contagious. He wouldn’t be entirely wrong in that respect either. He takes a better look at his newly minted green armpits and wheezes. “Geez.” He looks from Carlotta to Della. “It’s fine. I just remembered I have somewhere to be.”

And with that, the seat on Della’s left frees up and Carlotta plops down in it.

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I land in the seat to her right, effectively boxing her in, and my swollen feet are thankful for small mercies, regardless of the fact that those mercies come in the form of a hard barstool. Now to get some food in me. I open my purse and take a bite out of one of the crullers I packed. Have donuts, will travel seems to be my motto these days.

Della doesn't even attempt to hide her relief as the man makes his hasty exit.

"Thanks," she says to Carlotta. "He was about thirty seconds away from showing me pictures of his pet iguana. Again."

"Iguana pictures are third-date material at the earliest," Carlotta is quick to inform. "I once dated a man with a pet python. The jokes just write themselves with that one."

Thankfully, she chooses to stop there.

"Do tell a few," Sebby says, bouncing around on the bar in front of Carlotta with his tail swishing like mad.

But before Carlotta can oblige our ghostly guest, the bartender—a burly man with an obviously fake orange beard and a name tag that reads O'Malley—approaches us with a mile-wide smile.

"Good evening, ladies," he practically yodels. "You look like a fun bunch. How about this—I give you the first drink free if you don leprechaun hats and orange beards." He quickly outfits the three of us with the hat and face fur, and since we're not ones to look a gift-leprechaun in the mouth, we quickly oblige.

“Oh Lolita,” Sebby marvels as he floats around my head as if he’s never seen a woman with a beard before despite his hair-raising story about Sebastian’s mother. Come to think of it, he’s probably never seen a pregnant woman with a beard before either. Although oddly enough, this orange furry nightmare once happened when I was knocked up with Lyla Nell, too. “Lolita,” Sebby sighs as he looks at me moony-eyed. “Be still my non-beating heart. I’ve never seen a human so beautiful. That beard really does take your natural beauty to new heights.”

I make a face at him. It’s nice to know if this bakery gig doesn’t work out, I can always join the circus.

The bartender nods our way once more. “What can I get for you girls?”

Carlotta raises her hand first. “I’ll have whatever has the highest alcohol content and the lowest shame factor.”

I avert my eyes because I know for a fact Carlotta doesn’t care about shame. If anything, she’s flirting shamelessly with the bartender at hand.

“One Leprechaun’s Curse, coming up.” O’Malley nods, apparently understanding this vague request.

“Guinness,” Della says quickly.

He turns to me and his eyes linger for a moment on my pregnant belly. “And for you?” He cringes slightly as he says it.

“Something green, festive, and completely non-alcoholic,” I reply. “I’m the designated everything these days.”

“Shamrock Shake with extra whipped cream it is.” He decides, already drifting away

to prepare our drinks.

“Well, look at you.” Della smiles with delight as she inspects my swollen midsection. “You really bring new meaning to the wordsbelly up to the bar. And you hardly fit,” she says with a laugh. “When are you due?”

“Right about now,” I tell her, and the woman’s eyes round out. “But it feels as if I should have delivered last month. At this point, I think my body has forgotten what to do and when.”

She gives a mournful laugh. “Well, I can tell by the way you’re carrying that it’s a girl.” She grimaces slightly. “A verybiggirl.”

“You might be right,” I tell her. “The odds are fifty-fifty times two. I’m having twins.”

“Twins?” She laughs as she inspects me once again. “Your husband sounds like a real overachiever.”

“I’ve heard that before.” I laugh along with her because it happens to be something Noah pointed out when we announced the double trouble news.

Della seems to suddenly realize she’s flanked on both sides. Her easy smile fades slightly as she looks between us. “Hey? Do I know you two?”

“Not formally,” I answer, extending my hand. “I’m Lottie Lemon. I own the Cutie Pie Bakery in Honey Hollow. And this is Carlotta.”

“Just Carlotta,” Carlotta clarifies. “Like Madonna. Or Sasquatch.”

“Or Godzilla,” I add the more accurate comparison.

Della shakes my hand tentatively. “Della Crane. I’m a realtor with Red Crown Realty. Here to meet all of your real estate needs,” she says just as the bartender slides a green Guinness her way and she mock-toasts Carlotta and me before sucking the foam off the top. “Now how did we not formally meet again?”

“At the auburn affair last week at the community center the night Sebastian Gallagher was murdered,” I offer and the color drains from her face faster than beer from a punctured keg.

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She glances toward the exit as if calculating the nearest escape route, but Carlotta shifts subtly to block any potential flight.

“That’s right, Agent Orange,” Carlotta grouses. “We’ve got you pegged. We know what you did and when. And more importantly to who! Now spill the killer deets or we’re calling the cops.”

So much for slowly digging into it.

More like digging our own grave—one right next to Sebastian Gallagher.

LOTTIE

“Oh, good grief.” I place my hands over my belly and both twins offer up a swift kick as if to say, this is what you get for bringing her along.

The Irish rock music blares away here at the Irish pub where Carlotta and I traipsed off to in hopes of shaking down Della Crane. But thanks to Carlotta’s no-nonsense, all-nonsense style of interrogation, the only one shook is me.

Della inches back to get a better look at Carlotta with her orange beard. I’ll admit, she wears it well.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Della says and her voice is suddenly tight.

“Oh, I think you do,” Carlotta presses on, much to Sebby’s delight, who happens to be barking and doing somersaults with such unmitigated glee you’d think he was the

one sucking down green beer. “You were having quite the heated discussion with the deceased,” Carlotta goes on. “The kind that makes people wonder if you might have stabbed him later.”

“Good going, Carlotta,” Sebby is quick to cheer her initiative. “There’s no point in mincing words.”

Especially not if you don’t mind spooking a suspect.

“Carlotta,” I warn, shooting her a look. So much for the subtle approach.

The bartender returns with the rest of our drinks—a violently green concoction in a skull-shaped glass for Carlotta and what appears to be a mint milkshake with a shamrock cookie on top for me. Della immediately grabs her own already half-empty glass and takes a long, fortifying swig.

“Look”—I say once O’Malley drifts away again—“we’re not here to accuse you of anything. I just want to understand what happened that night.”

“Why?” Della asks as her knuckles turn white around her glass. “Are you a cop or something?”

“No,” I admit. “But I am someone who was there, who saw Sebastian alive, and then very much not alive. And I’m someone who needs to know the truth.”

She makes a face at her beer. “The truth?” she repeats with a bitter edge to her voice. “The truth is that Sebastian Gallagher was a manipulative, conniving, two-faced snake who built his entire whiskey empire on lies and theft.”

Sebby gasps. “Is she name-calling my sweet Sebastian?”

Carlotta chuckles. “Well. This conversation just got a lot more interesting. But let’s cut to the chase. How did he perform under the sheets?”

“Carlotta,” I hiss so loud this time half the bar stops its conversation for a beat.

“What?” Carlotta hisses back. “Inquiring minds want to know and all that other nonsense. And stop giving me the stink eye. With that beard and hat, it feels as if you’re putting a leprechaun curse on me.”

Della looks between us, then at the exit again, clearly debating whether to bolt or unburden herself. After a moment, she gives a dull laugh. It’s clear Carlotta is the one who cast a leprechaun pox on us all this evening.

“You girls are a hoot.” Della tugs at her beard for a moment, and I must admit, the color really makes her crimson locks pop. “So, you really want to know? Fine. Sebastian Gallagher was a charming con artist who dated me just long enough to gain access to my finances. He cleaned out my bank accounts, maxed out my credit cards, and left me with nothing but debt and humiliation.” She sags at the thought and I feel terrible for even asking.

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear it,” I say, practically gagging on the grief I feel for the poor woman.

“So, the plot thickens,” Sebby says with a swish of his tail. “I love a good revenge motive. It’s like those soap operas Sebastian used to watch when he thought no one was looking.”

I struggle not to react to my ghostly companion as I press on. “Della, is that why you were arguing with him at the community center?”

“Yes.” Her lips form a tight ball and turn as pale as her flesh. “I’d finally gathered

enough evidence to prove what he'd done. Account statements, forged signatures, even recordings of him bragging about his demented financial conquests to other men." Her eyes flash with a mixture of triumph and pain. "I confronted him with it all. I told him I was going to expose him for the fraud he was."

"Men like that deserve to be exposed," Carlotta offers up a mock toast with that skull glass of hers. "Preferably in public, with a spotlight and a hot mic. Or in private with handcuffs and a riding crop."

"How did he take that news?" I ask, sipping my creamy, dreamy concoction and the twins give an approving kick.

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“About as well as you’d expect,” Della sighs as she says it. “He laughed in my face and said no one would believe me. He said he’d tell people that I’d given him permission to access my accounts, and threatened to destroy my business reputation if I tried anything.” She takes another drink and the top of her orange beard is now stained green. “Then he walked away like I was nothing.”

Carlotta leans hard into the woman. “And later that night, someone just so happened to stab him. Convenient timing, Ginger Snap.”

“Ooh, Ginger Snap.” Sebby wiggles his tail with delight. “That does make me hungry for a cookie.”

Me, too. And because of that, I don’t waste any time gobbling down the cookie that’s spiked onto that mountain of whipped cream in front of me. Ginger snap, indeed. Mmm.

“I didn’t kill him, if that’s what you’re implying,” Della says sharply. “Although I can’t say I shed any tears at the news either. Sebastian had a talent for making enemies. I’m just one in a long line of people who wanted him off of this planet.”

“Oh, do make her tell,” Sebby pleads. “Back in the day, Sebastian used to brag in depth about all of the women he wronged. And he seemed rather proud of it, too.”

Charming.

“Go on, Carrot Top.” Carlotta leans toward Della, suddenly all ears. “Nothing bonds women like sharing stories about terrible men.”

Della hesitates, then shrugs. “Sebastian Gallagher was the love ’em and leave ’em type. As in leaving them holding the bag. Rumor has it, he would marry women then take off with everything they owned.” She takes another sip of her drink. “And he once did some shady business deals with a person who ended up in prison because of it. Sebastian walked away clean as a whistle while his partner took the fall.”

“Partner in business or crime?” Carlotta raises an eyebrow.

I shrug at the two of them. “With Sebastian, it sounds like they were one and the same.”

“Both,” Della confirms. “I don’t know much about it, just that someone went to the slammer while Sebastian kept right on making whiskey and breaking hearts.”

“He sounds like a real prince,” I say as dry as that man’s whiskey—and heart, apparently.

Sebby hops onto my shoulder, peering at Della with newfound interest. “Ask her about his family. Sebastian the original, his father, was quite the family man. Had seven children and remembered all their names... most of the time.”

I clear my throat. “Did Sebastian have a family of his own? Any children?”

Something flickers across Della’s face and it looks a lot like pity. “He had a wife and a couple of kids once. But he walked right out the door and never came back. Rumor has it, he left them with nothing but his name, which probably did them more harm than good.”

“Oh wow.” I shake my head at the horror. “What was his wife’s name?” I ask, trying to sound casual while my heart pounds a rhythm in my ears. I’d bet money the ex-wife was the killer. And if she wasn’t, the killer did her a solid.

Della scrunches her nose. “Kay, I think. I asked him about her once, and he said, ‘Leave Kay out of this.’ That was the end of that conversation.” Della drains the rest of her glass. “The man had more secrets than Area 51.”

“Men always do.” Carlotta gives a dramatic sigh. “The pretty ones especially. I once dated a guy who claimed to be a bachelor. Turned out, he had three wives in three different states. I’d have been impressed by his time management if I wasn’t so ticked off at him.”

“How did you handle that?” Della asks, momentarily distracted from her own troubles.

“Let’s just say his other wives and I formed a support group that involved his credit cards and a very expensive booze-filled spa weekend.” Carlotta winks. “We found solidarity in margaritas and expensive shoes.”

“Look”—Della says, trying her best to extract one last green drop from her glass—“I need to get going. I’ve probably said too much already, but beer really does have a way of loosening up my lips. Plus, I don’t mind telling you ladies what a mule that man really was.”

“Had Sebastian been a mule all along?” Sebby looks stymied by the analogy. “Well, that explains why he had a habit of kicking people when they least expected it.”

Sounds about right from what I’ve heard.

“Della”—I say quickly before she leaps out of her chair—“just one more question. About how much did he take from you?”

For the first time, genuine emotion crosses Della’s face. “Nearly two hundred thousand dollars. My life savings, my home equity, everything. I was going to open

my own real estate agency. Now I'm back to square one, working for a boss who takes sixty percent of my commissions."

"Did you see anything unusual that night?" I ask, returning to the killer in question. "Anyone hanging around Sebastian who seemed out of place?"

Sebby floats to the ceiling and back. "Yes, Della, did you notice any suspicious characters? Perhaps someone muttering 'I'm going to stab Sebastian in his cruel, cold heart?' Now that would be a solid clue."

I make a face his way.

Della considers my question while idly spinning her glass on the bar top. "Not really. Though there was that older woman he was talking to. A blonde, elegantly dressed. They seemed to be having a pretty intense conversation."

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“Keegan Meryl?” I ask as my pulse quickens.

“I don’t know her name. But Sebastian looked shocked when he saw her. Like he’d seen a ghost.”

“Or an ex-wife, perhaps?” Sebby suggests and I all but dismiss the thought. Surely Venus would have known if that man was her father.

“Anyone else?” Carlotta prompts.

“There was a dark-haired woman in a cream-colored coat who followed him outside at one point. I noticed because she seemed so out of place—everyone else was in far more casual clothes for the event. You could tell she was dripping with money.”

“That’s our Eliza in a diamond-encrusted nutshell,” Carlotta chirps.

My heart skips a beat. A woman in a cream-colored coat. Eliza Baxter wears cream-colored coats like other women wear jeans—frequently and without a second thought as to the blood she might get on them.

Sebby gives a dramatic gasp. “We have our killer, Lolita! It’s your mother-in-law! Hey? What if Sebastian was married to your husband’s mother? The fact that she killed him could make family dinners going forward a little awkward. Though I have to say, the drama would be delicious.”

“I should really go,” Della says, standing up. “But thanks for the conversation. It’s nice to know I’m not the only one who’s been taken for a ride by a charming con

artist.”

“Want my number?” Carlotta offers. “I’m starting a support group. We meet weekly at the liquor store.”

Della laughs as she adjusts her beard. “It was nice chatting with you ladies. Enjoy the rest of your night.”

As she walks away, Carlotta leans toward me. “So, what are you thinking? Is Red still our prime suspect?”

I watch Della step outside, phone already pressed to her ear, looking more like a woman on a mission than a killer on the run.

“I’m thinking, we have a financial scam, a woman with a serious motive for revenge, at least two others with mysterious connections to Sebastian, and a very tangled web, indeed.”

“Sounds like we need another round,” Carlotta declares as she signals for the bartender.

“And possibly a flow chart,” I add, absently rubbing my belly as the twins execute what feels like a coordinated tumbling routine.

Between stolen money, broken hearts, and a mysterious woman in a cream-colored coat, this case has more ingredients than one of my blue ribbon cakes.

Someone places their hand on my shoulder from behind and I turn around as a scream gets lodged in my throat.

LOTTIE

I gasp so loud that it threatens to dislodge this fake orange beard on my face.

O'Reilly's Pub and Diner is buzzing with loud Irish rock music and a sea of emerald and orange locks, both real and fake alike. The lights are dim, the scent of corned beef hash is thick, and the laughter and manic chatter can be heard all the way to Ireland, I'm sure of it.

"Noah?" I blink in surprise.

Not just Noah, but Everett, too, both decked out in matching green top hats and orange beards that rival both mine and Carlotta's in their synthetic garishness.

In this light, with the neon shamrock signs bathing everyone in an eerie emerald glow, we could pass for an oddball barbershop quartet—if barbershop quartets specialized in facial hair and questionable green top hats.

"Why do I feel as if I have two proficient stalkers?" I ask with a laugh while the twins execute what feels like a backflip in response to the fact my heart nearly stopped.

"We sent you about fifteen texts combined," Everett says, leaning in and pressing a kiss on my lips. "We were worried," he grunts. His back is clearly still giving him trouble, though he'd rather eat his ridiculous beard than admit it.

"Fifteen texts?" I quickly fish out my phone and groan. "It's dead," I say, wagging the offending device their way to reveal a black screen. "Apparently, pregnancy brain extends to forgetting to charge essential communication devices. My apologies."

"No problem," Noah says, signaling a waitress. "Table for four?"

"Sounds like we're staying, Lot." Carlotta rubs her belly. "All that Leprechaun's Curse has my appetite dancing an Irish jig."

“My appetite is always dancing an Irish jig,” I’m quick to say.

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Sebby chortles out a ghostly laugh. “That’s because you’ve got two Irish lads or lassies swimming away inside you.”

He’s not wrong.

Everett helps me off the stool. “The waitress promised a free basket of soda bread if we keep these on,” he says, adjusting his beard with what appears to be a modicum of dignity.

How he manages to look distinguished even with fake orange hair hanging from his face, I will never know. At least ten different women—bearded women—crane their necks as they struggle to get a better look at both Everett and Noah. And oddly enough, almost all of them are frowning at me.

Regardless, the luck of the Irish is definitely in my favor.

“Plus”—Noah adds—“they supposedly have the world’s best shepherd’s pie. We figured you might be hungry.” He pats his belly, alerting us to the fact he definitely is.

My stomach growls in agreement, betraying me completely. “Fine, but only because these babies are demanding sustenance.” I pat my belly. “Their appetite for justice is only matched by their appetite for carbohydrates.”

“Much like their daddy,” Noah quips while patting Everett on the back and Everett’s face turns purple from the shock of pain I’m assuming.

“One of us is lousy at bed rest, and it’s not me,” I tease. “I completed my three-day sentence with a smile on my face—and that smile was only from the fact I knew day four was coming.”

Carlotta belts out a laugh. “Lot’s appetite for justice doesn’t match her appetite for donuts. Nothing comes close to matching that.”

“That’s because some things are sacred,” I say, patting my belly as if assuring the twins that donuts would be on the way eventually. And they will be, even if I have to mine the stash in my purse to provide them.

The waitress—a tall woman with shamrock earrings larger than most satellite dishes—leads us to a booth in the corner. The sturdy oak table is scarred with decades of initials, spilled drinks, and what might be knife marks from particularly enthusiastic diners—or killers. The leather seats squeak beneath us as we settle in with Everett and me on one side, and Noah and Carlotta on the other. And well, Sebby floating somewhere in between.

“I’ll be happy to take your orders now if you like,” the waitress announces with her pencil poised. “And might I say, you four have the most magnificent beards I’ve seen all evening. The family that beards together, stays together.” She laughs and winks as she says it.

Sebby lands in the middle of the table, his ghostly form catching the light from the green candle flickering between salt and pepper shakers. “What a strange human ritual! Sebastian never grew facial hair. Said it itched his delicate skin. Although you know about his mother.”

By the sounds of it, his mother was testing the luck of the Irish—or at least as far as her lucky locks go.

“How about four shepherd’s pies? And three beers?” Noah asks and we all quickly nod in agreement. “Everett’s treat.” He winks at my handsome hubby, only to be met with a frown. Noah nods up at the waitress once again. “And whatever non-alcoholic drink you’d recommend for a very pregnant lady.”

“Green apple cider, non-spiked,” our waitress suggests with a grin my way. “Comes with a free shamrock cookie.”

“Sold,” I agree.

“And don’t forget that soda bread,” Everett suggests. “We’ve been good sports about the facial fashions.”

“Coming right up, handsome.” She takes off for the kitchen with her shamrock earrings swinging like pendulums.

“So”—Noah leans forward, his voice dropping a notch—“learn anything interesting from Della Crane?”

“Don’t worry, Foxy. We got all the dirt,” Carlotta tells him before I can open my mouth. “Sebastian was a gold-digging leech who stole two hundred grand from Red and broke her heart. Just one in his long line of scams. The man collected enemies like Lottie collects little yippers.”

Sebby’s furry little mouth falls open as she looks at Carlotta. “You say gold-digging leech as if it’s a bad thing.”

The waitress returns, impossibly fast, with a basket of soda bread that smells like heaven and a crock of honey butter that I immediately want to dive into and we all do just that.

After we devour half the basket, I nod to Everett and Noah.

“Carlotta’s not exaggerating,” I say, slathering another thick piece of warm bread with butter. “Sebastian apparently had a talent for conning women, marrying them, and then disappearing with their money. He also had a wife named Kay and some kids he abandoned.”

“Kay?” Noah’s brow furrows. “That name sounds familiar.” He straightens a moment. “Wait a minute. I did some research on his brand. The name Kay is on those old Gallagher whiskey bottles. Kay Gallagher was part of the original family business.”

Our shepherd’s pies arrive at a speed that defies the laws of restaurant physics. Steaming large ramekins filled with perfectlyspiced meat, vegetables, and a cloud of mashed potatoes browned to crispy perfection. The smell alone makes my mouth water, and the twins do backflips from sheer anticipation.

“How about we talk suspects?” Everett suggests between bites of what might be the best comfort food ever created. “Starting with Keegan Meryl.”

I shed a dark smile at my far too sexy husband. The good judge certainly knows exactly how to speak my favorite love language—murder.

LOTTIE

“I’m in,” I say. And I have no doubt Everett is anxious to find the real killer, considering the fact his mother is at the top of the official suspect list. And maybe even mine.

“Venus’ mother.” Noah nods. “Keegan Meryl has a clean record and no obvious motive.”

“Nice to hear,” I say as I wince. “But Della did mention seeing a blonde woman having an intense conversation with Sebastian that night. I’m thinking it might have been her.” I dive right back into that shepherd’s pie, where I belong, just before another thought hits me. “You know, Keegan told me something strange at Fondu’s birthday party. She said, ‘I realize my true relationship with Sebastian will come out in the end, but I can’t say a word without speaking to my children first. They would never forgive me.’”

“That sounds suspiciously like confession-adjacent territory,” Noah observes, before reaching for another slice of soda bread.

“Very adjacent,” Sebby agrees, attempting to steal a bite of my pie and achieving the feat. I point hard at Carlotta’s pie and he mock salutes me with his paw before drifting her way. “Sebastian was quite the ladies’ man in his day, too. And that blonde sure is a looker. I couldn’t blame him for wanting to take a bite.”

I make a face just as Sebby takes a bite from Carlotta’s pie and nearly loses his tail because of it.

“And Keegan dropped another bomb, too,” I add. “She told me she knew all about my relationship to Eliza. Then she said not only was Eliza at the scene of the crime, but she thought Eliza may have had a very good motive.”

Everett’s fork pauses midway to his mouth. “My mother? That’s ridiculous.”

“What did she say the motive was?” Noah asks, with his lips pursing in the way they do when they are full well in the know about something.

“That’s just it. She refused to say. She also said that if her suspicions are right, then that was Eliza’s story to tell.” I wince over at Everett.

“Classic deflection tactic,” he’s quick to say.

“The oldest trick in the book,” Carlotta agrees. “When in doubt, point the finger at someone else’s mother-in-law.”

“Well”—I shrug a little at Everett— “I did see your mother confronting Sebastian that night. She had him backed against the wall, jabbing her finger into his chest. She was furious.”

Noah clears his throat and suddenly becomes very interested in his shepherd’s pie. And is he avoiding eye contact?

One of the twins gives a swift kick and I rub my belly. Maybe I’m reading too much into this.

If Noah knew anything about Eliza, I’m sure he’d share it with us. I glance over at Everett and he seems completely like himself. In other words, completely irate that his mother is sitting anywhere near a suspect list.

“My mother wouldn’t kill anyone,” Everett says firmly. “I’d stake my life on it.”

Carlotta sighs his way. “There’s nothing sexier than a man standing up for his mama. Even if she wore the man’s blood like a pair of gloves.”

“I still say Eliza is innocent,” I declare, reaching for another piece of soda bread—and the crock of honey butter. I’m no fool. “I really do like her friend Glinda. I’m glad she has a good network of support right now.”

“Anything else with Della Crane?” Noah asks, pulling off a chunk of the golden crust with his fork.

“Yes,” I say, leaning in. “Della mentioned that Sebastian once had a business partner who went to prison while he walked away clean. But she didn’t know the details, though.”

Noah tips his head to the side and jots it down on his phone. “I’ll be sure to look into that as soon as I get home.” He puts down his phone. “So, we have Keegan with a mysterious relationship to Sebastian, Eliza with a confrontation that was witnessed, Della scammed out of two hundred thousand dollars,” Noah summarizes, looking every bit the handsome detective he is—even with a bright orange beard that fans out in every direction.

“Don’t forget the abandoned wife and kids,” Carlotta reminds us. “Hell hath no fury like a woman left with the bills and brats.”

“Hear, hear,” Sebby says before landing his face in Carlotta’s shepherd’s pie.

The twins choose this moment to launch what feels like an Irish step dance competition inside my uterus, making me wince and press a hand to my side.

“Lemon?” Everett looks ready to launch out of his seat.

“Are you okay?” Everett and Noah ask in unison, then glare at each other.

“I’m more than fine,” I assure them. “The twins are just excited about the case. Or possibly the soda bread—and the honey butter. And for sure the shepherd’s pie.”

“Who are you kidding, Lot?” Carlotta scoffs. “Those baby boozers are excited about all the free beer tomorrow. St. Patrick’s Day in Honey Hollow is legendary. Even the little yippers know it.”

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“Tomorrow is St. Patrick’s Day,” Noah acknowledges. “But orange beards aside”—he tugs at his synthetic facial hair—“I doubt there will be any free beer, green or otherwise.”

Carlotta grunts, “Way to be a downer, Foxy. Just so you know, I happen to have a little sneak peek into a surprise that Harry is planning for all of Honey Hollow.”

“What kind of surprise?” I ask, instantly suspicious. Not that I have any reason to be suspicious of Mayor Nash, aka my biological father. But then, whenever he and Carlotta colluded in private before, it produced two children via an extramarital affair.

“What kind of surprise?” Carlotta crows my way. “The surprising kind, Lot. You’ll have to find out tomorrow like everyone else. I’ll give you a hint—the parade ends at Honey Lake.”

Everett frowns her way. “That’s not a hint, that’s a geographical fact.”

Carlotta offers an unrepentant shrug. “Geography can be almost as sexy as you.”

We finish up our meals before Everett antes up his credit card, and we head for the geographical area known as the parking lot.

“I sure hope things look up for the case soon,” I say as Noah and Carlotta walk well ahead of Everett and me.

He wraps his arm around my waist as best he can and lands a kiss on my cheek.

“I’d say the night is getting better already,” he says, tugging at his orange beard and I laugh.

“After that meal? How could this night possibly improve from here?” I tease.

He ticks his head to the side. “I was thinking once we get home, I could help you out of these clothes and into something a little more comfortable.”

“Judge Baxter.” I gasp and laugh. “Are you suggesting I need help undressing?” It’s basically true, but I want to hear the saucy things he has to say.

“I’m suggesting”—he says with a twitch of his lips that still makes my heart race—“that I have very specific motions I’d like to file when we get home.”

“Planning to present evidence in my chambers?” I bite down on a smile as I do my best to match his legal innuendo.

“If it pleases the court. And it is my sole purpose to please the court.” He leans down and brushes his lips to my ear. “Let’s just say, I’m prepared to work late into the night on this particular case.”

“Well then”—I smile up at him—“I think the court is ready to hear your opening arguments.”

“Prepare to be stunned.” He stops next to my minivan. “However, the beard is definitely not invited to the proceedings.”

“Objection sustained,” I say, plucking the orange menace from my face. “The prosecution is ready when you are.”

Between abandoned wives, emptied bank accounts, and enough secrets to fill one of

my triple layer cakes, someone in our cozy little town decided Sebastian Gallagher needed permanent retirement.

And tomorrow, mixed in with all those green beers and fake orange beards, my killer-finding radar tells me we'll be rubbing elbows with someone who stabbed their way to a solution.

If the twins kicking my ribs are any indication, they've got a hunch about who it might be, too.

If only they'd give me a clue.

LOTTIE

It's St. Patrick's Day and Honey Hollow's most festive parade of the year is well underway.

Main Street has transformed into a river of green, flowing with more shamrocks, leprechauns, and questionable Irish accents than the entirety of Dublin on its most celebratory day.

The air vibrates with bagpipes wailing alongside fiddles, punctuated by periodic roars from the crowd as particularly impressive floats pass by.

Everywhere I look, emerald top hats bob above a sea of orange beards—a mandatory fashion statement in Honey Hollow this time of year. And to be honest, I'm going to miss them. They're as cheery as they are itchy.

The scent of my green-frosted cinnamon rolls wafts from the tables set up just outside my bakery like a sugar sweet siren call, hypnotizing otherwise sensible citizens into lining up three-deep for a bite.

“We’ve already sold out twice, and it’s not even noon,” Lily shouts as she and Effie do their best to meet the demands of the dessert-hungry crowd.

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“Tell me about it,” I say, doing my best to restock the inventory. “At this rate, the twins will be born into a town suffering collective sugar withdrawal.” Not that it’s a bad thing—especially not when you own the bakery in town who has what it takes to feel better.

Carlotta and Suze step up, both craning their necks hard into the crowd.

“That gentleman right there”—Carlotta points with a half-eaten whiskey-glazed donut—“now he has the kind of thighs that could crack walnuts. Just saying.”

I shake my head their way. I'm not even going to ask.

Suze follows her gaze to a kilt-wearing bagpiper. “Nah. He’s too skinny. But that fellow behind him? Now he's built like a rugby player. Just get a look at those shoulders. Now that’s what I call Irish stew material.”

Did she really just say Irish stew?

Again, I am not going to ask.

“You two realize not everyone in a kilt is actually Irish, right?” I remind them while restocking our rapidly depleting display of green bagels. They might be green, but they are delicious.

“Details, details.” Carlotta dismisses me with a wave, and I think she just flipped me the bird, too. “A man in a skirt is a man brave enough for anything. Everyone knows that, Lot.”

“It’s not a skirt,” Lily chimes in, arranging the shamrock cookies before stealing one and taking a bite out of it. “It’s traditional Highland dress.”

“Know-it-all,” Suze says under her breath.

Lily isn’t usually a know-it-all, so I’m pretty impressed with her man-skirt knowledge.

“Ha,” Carlotta barks out a laugh. “That’s what I call easy access.”

“Carlotta.” Effie gasps, then laughs. “Watch it, woman. There are children present.”

“Children?” Suze snorts. “I only see potential husbands and future ex-husbands. Not that I’m ever getting married again.”

“Tell it like it is, Suzie Q,” Carlotta steals another whiskey-glazed donut. “If they’re old enough for green beer, they’re old enough for the truth about kilts.”

I shoot her a look.

“Relax, Lot Lot,” Carlotta goes on despite the death stare I’m currently giving her. “Kids these days know more about easy access than we do. They invented dating apps, remember? Besides, the real crime here would be not appreciating fine Irish craftsmanship when it parades right in front of us.”

“Donuts!” Noah’s voice breaks through the crowd, and soon enough he materializes in front of me, looking as dapper as ever in a tweed jacket and jeans, already reaching for one of the few remaining whiskey-glazed specimens. “I’ve been patrolling for two hours on nothing but coffee.” He pulls me in and lands a kiss on my cheek as both twins jump in my belly.

“Nothing but coffee? You poor baby,” I tease and slide him an extra donut because of it.

“How’s it hanging, Foxy?” Carlotta leans in and I gasp at the woman. “What?” she counters. “I’m talking about his nightstick.” She looks back at him. “Have you seen any leprechaun-related crimes?”

“Three drunk and disorderlies, two public indecency warnings for inappropriate shamrock placement, and one attempted theft of a ‘pot of gold’ from the bank’s float.” He takes a massive bite of his donut, and just the sight makes me want to do the same. I’ve already eaten a cool dozen this morning. “The usual St. Patrick’s Day mayhem,” he finishes.

But before Carlotta can regale us with another inappropriate comment, Everett appears beside him, looking unfairly handsome in his green button-down shirt and a well-fitted dark suit that brings out the vexingly sexy blue in his eyes.

“Lemon.” He leans in and lands a kiss to my lips. “The parade committee outdid themselves this year. I counted at least six bagpipers who can actually play the instrument.”

“A new record,” I say before dotting his lips with another far steamier kiss. I can’t help it. My hormones are on fire. And after Everett’s performance in the bedroom last night, every last bit of me is on fire to get right back there for a repeat performance.

His phone buzzes, and he frowns at the screen. “Evie says her car won’t start. Conner is supposed to meet her here for the parade, but she’s stuck at the house. She wants me to give her a lift.”

“Go,” I tell him. “I’m not going anywhere anytime soon, and I’ve got plenty of help.” I gesture to our fully staffed booth.

“Are you having any contractions?” He glances at my belly skeptically. “You’re coming up on your due date, and they say twins are notorious for making an early arrival.”

“We both know they’re definitely too late to do that. I haven’t even had a hint of a contraction. I think I’m going to have to give these kids an official eviction notice. And regardless, I promise not to have the twins until you get back,” I assure him with a solemn nod. “Scout’s honor.”

“You were never a scout.”

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“True, but Lyla Nell will be someday and that has to count for something.”

“Very funny.” He offers me another quick kiss. “Please steer clear of trouble while I’m gone. No investigating, no confronting suspects, and definitely no chasing after anyone.”

“The only thing I’m chasing is adequate bladder capacity,” I promise.

“I’ll keep an eye on her.” Noah winks my way before taking another bite of his donut. Someone screams in the crowd and Noah’s attention is quickly pulled away. “Right after I make sure everyone is okay.” He takes off and so does Everett.

I keep pulling out more whiskey-glazed desserts and the bustling crowd just keeps migrating toward my bakery. It’s apparent I’m not the only one craving one of my sweet treats.

But sugar and spice aren’t the only things I’m craving these days.

Right about now, I’ve got an insatiable craving for justice.

And I’ll stop at nothing to get it.

LOTTIE

The St. Patrick’s Day parade rages around me as I do my best to help fill orders, but I’m so exhausted I’m half-moved to go back to my office and take a nap.

While the twins practiced their synchronized swimming routine against my ribcage at four in the morning, I went ahead and did some digging into Sebastian Gallagher and his whiskey brand.

It turns out, his family's original company, Gallagher Whiskey, collapsed decades ago amid a scandal. Buried in old newspaper archives, I managed to find a story about a woman named Margaret "Maggie" Murray, a chemistry professor turned craft distiller, who spent twelve years in prison for an elaborate whiskey counterfeiting operation.

According to the article, Sebastian had masterminded the whole thing, but Maggie took the fall when he planted evidence in her lab and testified against her.

The counterfeiting scheme resulted in three deaths from methanol poisoning, which were ruled as negligent homicide in her case. She lost her academic career and apparently her freedom while incarcerated.

And try as I might to find a picture of what this Maggie woman may have looked like, the only photo I could find was one of her being led away by police. And all that photo offered was the back of a blonde woman's head.

A trumpet blast yanks me from my thoughts as the redheaded roundup float approaches—a massive shamrock-shaped platform populated by hundreds of glorious redheads.

"Look at that, Lot," Carlotta yips. "That float has more gingers than your spice rack during the holiday baking season."

I make a face her way before reverting my attention to the happy crowd as some of the members march alongside the massive float like a crimson army while tossing glittery green beads to the roaring crowd.

“It’s raining jewelry!” Carlotta shrieks with delight and immediately abandons her post next to the donuts to dive into the fray.

“Save some for me! I love free beads,” Suze calls out, proving to be surprisingly spry as she darts after Carlotta into the melee of bead-hunters. It would figure. Free is Suze’s favorite word—four letter or otherwise.

I try to crane my neck to keep an eye on them—in the event one of them breaks theirs—when a familiar happy-go-lucky redhead with a touch of gray around the temples steps into my line of vision, and next to her is an all too familiar, always chic brunette.

“Lottie!” Glinda’s voice cuts through the chaos as she and Eliza approach our table. “We are in desperate need of caffeine and sugar. The parade is delightful, but it’s equally exhausting.”

I give a quick laugh in response. “I’ve gone pro in the exhaustion department as of late.”

“You look fabulous.” Eliza winks my way. “Two Irish coffees and two whiskey-glazed donuts, please,” she requests, looking elegant as always in that cream-colored coat of hers that somehow remains spotless despite the festivities. Come to think of it, unless she has a look-alike coat, she managed to get every drop of Sebastian Gallagher’s blood out of it, too. Good for her. The past is the past and dead bygones are dead bygones.

“Make that three donuts,” Glinda adds with a wink. “I have a particular weakness for your whiskey glaze. Must be the scientist in me—appreciating the perfect chemical reaction of sugar and alcohol.”

“It’s a combo most can’t seem to resist,” I say, bagging up their order while Lily

prepares their coffee. “So are you enjoying the parade?”

“It’s so very charming,” Eliza says as only she can. “Although I’m more interested in what Mayor Nash has planned at Honey Lake. Apparently, it’s going to be quite the spectacle.”

“Oh, the whole town is buzzing about it,” Glinda agrees as she shoves a twenty-dollar bill into Lily’s hand and tells her to keep the change. “Well, we’d better find a good spot for viewing this spectacle. Thanks for the treats!” They disappear into the crowd with Glinda already biting into her donut with obvious pleasure—and that’s exactly what I like to see.

As the owner of the bakery, the pleasure is all mine.

“One Irish cream latte, please,” a familiar voice requests, and I turn to find Della Crane at our counter, her red hair particularly vibrant against her green sweater.

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“Coming right up,” I tell her. “How are you enjoying the parade?”

“It’s exactly the distraction I needed,” she admits. “Between my financial disaster and being questioned in a murder, I could use a little leprechaun magic.” She mutters that last part mostly to herself.

“Couldn’t we all,” I agree, handing over her latte in record time.

“Lottie!” My mother’s voice carries over the crowd as she maneuvers Lyla Nell’s stroller back to our booth.

“Hello, ladies,” I say to two of my favorite females. “How about a donut for each of you?”

“Dough-knee!” Lyla Nell belts out with a clap. “Sebby need dough-knee, too,” she says, reaching under her blanket and pulling the cute little fox up by his ear.

He looks my way with a bewildered expression. “I’d complain, but she just keeps the sweet treats coming.”

“I wouldn’t complain either,” I say, offering Lyla Nell two donuts—vanilla cake with vanilla frosting and lots of green sprinkles. “One for each hand,” I tell her.

My mother helps herself to a whiskey-glazed donut and leans my way. “Lottie, you will never guess who I just spotted across the street.”

“I sure hope it’s the stork,” I say, rubbing my belly.

“Heavens no.” She waves the idea away as if that wily bird never plans on paying a visit to Honey Hollow. And I’m beginning to believe it. “It’s my old friend, Kay! I haven’t seen her in years.” She takes an indulgent bite out of her donut and moans.

“Kay?” I inch back, trying to remember where I’ve heard that name recently—and then freeze solid. “Which one is she?”

Mom cranes her neck for a moment before pointing directly at Keegan Meryl, deep in conversation with Venus.

“There, in the green jacket. She was friends with one of my roommates in college. I know her from way,wayback when.”

My brain stutters like an engine missing a spark plug—not exactly an anomaly these days. “But that’s Venus’ mother, Keegan.”

“Oh, she went by Kay back then. I guess we all grow up sometime.”

A particularly glittery leprechaun passes by and manages to capture Lyla Nell’s complete attention.

“Glam Glam,” she cries as she does her best to reach out and touch the walking, talking good luck charm. “I want! Gimme gimme, please!Pa-lease! Right meow!”

“Oh, all right. Let’s go try to catch him,” Mom says, already whisking my sweet baby girl away. “Hey, stop, leprechaun! My granddaughter would just love to have a picture with you!”

They wheel away in a blur, leaving me frozen in place as puzzle pieces slam together in my mind with the force of a falling piano.

Keegan is Kay?

Could she be the mysterious Kay Gallagher—as in Sebastian's abandoned wife?

She does have three children. Although Della mentioned Sebastian left Kay with two children. Maybe she meant three? Or maybe Venus doesn't belong to Sebastian. He didn't seem to have any real connection to her that day we spoke to him. But he sure did have a real interest in speaking to Keegan. And I have a feeling I know why.

The blonde woman in the prison photo. Maggie Murray. That couldn't also be Keegan, could it? No, that doesn't make any sense.

Not much does these days.

A float sails by and opens up my view to the crowd across the street. There she is, huddled by her daughter's side, so seemingly innocent.

"I'll be back in a minute," I say to my staff as I waddle my way toward the crowd.

"Where are we off to, Lot?" Carlotta asks as she jumps by my side with enough beads to fill a pirate's chest.

"Off to speak with a friend."

And maybe a killer.

LOTTIE

The crowd scatters before me as if I'm a human bulldozer and my pregnant belly is the wrecking ball as I try to cross the street right in the middle of the St. Patrick's Day parade, right here in Honey Hollow.

I waddle my way through the junior high marching band with all the grace of a penguin on roller skates, one hand supporting my lower back, the other extended like a bumper to ward off potential collisions.

Carlotta trails behind me, jangling with enough parade beads to sink a small ship.

"Make way for the human incubator," she calls out to anyone who fails to dodge quickly enough. "Two tiny humans coming through—still in their original packaging! Let's try to keep it that way, Lot. Shall we?"

Before I can answer, Sebby materializes beside me as his ghostly fox form shimmers with excitement. "Lolita! You're moving with the determination of a fox on a rabbit hunt. I find your waddle most dignified!"

"Thanks, Sebby," I mutter. "Nothing says dignified like not being able to see your own feet."

"This too shall pass," he hums contentedly as he floats by my side. "Although there's no guarantee it'll pass anytime soon."

"Or ever," Carlotta contributes. "And it's all your fault, Lot. You've coddled those

kids. You keep feeding them donut after donut, and now they're never going to leave. I went on a strict diet of booze and cigarettes when it was time to give both you and your sister an eviction notice."

"That might explain a few things," I sigh as I do my best to dodge an Irish band coming in hot to my right.

One of the bagpipers blasts a note so high-pitched, I swear one of the twins does a somersault in protest.

The smell of corned beef and cabbage wafts from a nearby food stand, mingling with the sugary sweetness of green cotton candy and beer that's been dyed an unnatural shade of emerald. And my stomach growls appreciatively at all of it.

What can I say? The twins have my taste buds working overtime.

By the time we reach the opposite side of the street, my foot misses the curb by half an inch. I wobble precariously—because apparently, my center of gravity has packed its bags and moved out of state—when Venus Finnegan appears out of nowhere. She grabs my arm with surprising strength and hauls me onto the sidewalk as if she's landing a particularly stubborn marlin.

"Lottie," she pants with her eyes wide. "What in the world were you thinking? You nearly took a tumble there."

"Or twelve," I tell her, hugging my belly as a quasi-apology to the twins. "I was just hopping over to say hello."

Venus cringes my way. "All you had to do was wave me over and I would have been there in three seconds flat."

“You’re so kind,” I tell her. “And thanks for the save,” I say, patting my belly. “These days I’m about as graceful as an elephant trying to balance on a beach ball, and twice as dramatic when gravity gets its way.”

She gives a mournful chuckle, just as Sebby circles around Venus curiously. “The blonde one has quick reflexes! In my fox days, I would have been impressed by such hunting skills. Although not so impressed if I were to end up on her trophy wall.”

Keegan approaches with measured steps, looking as polished as ever in her designer emerald ensemble. Not a hair out of place, unlike me. I’m pretty sure I have powdered sugar in my eyebrows and frosting in places it doesn’t belong.

“Lottie,” she acknowledges me with a tight smile. “Enjoying the festivities?”

My mouth opens and closes. “Would you ladies mind if we found somewhere quieter to chat?” I nod toward a large maple tree where the crowd has thinned out and we head that way.

“Venus”—I begin once we’re settled under the branches—“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but are your siblings your full siblings or step-siblings?”

Sebby’s ghostly ears perk up a notch. “Ooh, Lolita! Direct questioning! This is just like those detective shows Sebastian used to watch. I can’t wait until you say, ‘Cuff ’em, Carlotta.’”

Carlotta nods. “And it just so happens that I travel with a pair of those on me—for recreational purposes, of course.”

Venus inches back like I’ve just asked her to help me hide a body. “They’re actually my step-siblings. Why do you ask?”

Keegan lifts her chin and her posture screams “guilty” louder than Lyla Nell when denied cookies. “Lottie, I told you I needed a chance to speak with my children. Whatever you think you know, please stop now.”

“Ha.” Carlotta is quick to laugh in the woman’s face. “Lot Lot, stopping anything?” Carlotta snorts and gestures at my pregnant belly. “Just look at her. She can’t even stop at one baby. She had to go for the two-for-one special. And don’t get me started on her donut consumption. The woman has never met a baked good she didn’t like.”

There are no truer words.

“Thanks for that character reference, Carlotta,” I mutter before turning to face Keegan directly. “My mother confirmed that you went by the nickname Kay.” I take a moment to glance at her daughter. “I’m sorry to do this, Venus, but I’d like for your mother to answer a few questions.”

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“What?” Venus gasps as if I just wielded a knife their way—much like the killer did to Sebastian.

Sebby circles Keegan with his ghostly tail swishing. “Her aura is twitching like a rabbit’s nose, Lolita! She is definitely hiding something tasty!”

Maybe so, but I know for a fact murder leaves a bitter taste in just about anyone’s mouth.

Keegan groans and it’s almost inaudible beneath the blare of the passing band, but I catch it anyway.

Venus must have heard it, too, because she gasps at her mother while her perfectly manicured hand flies to her throat as if she were in a Victorian novel.

“Mother,” she says with a growl. “Whatever she asks, just answer it. For goodness’ sake, it’s not like you’re the killer.”

Keegan doesn’t say a word; she simply crimps her lips, and that alone causes Venus to gasp twice as loud.

Venus closes her eyes in defeat for a moment. “I just pray this day doesn’t end with the need for legal counsel.”

Carlotta nods. “Green beer and attorney fees don’t mix well. Ask me how I know.”

“Keegan”—I press on, fully ignoring Carlotta’s potentially dicey diatribe—“did you

have two children with Sebastian Gallagher? Were you married to him, and did he walk out on you? Or am I just making wild assumptions based on my sugar-addled pregnancy brain?"

Okay, so I gave her an out, but that's because I like her and I like her daughter, too. I don't want any of this to be true.

Keegan pauses to look at the sky as if she's checking if somehow the luck of the Irish might actually save her from this conversation. Finally, she bows her head in defeat.

"Yes," she admits, the word seemingly dragged from her against her will. "Sebastian drained my trust fund during our five-year marriage, then abandoned me with two small children. In fact, I recently discovered he maintained a long-term girlfriend throughout our entire marriage." Her voice hardens. "It's true. I was married to that donkey and he did exactly what you said. He told me he was going to the store and never came back. The man was deplorable."

"Good grief," Venus says as she bows slightly as if she might be sick.

"Oh, Keegan," I say. "I've heard of deadbeat dads, but that's reaching Olympic levels of abandonment. I am so sorry to hear it."

Sebby's ghostly eyes widen. "The plot thickens like your famous whiskey pudding pie, Lolita!" His ears slope down toward his face and his entire countenance falls into despair. "Sebastian was even more dastardly than I could have imagined."

Poor Venus looks as if she's been slapped in the face as she looks at her mother. "But you told us your first husband died! You said his name was Phillip Dawson!"

"I'm sorry, Venus." Keegan's eyes swell with tears that she doesn't allow to fall. "I was too ashamed and angry to tell you kids the truth. I was going to, though. I was

getting ready to.” She turns and glares at me sharply enough to frost cupcakes from across the room. “But someone has decided to take that opportunity away from me.”

I also decide to cut straight to the chase. No sense in tap-dancing around the elephant in the room—especially when I’m basically the elephant both metaphorically and literally speaking.

“Did you kill him, Keegan?” I ask point-blank.

“Oh, course she did, Lot,” Carlotta chimes in with an inappropriate whoop. “The jerk did her dirty. Now we need to forget we ever had this conversation and skit, skat, scoot across the street and celebrate with a pint of green beer that the dirty rat is dead. I mean, if I had a quarter for every man who deserved a stabbing, I’d have retired to Fiji by now.”

Sebby zips around the four of us. “Carlotta speaks the ancient vulpine wisdom! In the fox world, such betrayal would warrant a swift nip to the hindquarters!”

Venus looks at her mother, her face crumpling faster than my resolve in front of a fresh batch of cinnamon rolls.

“Mom, did you do this?” she asks just above a whisper. “Did you stab Sebastian Gallagher in the heart?”

“No,” Keegan doesn’t hesitate with her answer. “He tried to corner me that night and we spoke for less than a second before I got away from him. I needed to collect my thoughts. I don’t appreciate being caught by surprise. I was just about to let you know that I was leaving the event when I saw the crowd gathered around his body.” She closes her eyes for a moment. “I’ll admit, I was a bit relieved, a bit saddened, and a bit angry that I didn’t get a chance to properly give him a piece of my mind.”

“I’m sorry to hear it, Toots,” Carlotta says with genuine sympathy. “A good knife to the chest would have made you feel a heck of a lot better. Especially if you were the one delivering the blow. Nothing says ‘I’m over you’ quite like a well-placed stab wound.”

“Carlotta,” I snip. “Maybe dial back the homicidal cheerleading while we’re in public?”

Sebby nods. “At least wait until the leprechauns are out of earshot.”

Carlotta gags as she tosses up her hands in mock surrender. “I’m just saying what we’re all thinking. Nothing clears the sinuses like justified homicide—except maybe wasabi. And the way these twins are pushing on your bladder, you might be contemplating it yourself soon. I’ve seen you waddle to the bathroom fifteen times today alone. Sexy has it coming to him.”

“Thank you for keeping count of my trips to the potty,” I deadpan. “I was worried no one was monitoring my bladder habits.”

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Sebby nods sagely. “Being a ghost has its advantages, Lolita.”

I’ll keep that in mind.

Keegan straightens her already perfect posture. “If you’ll all excuse me, I’d like to go home now. I’ve had enough St. Patrick’s Day festivities to last a lifetime.”

“No,” Venus says firmly. “The best thing you can do is tell Detective Fox everything you just told these ladies and me. He’s around here somewhere. I saw him earlier. I’ll help you track him down.” She turns to me with an apologetic half-smile. “I’m so sorry about all of this, Lottie.”

I shake my head at her mother. “But if you didn’t do the deed”—I start— “then who did?”

Keegan shrugs with elegant dismissal. “I did hear he ran into some real legal trouble years after he ditched me. And in typical Sebastian fashion, he made sure someone else took the blame. I’d look in that direction. I heard it had something to do with a scientist he was dating at the time.” They take off before I can respond, leaving me staring after them with my jaw just about hitting the pavement.

A scientist he was dating?

Sebby floats in front of my face with his transparent tail swishing with excitement.

“Lolita! My fox senses are tingling! A scientist with a grudge is always a dangerous predator—they know all the clever ways to make things go boom!”

The members of the redheaded roundup continue to march the parade route, tossing more beads and waving to the crowd, their crimson hair blazing like warning signals in the afternoon sun. And suddenly, one particular redhead comes to mind.

And just like that, my mind is blown.

Boom, indeed.

I scan the crowd, searching for a familiar face with vivid red hair and a friendly smile that might conceal the darkest of secrets. Because sometimes the most dangerous poison comes in the sweetest package, and up until now I've been swallowing every single drop.

NOAH

The parade is in full swing, and it looks like a river of green flowing down Main Street.

I navigate through the crowd, sidestepping leprechaun hats and dodging the occasional flying strand of beads. The air smells like a mix of beer, corned beef, and funnel cake—not a bad combination if you ask me. But then, I've never been all too picky about my culinary needs.

I'm about to make my way to the bakery once again when I spot Everett a few feet away, with Evie beside him. He's scanning the crowd, probably looking for Lottie. That woman has a knack for finding trouble even when she's nine months pregnant with twins. Actually, make that especially when she's nine months pregnant. It's happened before.

I flag them down with a wave and push my way through a group of teenagers decked out in enough green to camouflage themselves in a forest.

“Noah.” Everett nods as I approach. “I was just on my way to see Lemon.”

“Uncle Noah.” Evie practically jumps onto me with a hug, looking every bit like Everett in female skin but miles better. “Happy St. Paddy’s Day! Here’s a pinch for being my favorite uncle,” she says, giving my ribs a tweak.

“Whoa,” I say, trying to deflect. “Careful now, I’m packing heat. I’d hate to have an accidental discharge. Besides, I’m wearing green. Didn’t your dad teach you the rules?”

“Dad says rules are for fools,” she shoots back with a giggle.

“Hey.” Everett inches back, looking genuinely affronted. “I’m a judge. I would never say that.”

“And I’m kidding,” she says, pinching his ribs as well. “Where’s Mom?” She looks my way as does Everett.

“At the bakery, I’m guessing. In fact, I was about to swing by the bakery stand for another donut.” I nod to Everett. “Your wife makes the most dangerous whiskey-glazed donut in three counties.”

Everett tips his head. “Let’s see if we can track her down. She promised to stay put, but you know Lemon.”

“I do, indeed,” I sigh at the fact. “That woman’s definition of ‘staying put’ includes a three-mile radius and potential suspect interviews.”

Evie bubbles out a laugh. “You two have fun with Mom and those donuts. Good luck keeping her in line. I see Grandma up ahead. I’m heading over to say hi.” She points toward the other side of the street where Eliza stands observing the festivities with

her usual regal composure. She's with her friend Glinda. They catch a glimpse of us just as her friend whispers something to Eliza before disappearing out of sight.

"I'll catch up with you in a minute," Everett tells her.

We watch as Evie weaves through the crowd before I place a hand on Everett's arm. "Before we track down Lottie, I need a word with you."

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Everett raises a brow. His eyes sharpen, the way they always do when he senses something is up. The man didn't become a success in the legal field by missing subtle cues.

"What's going on?" he growls. "Is it the twins? Is Lemon in labor?" His eyes round out as a genuine panic begins to set in.

"No," I'm quick to let him off the hook in that respect. "There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about," I begin, wincing slightly. This isn't a conversation I want to have in the middle of a parade, but the investigation isn't slowing down for the festivities. "It's about your mother."

EVERETT

I blink at Noah, trying to process what he might have to say. "What about my mother?"

The words come out like a threat, but I can't help it. Half the time I'm near Noah, a part of me wants to threaten him.

He winces. "She came into my office last week," he says, his voice low despite the noise from the parade. "She said she had a confession to make."

My temper flares instantly. "A confession? Are you trying to tell me my mother confessed to killing Sebastian Gallagher? And you're just now getting around to telling me about it?"

Noah shakes his head quickly. “No. She confessed to something far more personal.” He sighs hard and glances across the street where my mother stands talking with Evie. “Look, I told her she needed to tell you what she told me. She said she would. But clearly she hasn’t. And push has come to shove. I’m going to have to do an internal investigation on her. She was found holding the murder weapon. It’s just better for everyone involved that you know the truth as soon as possible. Why don’t we track her down? I think this is as good a time as any.”

He starts to move, but I grab his sleeve. “We’re not going anywhere. Start talking, Noah, before I shake the answers out of you myself.”

A float passes by, blasting “Danny Boy” at a volume that makes conversation nearly impossible. We stand in strained silence until it passes, and the scent of corned beef and cabbage from a nearby food truck momentarily distracts me.

“Start talking,” I bark.

Noah sighs once again. “Your mother confessed to being married before she was hitched to your father. She was married to Sebastian Gallagher for a year. The man took off with a pile of her money and never looked back. Eliza said she was so humiliated she never spoke of it again.”

The ground seems to shift beneath me. I stagger back, bumping into someone wearing enough green beads to sink them in the lake.

“And she saw him for the first time that night? The night of the murder?” I ask, already calculating the implications.

Noah nods. “She says she had words with him, but she didn’t kill him. She said she wanted to, but someone beat her to it. When she saw him lying there with a knife in his chest, she said she plucked it out because she wanted him to live. She wanted to

finish telling him a thing or two. She seemed to think that him dying was the easy way out.”

I close my eyes for a moment in an effort to collect myself. “That sounds like my mother.”

The parade continues around us, a riot of green and noise that stands in stark contrast to the cold reality settling in my chest. My mother was married to the murder victim. She was found holding the murder weapon. The evidence is circumstantial but damning.

I straighten as I scan the crowd. “Does Lemon know?”

“I don’t think so,” Noah replies, but I detect the uncertainty in his voice.

We make our way to the bakery, pushing through revelers who are oblivious to the investigation unfolding in their midst. The smell of sugar and warm cinnamon rolls envelops us as we approach, but there’s no sign of Lemon inside or out.

I blow out a breath. “Lemon may not know about my mother’s history with the deceased, but I promise you she knows something. In fact, she might just be with the killer as we speak.”

Noah’s hand moves to his gun as he looks around. “Let’s go. We don’t have a second to waste.”

The implications hit me like a blow.

My wife, nine months pregnant with twins, could be in danger.

My mother, the most composed person I know, could be facing a murder charge.

And somewhere in this sea of green, a killer roams free.

LOTTIE

The crowd around me blurs into a sea of green as I try to process what Keegan just revealed.

AscientistSebastian dated.

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Someone who took the fall for his crimes.

The pieces click together in my brain like the world's deadliest jigsaw puzzle.

I've hardly taken three steps when I spot Eliza and Evie near a cotton candy stand, both of them looking like elegant swans in a pond of rowdy Irish ducks. I waddle over and give them both a quick hug, my belly serving as an inadvertent buffer zone.

"Mom." Evie gives a little laugh. "I just felt one of the twins kick." She puts her hand on my belly and it happens again. "How are you feeling? Are these twins ever going to come out into the world?" She bends over and pats my belly again. "Come out, come out, wherever you are. I can't wait to squeeze you guys!"

"I'm sure they'll get here soon enough," I say, craning my neck past them, and not sure I'm believing the words I just said either. "I'm fine," I assure her, patting my belly as well. "We're all fine. Eliza, where did Glinda go? I just saw her with you a moment ago."

"Glinda?" Eliza's perfectly sculpted eyebrows arch. "She said something about wanting to see the mayor's big surprise at the lake before heading up north to visit her sister in Canada."

"Of course." I barrel ahead, my feet already moving before my brain can fully process the implications.

Canada.

She's planning to flee. I'm shocked she didn't do it sooner.

"Mom, you can't walk to the lake," Evie calls after me. "It's like more than three blocks away!"

"The twins and I need the exercise," I call back even though my lower back is already protesting the idea.

"Wait up, Lot!" Carlotta shouts, hurrying to catch up with me, her beads jangling like wind chimes in a hurricane. That's basically Carlotta in a nutshell.

Sebby materializes beside me, his ghostly form zipping through the crowd in a spray of glittering stars. "Lolita! Your determination is admirable, but your waddling speed is concerning!"

"I'm moving as fast as a woman carrying the entire future generation of Baxters can," I pant, navigating through the crowd with the grace of a bulldozer with a flat tire.

In what feels like both an eternity and somehow less than five minutes, we reach Honey Lake, where the parade finish line stretches across the shore.

The area teems with people, band members tuning their instruments, and members of the redheaded roundup gathering for one final photo op. It's a glorious sea of red in every single direction.

"Well, would you look at that," Carlotta whistles, taking in the scene. "It's like someone put a ring of fire around the lake. That's a lot of carrot tops in one place. I'm sensing a disturbance in the force. Gird yourself, Lot. Something wicked is about to bubble up in this sea of crimson. This is nothing short of a bunch of bad luck run amok."

“Indeed there are a lot of carrot tops,” Sebby agrees, his ghostly ears perked up. “Though in fox culture, redheads are considered quite lucky. It’s the opposable thumbs we find suspicious.”

“You would,” Carlotta grunts.

I scan the crowd until I spot Glinda talking to Mayor Nash near the dock. They exchange a few words before parting ways, and I track Glinda as she moves to the edge of the lake, on the quieter side, away from the crowd and near the woods.

My heart pounds as I approach her. I take one look at her vivid red hair and that line of not-quite-gray roots and nod to myself. They’re not gray at all. They’re blonde.

“Glinda?” I call out.

She’s staring pensively at the boats all decked out for St. Patrick’s Day, their green and gold decorations reflecting in the water, not at all in tune to the fact I just shouted her name. Because she doesn’t innately recognize it as her name.

“You knew Sebastian Gallagher,” I pant from the trek over, one hand supporting my back, the other resting protectively on my belly.

“Her aura is flickering away like a campfire in a windstorm,” Sebby shouts, circling Glinda with suspicion.

Glinda turns around and squints at me before raking her eyes up and down over my very pregnant form. “Lottie? What’s going on? Yes, I knew of him,” she says with a casualness that feels manufactured. “I mean, he had a very lucrative whiskey business. A lot of people knew him from that.”

I shake my head. “You knew him far better. In fact, I’d go as far as saying you had a

romantic entanglement with him.”

Glinda gasps, her eyes filling with fire that could melt steel.

“Unfortunately, that didn’t work out too well for you,” I continue, watching her face for any reaction.

“That didn’t work out too well for a lot of people,” Carlotta chimes in. “The man collected broken hearts like I collect cheap shoes. Which reminds me, I’m due for a shopping spree. Don’t worry, Lot. I’ve still got your credit card.”

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Glinda lifts her chin. “Why don’t you ask your mother-in-law how well it worked out for her?” She gives a crooked smile. “After all, she was married to the cad.”

The three of us gasp in unison. Even Sebby’s transparent jaw drops.

“She was?” I tip my ear toward the woman. I’m positive I’ve misheard.

“That’s right,” Glinda doubles down. “And the monster stole all he could from her before leaving town.”

“Seems like Wiley’s actions were on trend,” Carlotta quips. “Stealing from women and disappearing was the hot new thing for men back then. Sort of like bellbottoms, but more financially explosive.”

I agree, after all, Noah’s father pulled the exact same vanishing act later on poor Eliza.

“Sebastian truly was the lowest form of human,” Sebby says with a spectral shudder and tiny stars spray all around him. “He made mud look like a good thing. I’m not surprised to say he really did take after his father in the worst possible ways.”

“So that’s why Eliza was so livid when she spoke to him,” I say, mostly to myself. “It all makes sense now.”

“Yes,” Glinda agrees, a bit too eagerly. “It makes sense why she chose to kill him. Of course, she was caught up in the passion of the moment. I’m sure her son will make certain she spends a minimal amount of time behind bars, if any. They have so many

cushy women's prisons these days. She'll feel as if she's away on a spa trip."

"Is that how you felt, Maggie?" I ask, and the woman's eyes nearly dislodge from her skull.

A loud air horn cuts through the tension. Mayor Nash's voice booms over a loudspeaker as he congratulates everyone on another fantastic St. Patrick's Day parade. "And now, folks, I have a surprise for the entire town of Honey Hollow!"

He waves a green flag, and all of a sudden dozens of boats begin to speed around the lake, leaving a trail of dark liquid in their wake. In seconds, all of Honey Lake transforms into a glittering shade of emerald.

The crowd goes wild with cheers and applause. I'll admit, it's a mesmerizing sight, but I can't focus on that now.

Glinda tries to step around me, but Carlotta blocks her path.

"Hold it right there, Red. Or should I say Blondie?" Carlotta plants herself firmly in front of the woman. "You're not going anywhere until Lot gets to the bottom of this sticky, risky whiskey business. And speaking of sticky, that lake is calling me. Swimming in green waters is at the top of my bucket list, Lot. Wrap it up, would you?"

I roll my eyes. Carlotta's bucket list needs a serious revision.

But I revert my attention where it should be.

"Glinda Van Jance?" I shake my head at the woman. "I should have known when you said you were a huge Wizard of Oz fan that something was up. And Van Jance? As in vengeance?" I nod. "You practically wanted to be caught."

She shakes her head vigorously. “No, don’t you see? Eliza did it. She had the motive! She took one of the vintage knives from the Fallbrook Sourdough Society. Eliza is the killer, not me.”

“So that’s where you got the pearl-handled knife,” I muse. “Of course. And I bet somewhere along the way Sebastian told you about all of his crooked conquests. That’s how you knew to befriend Eliza when you got out. Is that right, Maggie?”

Her eyes narrow and her fury builds like a pressure cooker about to blow its lid.

“That’s right, you nosy gnat. I killed the insolent fool,” she hisses. “He framed me and left me to rot in prison while he went on his merry way. I thought he loved me. I thought we were a perfect match. But he just pushed me aside and went on to his next victim.”

“Why try to pin this on Eliza?” I shake my head. “It’s obvious why you wanted him dead.”

“Why not?” she scoffs. “That woman has had everything handed to her. Besides, I didn’t want anyone to suffer behind bars the way I had. And once I realized her son is a prominent judge, I knew she wouldn’t.” She glances past me at the dark belly of the woods. “Now, if you ladies will excuse me, I have somewhere I need to be.”

She tries to dart past me, but pregnancy has made me crafty—even though I’m not quick. I stick my foot out, and she trips, sprawling onto the grass with a yelp.

“Lolita!” Sebby zips around excitedly. “What athletic prowess! Using your center of gravity as a weapon is pure genius.”

“Get her, Lot!” Carlotta lunges forward as Glinda scrambles to her feet.

I'm not exactly built for chase scenes these days, but I manage to grab a fistful of her jacket as she tries to bolt. Carlotta throws herself at Glinda's legs in a tackle that would make a football coach weep with joy.

"Lemon," Everett's voice booms across the green space, and I look up to see both him and Noah sprinting toward us, with their faces a matching set of panic.

Glinda wrenches free and makes a desperate break for the lake, with Carlotta hot on her heels. Without hesitation, Carlotta dives into the emerald water after her. They both emerge seconds later, drenched and dyed a brilliant shade of green from head to toe. And by the looks of it, Carlotta is enjoying the heck out of it.

She would.

“She confessed,” I shout to Noah and Everett. “Her real name is Maggie Murray! She admitted to setting Eliza up. And she admitted she killed Sebastian Gallagher!”

“Come on in, everyone,” Carlotta shouts, treading water beside a furious, soggy Glinda. Both are lit up like a couple of toxic limes. “The water is fine! I’ve always wanted to be green. Brings out the sexy minx in my eyes!”

More like the mischief.

Noah wades in with handcuffs at the ready, looking less than thrilled about getting his clothes wet or green.

Sebby floats above us all, his ghostly form beginning to shimmer even brighter.

“It looks as if it’s my time to go, Lolita,” he says, drifting upward against his own volition. “May the luck of the Irish be with you and your little buns in the oven!” He gives a little twirl. “Tell Lyla Nell that Sebby will miss pulling her pigtails, but I’ll be watching over her always.” With that, he disappears in a vat of green glittering stars.

Everett reaches me, wrapping his arms around me with careful tenderness. “Lemon, are you okay? Are the twins all right?”

The babies choose that moment to kick with Olympic-level force.

“They’re fine,” I say, leaning into his embrace. “But I have a sneaking suspicion they

want donuts.”

“Of course, they do,” he sighs, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “They are your children—ourchildren.”

We share a quiet laugh that turns into a heated kiss.

We pull back in time to see Noah leading a green-tinted Glinda back to shore in handcuffs.

I can’t help but think that justice, like revenge, is sometimes best served with a splash of color—and today’s special is definitely emerald green.

Everett lands a kiss to my cheek. “How about we leave the detective work to the detective from here on out and focus on our family instead?”

“I’m in,” I say, raising a hand.

“Rumor has it, we’re going to have twins.”

“If only the twins had heard that rumor,” I tease, and they both give a swift kick. “But whether or not they make an appearance anytime soon, we’ve got a birthday party to throw for a certain little girl. Lyla Nell is turning two.”

“I seem to remember my wife is about to have a birthday herself.” His lips curve with the thought. “Don’t worry, Lemon. I’ll make sure both of your special days are perfect.”

And I have no doubt he will.

He seals the sentiment with a perfect kiss to prove his point.

## LOTTIE

The living room looks like a pink bomb detonated with the precision of a glitter-obsessed perfectionist—that would be Keelie.

She's the one who helped me decorate this morning. It's the afternoon of Lyla Nell's second birthday—and well, technically, my birthday, too, but I'm more than happy to let my big day take a back seat.

We've invited a few friends and family and already gorged on all the Mangias pizza and Chinese buffet from the Wicked Wok. In fact, we've moved past the cake and are already halfway through with the gifts at this point.

Streamers dangle from the ceiling in perfect spirals, balloons cluster in every corner in various shades of bubblegum and cotton candy, and a mountain of glittery wrapping paper grows by the second. The air smells like buttercream frosting, coffee, and that unmistakable scent of new toys fresh out of their packages—a mix of plastic and possibility.

Cast aside on the dining room table sits a decimated three-tier cake with a Barbie doll standing proudly in the middle, and her lower half once encased in a frosting skirt that now resembles a disaster zone after Lyla Nell and her band of toddleraccomplices attacked it with tiny forks and sticky fingers. It was a deliriously beautiful sight.

Crumbs litter the table like pink confetti, and the frosting has somehow made its way onto the ceiling fan. Don't ask me how. When toddlers are involved, physics takes a vacation.

“Come on, Little Yippy. Hurry up!” Carlotta urges Lyla Nell from her perch on the arm of the sofa. “I'm growing old here. By the time you open all these presents, I'll

need a walker and one of those pill organizers with the days of the week on it.”

“You already have one of those pill organizers,” I’m quick to point out.

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“Yeah, but those are for myfunpills.” She nudges Mayor Nash and winks at him, and that lets me know I don’t need to press the subject.

Lyla Nell giggles, struggling with the ribbon on a particularly well-wrapped package. Her little face scrunches with determination, her tongue poking out the side of her mouth—an expression she’s definitely inherited from me. But other than that, her green eyes, that dark hair that turns red at the tips, and those deep-well dimples, she’s all Noah Fox.

“I help!” Josie, my sweet niece, dives in to assist, making the unwrapping process approximately seventeen times slower, while two-year-old Bear watches with the intensity of a sports commentator, clutching his own new toy truck like it might make a break for the door.

Noah and Everett hover around the chaos like helicopters with cameras. Noah holds the video camera as if he’s documenting a rare wildlife phenomenon forNational Geographic, while Everett snaps photos at a rate that suggests he’s afraid he’ll miss the shot of a lifetime.

“Get her from this angle,” Everett directs Noah while shifting positions. “The lighting is better.”

“I know how to film my own daughter,” Noah shoots back, but moves as suggested anyway. “This is my second birthday party.”

“And I’ve been documenting my daughter’s life each day for two years,” Everett counters. “Experience counts.”

Oh my goodness. These two. Always competing for Dad of the Year, even though technically they're both hers. And they're both winning if you ask me.

Lainey bounces baby Mimi on her knee while keeping one eye on Josie, who's now attempting to climb the gift pile as if it's Mount Everest.

Meg sits nearby, cradling baby Piper who sleeps through the chaos like a champion.

Noah's sister Sam watches with amusement as her daughter Willow Grace pulls at her mother's dark locks. And Lily and Alex's son Levi seems to be studying the proceedings with the serious expression of a tiny professor.

My sister Charlie and Everett's sister Meghan are happily sipping a faux mimosa, and I can practically see the glee on their faces just knowing they're one of the few people in the room that get to enjoy a night's sleep without interruption.

Over by the window, Mom and Wiley share the loveseat, her hand resting comfortably in his. It still amazes me how life can take such unexpected turns. If anyone had told me years ago that my mother would end up with Noah's father, I'd have laughed myself into a hernia. And then maybe have hired a good attorney who could draw up a decent restraining order.

Eliza, the picture of elegance even at a toddler's birthday party, sips tea from an actual china cup she brought from home—British bone china. Because, of course, she brought her own. Actually, she just gifted Lyla Nell one of her coveted sets. That very one. And you can bet I'm far more excited about that gift than Lyla Nell might ever be.

Eliza brought Everett's twin girls over, Ava and Olivia. And those two cute preteens flank Evie like white on rice, looking at their big sister with admiration while hanging on her every word as she helps Lyla Nell with the next gift.

It's all so very lovely. And loud. So very, very loud.

"Do you feel another year older, Lottie?" Keelie asks as Lyla Nell rips into another package and sends a shower of glitter-covered wrapping paper into the air that will probably still be turning up in the carpet when she goes to college.

"I feel exactly one Barbie cake and three cups of coffee older," I tell her, patting my perpetually enormous belly. "These two have apparently decided to postpone their eviction notice indefinitely. I'm beginning to think they've installed a home theater system in there. I don't see why they'd ever leave. After all, I'm giving them a steady stream of snacks—mostly donuts."

One of the twins kicks as if they agreed with me. Or they want another donut. Probably the latter.

Lyla Nell squeals as she uncovers her next gift—a double stroller with two baby dolls, courtesy of Keelie and baby Bear.

"Look, Mommy," she cries, holding up the dolls with a mixture of delight and suspicion. "Babies for me!"

"That's right, sweetie." Keelie smiles. "So you can be just like your mama and push your twins around Honey Hollow."

"Only I'll have a triple stroller," I say with a dull laugh.

Lyla Nell's face suddenly turns serious as she looks at the dolls, then at my belly, then back at the dolls. "Too many babies," she declares with the conviction of someone who's given the matter far too much serious thought, and the room erupts with laughter.

“Out of the mouths of babes,” Carlotta says with a grunt.

Mayor Nash nods. “The kid makes a valid point, Lottie. You’re about to be outnumbered.”

“I already am,” I say, pushing myself up from the couch with the grace of a walrus. “Anyone need a coffee refill? I’m heading to the kitchen.”

Various murmurs of yes and no thanks follow as I navigate the obstacle course of toys, wrapping paper, and sugared-up toddlers. My back aches as if I’ve been carrying around a sack full of bowling balls—which come to think of it, isn’t far from the truth.

These twins feel like they’ve gained about ten pounds each in the last week alone. My little late-night donut habit isn’t exactly doing me any favors either.

I take three steps when I feel a warm gush between my legs, followed by a splat on the stone floor that silences the room faster than if I had announced the apocalypse. And in a way I had—the baby apocalypse.

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Every adult stares my way with a frozen look on their face. Every toddler continues playing, oblivious to the medical event unfolding in the middle of the party.

Lyla Nell points at the puddle. “Mommy needs potty,” she announces with the authority of a tiny drill sergeant—a slightly terrified one at that. “Gonow, Mommy!Run!”

Chaos erupts like someone hit the panic button. Everett drops his phone. Noah nearly trips over a stuffed unicorn. Mom starts shouting instructions no one can hear over Keelie’s excited shrieking about “birthday babies!”

“Well”—I say to no one in particular as Everett and Noah converge on me from opposite directions—“looks like the twins got the memo. If they can arrive in time, we might be sharing a birthday after all.”

“The bag is the truck,” Everett shouts and his face is an equal mix of both excitement and terror.

“The truck is already running,” Noah calls out, somehow having teleported outside and back in the span of ten seconds.

“I’ll watch Lyla Nell,” at least six people volunteer simultaneously.

“And I’ll clean up the cake,” Carlotta adds, already helping herself to another slice by way of her fingers.

Before I can process what’s happening, I’m being whisked out the door between my

two favorite men in the world, leaving behind a birthday party that's now evolved into so much more.

And as we pull out of the driveway, I catch one last glimpse of my pink-festooned house, filled with the people I love most in this world, and I can't help but smile despite the contraction that's already building.

Some women get roses on their birthdays. Some get jewelry.

But me? I get the ultimate gift—a day when the entire world seems to celebrate not just the day I was born, but the days my daughter and my twins chose to make their grand entrances, too.

And as another contraction hits with the force of a freight train, I realize that sometimes the most painful gifts are the ones that change your life forever.

Another one bears down on me on top of that and it's ten times as painful.

“Drive faster,” I shout at decibels loud enough to shatter a window.

And just like that, we're flying through Honey Hollow.

LOTTIE

The room is a flurry of far too much commotion, lots of cheerleading, and lots of blood, sweat, and tears.

Bright hospital lights blind me overhead.

The sterile scent of antiseptic clashes with the comforting whiff of lavender or whatever essential oil my mother insisted on dousing my pillow with.

The hum of machines beeping steadily, monitoring the twin occupants of my abdomen who, after nine long months, have finally decided to make their grand debut.

“Push, Lottie! You got this!” Keelie cheers from my left, sounding a lot like the sideline coach she is.

“I am pushing!” I shout back, gripping Everett’s hand like a lifeline. He winces but doesn’t complain, although I’m positive his bones will never be the same. And I’m betting certain parts of my body won’t be either.

“You’re doing amazing, Lemon,” Everett murmurs, pressing a kiss to my sweaty forehead. “We’re almost there.”

Noah is on my other side, equally doting, although looking slightly green himself. “Yeah, Lot, just—oh wow, that’s—” He clamps his mouth shut as Dr. Barnette, my OB-GYN, and a redheaded one at that—and have I mentioned that she’s Everett’s ex? (but we’re not talking about that right now)— gives one final instruction.

“One more push, Lottie! Here we go!”

I push with everything I have, and suddenly, a sharp cry fills the room.

Dr. Barnette lifts a tiny, squirming, perfect human into the air. “It’s a boy!”

The room erupts in cheers. Mom lets out an excited squeal. Keelie and Meg high-five as if I had just won a medal. Lainey is already dabbing at her eyes, and even Charlie looks suspiciously misty-eyed.

Both Everett and Noah stare at our son in complete, dumbfounded awe.

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Everett grips my hand even tighter. “Lemon...” His voice cracks, and I swear I see a tear slip down his cheek.

Noah doesn’t even bother wiping his away. He’s too busy looking at our son like he just hung the moon.

“Not done yet,” Dr. Barnette announces. “Let’s get baby number two out.”

Oh, right. Another one.

I groan. “Can’t they take a cab?”

The room chuckles, but I don’t have time to quip because another contraction rolls through me, and before I know it, Dr. Barnette is holding up another tiny, squirming miracle.

Another burst of cheers fills the room.

“You did it, Lemon.” Everett kisses my forehead and his lips linger as Noah rubs my arm.

“You’re incredible, Lot,” Noah says with a sigh. “They’re incredible.”

I’m about to pass out when the nurse approaches, handing me two perfectly swaddled bundles—one with a gold ribbon around his wrist, the other with silver.

A few hours later and the room is twice as packed with friends and family.

Mom, Lainey, Meg, Charlie, and Keelie are all huddled around me, cooing over the twins.

Evie, Ava, Olivia, and Lyla Nell are perched on the bed, and even Carlotta and Mayor Nash have found their way in, along with Eliza, Meghan, and Wiley.

“They’re darling,” Mom coos, cradling the older one. “Twin boys! Can you believe it?”

The nurse labeled them with ribbons, but the truth is, I can already tell them apart. Same shock of dark hair and same serious blue eyes, but the older one has a dimple on his right cheek, the younger on his left. Their chins, their eyebrows both have tiny differences that might change over time, or maybe not at all.

“What are their names?” Lainey asks, practically vibrating with impatience. “Don’t keep us in suspense, Lot. We’ve waited nine months to meet them.”

I glance up at Everett and shrug. “Looks like push came to shove, and we still don’t have our names shored up.”

“How about Thing One and Thing Two?” Carlotta suggests with a smirk. “Or Thunder and Lightning? Peanut Butter and Jelly? Yip and Yap?”

“Let’s not set them up for a lifetime of therapy before they’re even a day old,” Noah counters.

Evie raises a hand. “How about naming one after Dad and one after Uncle Noah?” she proposes. “I mean, he’s going to be their dad anyway.”

Noah grins. “Noah is a pretty great name.”

Everett growls, and it's a sound that would make lesser men take a step back.

"How about using their middle names so there's not so much confusion?" Mom interjects rather diplomatically. "Corbin Noah Baxter and Everett Essex Baxter?"

Lemon-Baxter, I mentally correct, but I'm too exhausted to say that part out loud at the moment.

"Essex would be a better fit for the first name," Eliza suggests with the confidence of someone who's never been wrong about anything. And, of course, she would suggest it. She thought it was a good idea the first time around, too.

Keelie coos at the boys. "Okay, so the older twin is Essex Everett Baxter, and Corbin Noah Baxter for the second cutie pie."

Mom lands the older babe into my arms once again, and Lyla Nell edges closer to them from the corner of the bed with a bout of curiosity overcoming her initial shyness.

"Look at your brand-new baby brothers," Evie tells her. "That's Essex, and that's Corbin. Do you like those names?"

Lyla Nell nods, and the room erupts in a quiet cheer.

"Ozzy and Co-bean," she's quick to announce while clapping up a storm.

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“I love that,” Evie says. “Dad never goes by Essex anyway. I vote we nickname the older one Ozzy. What do you think?” She looks to Everett then me.

“What do you think, Lemon?” Everett brushes the hair from my eyes and offers a loving smile that warms me to my toes.

“I think it’s perfect.” I glance between Noah and Everett, my two favorite men—up until now at least. Now they’re forever tied with these two little men who came into my life today. “I love that we’re paying tribute to the two most important men in my world. What do you think, Everett?”

“I’m in love with them, their names, and our growing family,” Everett says softly. “It’s perfect. They’re perfect. And you’re perfect.” He leans in and offers me a lingering kiss as the room breaks out in another round of coos.

Lyla Nell tugs at the blanket as she inches in closer still. “Where they mommy at?” she asks with wide-eyed concern as she looks from me to Everett then Noah.

The room goes quiet, and it’s the kind of sudden silence that makes you wonder if someone hit a universal pause button.

“Why, I’m their mommy,” I tell her with a smile—an exhausted smile, but a smile nonetheless.

Lyla Nell looks genuinely confused, but adorably so as her little brow furrows like mad.

“No,” she shouts a touch too loud. “Youmymommy. Who day mommy?” She looks around as if the maternal offender might be hiding somewhere in the crowd.

The crowd coos again. It’s like watching a tennis match of adorable yet questionably traumatizing moments.

“Sweetheart”—I lean her way—“I’m their mommyandyour mommy,” I explain gently. “That’s how families work sometimes.”

“That’s right. Sharing is caring,” Lainey quips.

“Unless it’s the last donut,” Meg adds, and a loose chuckle breaks out in the room.

“Or one of Lot’s men—she doesn’t share those either,” Carlotta mutters under her breath, and another round of laughter breaks out.

Lyla Nell’s lower lip starts to tremble. “No! YouMYmommy! These babies needdifferentmommy.” No sooner does she get the words out—rather aggressively might I add—than the wailing begins. Loud. Sharp. Shrill cries, certainly loud enough to wake the dead, but thankfully not loud enough to wake two sleeping twin boys who just made their debut into the world.

Mom swoops in like a superhero and scoops Lyla Nell up, heading for the door as half the room clears out with congratulations tossed over their shoulders like confetti.

Charlie steps forward once the room quiets down, looking suspiciously excited. “So, about the event in Las Vegas next month. You know I’ve already committed to the Savory Sizzle in Sin City. And you know I’ve been begging you to sign up for the Sin City Sugar Showdown.”

“Oh, Charlie,” I moan. “The Flavor Frenzy is a big event, but I have a feeling these

two are going to be an even bigger event at my house. Especially at night. There's no way I can make it."

"Have I mentioned the winner gets their signature creation stocked in gourmet markets nationwide?" Charlie counters. "We're talking coast-to-coast distribution deals, Lottie. Your cinnamon rolls could be the next big thing from Seattle to Miami."

My mouth falls open. "Oh, wow, that's big!"

She nods. "The winner gets featured in Pastry Monthly and named America's Premier Bakery for the year. And the winner gets a permanent feature in the Culinary Hall of Fame," Charlie counters. "Not to mention exclusive rights to supply pastries to the White House for their holiday gala. This is bigger than money, Lottie—it's legacy."

"You should totally do it, Lot." Lainey shrugs. "I'll be there."

Meg nods. "And I'm going to be performing as Madge the Badge—also known as MadMadge. I can't wait to crack a few skulls."

"Free babysitting from Mom." Lainey throws it out there like the ultimate temptation—and right now it so is.

I look up at Everett and Noah, trying to gauge their reactions.

Everett tips his head to the side. "I'm on paternity leave. I can certainly make it work."

Noah looks far off with his gaze fixed on some hypnotic point out the window. "And if you guys go, I'm in, too, if you don't mind."

“I wouldn’t go without you,” I tell him.

He nods, still looking pensively out the window. “Good. I’ve got some business in Vegas that I’ve been meaning to take care of.”

Everett and I exchange a look.

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Something in Noah's tone makes me wonder what kind of "business" he's talking about, but with two newborns in my arms, I've reached my mystery-solving quota for the day.

"Then it's settled," I say with a shrug. "In one month's time, we'll be heading to Las Vegas."

"Vegas, baby! Here we come!" Carlotta shrieks, startling both babies awake. "Sorry, Double Dipper Yippers. I'm just excited about all the trouble—I mean, fun—we're going to have."

"I'll be there for sure," Keelie says. "And somehow I doubt Sin City has seen anything quite like the Honey Hollow crew," she says with a laugh.

"Vegas won't know what hit it," Everett agrees, kissing the top of my head.

I look down at my twin boys, already sensing that whatever awaits us in Las Vegas will be just the beginning of our family's next great adventure.

After all, I've never been one to dodge trouble—or a good mystery—especially when it comes with neon lights and slot machines.

Some mothers bring home teddy bears from the hospital. I'm bringing home twin boys and a one-way ticket to Vegas-sized chaos.

Look out, Las Vegas. Honey Hollow is about to invade.

Here's hoping we don't leave a trail of bodies in our wake.

But something tells me the odds are not in our favor.