



A Whisker in the Night

(Country Cottage Mysteries #29)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: It's Easter in Cider Cove and along with it comes chocolate bunnies, candy-coated chaos, and a basket full of murder.

The inn is buzzing with the Chocolate Bunny Hop Festival, and between running the event and helping Emmie prepare for her baby's arrival, I've got enough on my plate to keep me hopping. But when a notoriously ruthless resident is found dead, the sweetness sours fast.

With enough betrayal and secrets to fill a dozen Easter baskets, not to mention the fact that one of my friends is framed for the crime, I can't sit this one out. The killer's trail is as tangled as Easter grass, and the closer I get to the truth, the clearer it becomes—someone in town wants me to hop out of the picture—for good.

This Easter, the only thing sweeter than chocolate is justice. That is, if I can survive long enough to serve it.

Love talking pets and cozy country inns? Then welcome to the Country Cottage Inn. The Easter bunny is on his way and so is a killer.

The Country Cottage Inn is known for its hospitality. Leaving can be murder.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

“Get on your mark,” Mayor Mackenzie Woods bellows over the sound of the cheerful crowd as everyone seated at the extended picnic table leans in. The smell of chocolate wafts through the air like the world’s sweetest scent, and for once, I’m not upset that I’ve fallen prey to its siren song.

It’s the week before Easter, and all of Cider Cove has gathered right here at the Country Cottage Inn for a little fun under the spring sun as the Chocolate Bunny Hop Festival takes place on the grounds.

“All right, folks—” Georgie places both hands on the table as if she’s bracing for impact and her eyes just so happen to be laser-focused on the chocolate bunnies before us. “The rest of you may as well pack it up and head home. You’re looking at the soon-to-be undisputed chocolate bunny eating queen.”

A ripple of laughter moves through the crowd, but I can tell from the way the other competitors are eyeing their plates that no one is taking her threat lightly.

Yes, it’s a chocolate bunny eating competition and my husband Jasper and I, along with my best friend Emmie and her husband Leo, were somehow coerced into entering.

Okay, so it didn’t take any coercing. But what better excuse to eat all the chocolate bunnies you can? And have I mentioned they’re free?

We each have three chocolate bunnies to start with—and each one stands a prideful ten inches tall. The rules are simple: eat as many as you can within five minutes.

Once we devour these chocolate cuties, another trio of bunnies will magically appear. The last one standing—or perhaps holding their stomach, in this case—takes home the chocolate-covered glory along with the big prize.

Oh yes, the prize. A year's supply of chocolate from Cider Cove Blueberry and Chocolate Heaven and a custom-made Easter basket brimming with chocolate goodies to get your summer started in the right delicious direction.

“ Get set! ” Mackenzie's voice rises above the crowd again, and I'm suddenly questioning every life decision that brought me to this moment.

How did I let myself get talked into shoveling as many chocolate bunnies as I can into my pie hole while hundreds of people document the delicious disaster on their phones and upload it to every social media site?

Oh, that's right. I begged to be included. And to be fair, the baby practically demanded it. Or so I tell myself.

I'm already in my second trimester and the baby is due late August.

I pat my burgeoning belly as if to assure my little one that their mother knows exactly what she's doing.

Spoiler alert: I have zero clue. But hey, I've been inhaling chocolate ever since I found out I was expecting last November. I'm practically a pro at poor nutritional choices at this point.

Focus, Bizzy, Fish yowls from her perch in my sister Macy's arms. Fish is my sweet black and white tabby, and right now her tail is flickering away. Your mind is wandering, and there's a year's supply of chocolate on the line!

Fish is not one for subtlety. She's also not one for cutting me some slack, even in my delicate condition—especially not when my newfound addiction to the cocoa-based treat is starting to cut into the budget for her Fancy Beast cat food. Suffice it to say, we both have priorities.

Don't worry, Bizzy, Sherlock barks from the other side of the table, his red freckled face beaming with the kind of encouragement only a canine can offer. If you don't win, Jasper will!

Sherlock Bones is a red and white freckled mutt that came as a package deal with the aforementioned husband.

Fish swipes at Sherlock for even going there. Don't listen to him, Fish hisses with her whiskers twitching as she glares at Sherlock. You've got this, Bizzy. And if you don't and Jasper wins, then I suggest we reconsider who sleeps in the doghouse. He should be cheering you on—not aiding in your defeat.

Before I can laugh or play referee to the animal kingdom, a loud pop echoes through the air, and Mackenzie shouts, “ Go! ”

The table erupts into chaos. Hands dart for those chocolate bunnies with their vacant sky-blue eyes. I dive in with the enthusiasm of a woman who hasn't eaten in days, which, let's be honest—it's more like minutes. I bite into the first bunny and instantly feel transported to chocolate heaven indeed.

Oh, the rich, creamy milk chocolate with a hint of caramel—it just melts in my mouth as if on cue.

Sure, it's warm out, and I'm positive that's assisting with my strategy, but I know for a fact that the Westoffs craft some of the world's best quality chocolates. That's who owns Blueberry and Chocolate Heaven, the Westoff family—or at least they did

before they blew apart in a messy divorce.

I'm not all that familiar with the family. But my mother is one of the cogs that keeps the Cider Cove gossip mill running and she makes sure I don't miss a messy beat.

But never mind the gossip mill or anyone's messy divorce, I can't stop moaning my way through every scrumptious bite—it's just that good.

You're savoring, Bizzy, Fish scolds. This is no time to savor! Think of the prize! You need to inhale those pointy-eared chocolate suckers!

She's so right.

I cast a quick glance at Jasper and he's already halfway done with his second bunny.

It's obvious his competitive streak is shining through brighter than a golden egg in an Easter basket, and twice as prideful.

"How are you doing over there?" he asks and his words are muffled by a mouthful of deliciousness. Jasper has thick dark hair, light gray eyes, and dimples that make me melt on cue. He also happens to be the lead homicide detective down at the Seaview Sheriff's Department.

"Living out one of my favorite fantasies," I manage as I reach for my second bunny as well—even though he's suddenly onto this third.

Across the table, my best friend Emmie sits, looking like the picture of springtime elegance in a pink and blue floral dress. And despite her advanced stage of pregnancy, she looks rather dainty while nibbling on her first bunny as if it were a treat at a tea party.

Emmie notices me gawking at her and pauses from the chocolate task at hand. “Don’t look at me like that, Bizzy.” She offers up a wry smile. “I’m just here for the fun.” Besides, you know Leo has this on lock for the both of us. He’s in it to win it. She nods over to her husband who sits dutifully by her side gnawing away on chocolate bunny number four because clearly Leo is indeed in it to win it. The man is tearing through his bunnies like a sugar-hungry hitman.

“This is not a drill,” he growls between bites.

Leo is your standard tall, dark, and handsome sheriff’s deputy, and it’s the exact reason Emmie was drawn to him like a pregnant woman to pickle-flavored ice cream. And yes, the ice cream exists, and both Emmie and I have devoured a pint. And we’re also looking forward to our next pint, too.

“We’re taking home that basket, Emmie,” Leo calls out.

“You mean I’m taking home that basket,” Georgie grunts his way before devouring the bunnies in front of her with the ferocity of a sugar-seeking missile (albeit a senior citizen missile), leaving a trail of gold foil carnage in her wake. And just like that, three more chocolate bunnies are placed before her. “Go on, Bizzy,” she goads. “Don’t let the baby slow you down! Even though I’m going to win, I want you to get eating!” And don’t think I’m sharing the loot with you either.

She gives me the side-eye as the greedy thought crosses her mind.

Not many people know I can read minds, but Georgie is one of them, as are Jasper, Emmie, and Leo. And well, oddly enough, Leo shares my supernatural abilities, too. I sort of regard it as an odd quirk, but on occasion, it’s more of a curse.

My name is Bizzy Baker Wilder and I can read minds. Not all minds, not all the time, but most of the time—and most of the furry species are included in that supernatural

number. As usual, the furry species among us have better things to say than humans.

Georgie glances my way again. “I said get to eating, woman!”

And get to eating I do.

I chomp down on all three bunnies and three more appear in their place, offering me the same vacant blue-eyed stares. Come to think of it, they look a bit frightened—and as they should. I’m about to make quick work of them as I introduce them to my digestive system.

By the time I’m halfway through my fourth bunny, it’s clear I’m not winning this competition.

I glance over at the other contestants and spot a strawberry blonde with a freckled face and an adorable baby bump absolutely demolishing her third tray of chocolate goodness. She’s going at it like a well-oiled machine and it’s quickly becoming obvious I’ll be admitting defeat—along with everyone else at this table.

A deafening buzz goes off and the entire lot of us lets out a collective groan—mostly from relief.

“And the winner is—” Mayor Mackenzie Woods bellows into the microphone in her hand and we all look up at once.

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“T

he winner is—Hammie Mae Westoff, ladies and gentlemen! The chocolate bunny queen herself!” Mayor Mackenzie Woods shouts to the crowd gathered here at the Chocolate Bunny Hop Festival just as the chocolate bunny eating competition concludes.

Hammie Mae stands and waves as her cheeks flush with triumph. She looks to be about my age, late twenties, has strawberry blonde hair, freckles, and a baby bump to rival my own.

“I’d better go congratulate her,” I say as Jasper helps me up and Leo does the same with Emmie.

“I’ll go with you,” Emmie says as she places her hands over her enormous belly.

Emmie is one week overdue and looks as if she’s hidden a beach ball under that paisley dress of hers. But she’s just as gorgeous as ever. Emmie and I share the same dark hair, blue eyes, and the same formal moniker, Elizabeth . We were practically destined to be besties from the moment we met in preschool, and we have been.

Leo nods to Jasper. “How about we grab some drinks? Something manly like beer,” he teases as he wags a half-eaten chocolate bunny our way.

“Make it chocolate milk and I’m in,” Jasper says. “It’s not called the Chocolate Festival for nothing.”

“The Chocolate Bunny Hop Festival,” I say, offering him a kiss. “I’ll take a glass, too, if you don’t mind.”

Jasper and Leo have been best friends for almost as long as Emmie and me, and that makes the friendship among the four of us that much more special.

They take off with the promise of bringing us both back a glass of something creamy and dreamy, while Emmie and I head over to where Hammie Mae is speaking to my mother.

Mom spots me and waves us close. “Girls, meet your competition. Hammie Mae, this is my daughter Bizzy, and her best friend Emmie—a couple of chocolate lightweights.”

“Very funny,” I say as I extend my hand to the woman. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too, Bizzy,” Hammie Mae says with a laugh and her freckled face lights up as she offers me a handshake. “I just love what you’ve done with the inn—especially the café.”

“Thank you,” I say. “This is my best friend Emmie. She’s the one in charge of the café and she gets all the credit.”

Before Hammie Mae can respond, another woman strides over. An older redhead with a silver streak lying thick over the top of her crown with pride. She’s tall, statuesque, and exuding an executive level of poise. She also happens to be a vision in a lavender blouse and matching tailored slacks. She’s holding a gold foil bunny with a dark flat bottom, and by the looks of it, it seems as if it has some serious heft to it. I bet that’s solid milk chocolate! Thankfully, the chocolate bunnies in the competition were hollow, not that it gave me much of an advantage. It almost seems unfair that Hammie Mae won, seeing that her parents own the company. But then, I

suppose she's been training her entire life for this day.

My mother's eyes light up at the sight of the older woman. "Matilda!" she cries with glee as they share a quick embrace. "Bizzy, Emmie, this is Matilda Westoff, Hammie Mae's mother. She's a legend in the lifestyle world. You've probably seen her on TV."

"Only on every channel," I say, offering a smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Emmie gives a quick nod. "I echo the sentiment."

"The pleasure is all mine," Matilda purrs with genuine warmth.

"That bunny looks delicious," Mom says, nodding to the gold bunny in the woman's hands. "Your chocolates are simply the best. Thank you for sponsoring today's events."

"Of course!" The redhead beams. "And thank you for the compliment, but this bunny is actually a wrought iron bookend. He's part of a set. I was just showing him off to a few of my friends. We have a fully stocked gift shop back on the farm with so much more than just chocolate. In fact, I've opened a booth here at the festival and these beauties are in abundant supply." She offers me a peaceable smile. "Bizzy, I hear you run the inn. You must be the one keeping this festival running so beautifully."

I blush under her praise. I'm about to tell her that it's a team effort when an older man with a head full of glorious white hair steps into our circle. He nods over at Hammie Mae, then Matilda, and that mischievous smile on his face only widens. And in his arms happens to be the cutest black and white spotted cat I ever did see with a pink bow tied around her collar.

Fish and Sherlock bolt this way as well.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Matilda snips at the man and both Emmie and I gasp at her sharp and unexpected word choice.

The man’s mischievous smile widens twice its size and that little black and white cat in his arms sighs.

Here we go again, she purrs. I wonder if they’ll actually kill one another this time? Although at this rate, it’s not a matter of if —it’s just a matter of when .

A breath hitches in my throat at the thought.

The last thing we need in Cider Cove is another homicide.

Although with our track record—it’s not a matter of if —it is indeed a matter of when .

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The spring air is sweet, carrying the scent of wildflowers and chocolate as it mingles with the sound of laughter and chatter from the bustling crowd right here at the Chocolate Bunny Hop Festival.

The sprawling lawn of the Country Cottage Inn is buzzing with families snapping photos near one of the many topiary bunnies, children chase each other with sticky fingers and chocolate-stained smiles, and vendors hawk chocolate-dipped everything. That last bit is my favorite part.

The scene is pure celebratory perfection—or at least it was right up until now.

Matilda Westoff glares daggers at the white-haired man who doubles as a silver fox—albeit a silver fox with an insufferable smirk.

Hamish Westoff. I recognize him immediately from all those old Blueberries and Chocolate Heaven ads that used to take over the airwaves on local TV. He's holding a black and white cat decked out with a bright pink bow, and the cat looks just as unimpressed with him as Matilda does.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Matilda snaps once again, her voice sharp enough to slice through any one of those giant chocolate bunnies on display.

A passing crowd notices the brewing tension and their heads turn this way like sunflowers following the light.

Mom still has her phone out, and to my horror, I can see she's actually recording the event before us. It's safe to say she forgot to stop once the competition was over. But

it's not her fault. Mom isn't exactly the most tech-savvy among us. She still refers to text messages as emails no matter how often we correct her.

Georgie sidles up next to me, munching on what I can only assume is her sixth chocolate bunny of the day. And along with her trot Fish and Sherlock.

"This is better than listening to your mama spill the tea," Georgie whispers as she elbows me. "Do you think they'll throw punches? Or better yet, chocolate?"

"I'm rooting for chocolate," I say.

"Shh," Mom hisses, unable to take her eyes off the unfolding drama. And to be honest, neither can I.

Fish groans as she twirls around my ankles. I've got a bad feeling about this.

You say that about everything, Sherlock sniffs. And you're always wrong.

Fish's eyes widen and I recognize that look of indignation on her face, although it's quickly morphing into a look that spells out revenge.

I don't want to argue about who's wrong and who's right. She slices the air with her tail. How about we call a truce? I'll even find you a nice piece of chocolate that you can enjoy.

I shoot her a look. She knows full well that chocolate is lethal to dogs.

"Hello, Matilda," Hamish says to his ex-wife, his voice oozing with charm that's about as smooth as melted chocolate. He shakes his head at the woman. You know what they say—he thinks to himself—he devil works hard, but Matilda Westoff works harder. Judging by that look in her eye, she's bent on making me miserable.

But I know just how to win her over. “You look wonderful, per usual,” he tells her. Wonderfully wicked. He chuckles at the thought.

“Oh, stuff it. I don’t have time for your head games, Hamish,” Matilda bites out the words while straightening her posture like a queen preparing for battle. “Find someone else to irritate.”

“Now, now.” Hamish widens his devilish grin. “I’m here for the festival, same as everyone else. What’s the Easter holiday season without a little chocolate and family bonding?”

“Family bonding?” Matilda scoffs with a brittle laugh. “You wouldn’t know the meaning of family if it hit you over the head with a chocolate mallet.”

“Ouch.” Hamish places a hand over his heart as if she’s wounded him. “Still holding onto the same old grudge, are we?”

“Better than chasing after women half your age,” Matilda snaps back, her designer heels sinking slightly into the fresh spring grass.

A collective gasp circles through our small group.

The spotted cat in Hamish’s arms lets out another dramatic sigh like only a furry diva can. Hoomans. Always going for the jugular when chocolate is involved.

I’ll say.

“All right, you two.” Hammie Mae steps between her parents with her hand protectively covering her baby bump. “Let’s not start with the accusations. This is supposed to be a celebration. I just won the contest, in case anyone cares to acknowledge that.” Not that either of them has ever bothered to acknowledge

anything about me as of late . And not that I care what my father has to say. I haven't spoken to him in a solid year.

Ouch. I guess it's safe to say they're on the outs.

"Of course, we care, sweetheart," Hamish tells her, though his eyes never leave Matilda's face. "Your mother here just seems to forget that I own fifty-one percent of the company that provided those very bunnies you just devoured."

"Temporarily." Matilda's smile could cut glass. "But I doubt the general public will want you anywhere near the property once my new book comes out."

My mother actually squeals with delight at this revelation. "I've already preordered a copy of Chocolate-Dipped Deception: What Really Happened at Westoff Farms! My book club and I can hardly wait to read it."

"Mother ," I whisper as I grab her arm in an effort to keep her from texting the gossip committee all about the exchange at hand. And is she still recording this?

I gasp once I see that red light of hers still glowing on her phone.

The spotted cat in Hamish's arms gives a lazy stretch of her furry little limbs. I give it ten minutes before someone ends up wearing one of those chocolate bunnies as a hat.

Fish's whiskers twitch at the thought. My money is on five.

"Hey there, stranger." A honeyed voice cuts through the tension like a hot knife through chocolate ganache. "Looking for me?"

We watch as a willowy blonde in a pale pink power suit, bright red high heels with tiny gold Vs on the front, and a matching giant designer handbag that probably costs

more than all the money I have in the bank glides across the lawn toward us. And that handbag is about the size of half of her body.

I lean toward Emmie. “Who is this?”

“Verity Westoff—the latest Mrs. Westoff,” Emmie whispers back.

Emmie, much like my mother, is always in the know.

The woman in pink smirks at the entire lot of us, and I can hear her thoughts loud and clear. Little inn, quaint festival... how... provincial.

Fish’s tail bristles like a pipe cleaner. I don’t think I care for her one bit.

“Verity.” Matilda’s voice drops to arctic temperatures. “Shouldn’t you be at your restaurant? Or has it already shuttered its doors?” A week sooner than I predicted.

“Actually, we’re doing better than ever.” Verity’s smile is sharp as she hooks her arm through Hamish’s. “Unlike some people, I know how to keep a business and a marriage thriving.” She tugs at her husband. “Come on, honey,” she coos. “I want you to see the new display at the Blueberry and Chocolate Heaven booth before it gets picked over by all these... enthusiastic festival-goers.”

The way she says “enthusiastic” makes it sound like a disease.

I swear I can see steam coming out of Matilda’s ears.

“Still marking your territory, I see,” she growls at the blonde. “How predictable and desperate of you.”

Georgie ticks her head to the side. “Well, this escalated quickly.”

I nod in agreement. “I’m beginning to think this festival needs a referee,” I mutter to myself and Emmie gives a quick nod in agreement.

“ Bizzy ,” Georgie says, nudging me. “Ten bucks says Matilda smacks them both with her purse.”

“I’m not taking that bet,” I whisper back. “It’s practically a guarantee.”

Before things can escalate further, Jasper and Leo return with drinks in hand, and thankfully so. Their timing is impeccable.

“What did we miss?” Jasper asks, handing me a glass of creamy chocolate milk.

“Just a little family drama,” I whisper, taking a sip.

Leo raises a brow. “Should we intervene?”

“Not unless someone starts swinging or slinging chocolate,” Georgie says under her breath while popping the last bite of her chocolate bunny into her mouth.

As if on cue, Matilda takes a step closer to her ex and her eyes are blazing. “You’ve overstayed your welcome, Hamish. Leave. Now .”

That devilish grin on his face begins to falter, but just for a moment. “Fine. I’ll leave.” He straightens. “But don’t think for a second that this is over.” He nods her way. I’m not above sharing what I know, he muses to himself. Or at least I want her to think that.

With that, he turns on his heel and both he and Verity scuttle off into the crowd.

“Well”—Georgie says, clapping her hands together—“that was fun. What’s next? An

egg toss? Maybe a pie-eating contest? Or should we just skip to the part where someone gets murdered?"

I shoot her a look. "Don't you even joke about that."

"Who's joking?" she says with a grin.

And just like that, I can't shake the feeling that Georgie might be onto something. After all, this is Cider Cove. If history is any indication, indeed it's not a matter of if someone ends up dead—it's a matter of when .

"As much as I hate to admit it"—Jasper says before knocking back the rest of his chocolate milk—"Georgie has a point. Leo, what do you say we do a quick patrol of the grounds?"

Leo nods, already scanning the crowd. "Better safe than sorry, especially with that kind of tension in the air."

"I should get back to the kitchen," Emmie says, rubbing her beach ball of a belly. "Those chocolate cream puffs won't frost themselves."

"Ooh! Speaking of chocolate—" Georgie loops her arm through my mother's. "I hear there's a chocolate fountain we haven't checked out yet. I say we run a couple of coffee mugs underneath it. Or we can cut out the middleman and dive in headfirst."

"Now you're talking." Mom pulls her close. "Lead the way!"

I shake my head as they dash off to make every one of their chocolate fantasies come true. Some things never change. And on that note, I'll have to alert the staff that there will be a cleanup needed at the chocolate fountain in about two minutes.

In fact, I take off into the crowd to do just that with both Fish and Sherlock by my side.

I walk in circles and nearly get steamrolled by a crowd of preschoolers as the egg hunt gets underway for the afternoon.

Almost an hour drifts by and I pause to look out at the grounds as the rolling green lawns gleam like a jewel under the powder blue sky. The crowds are thicker than ever and with no sign of dissipating soon.

I'm about to head to the inn when something catches my eye near the border of the woods.

It's that black and white kitten darting back and forth, looking anxious as can be.

"I think that's Hamish's cat," I say, nodding in that direction and both Fish and Sherlock look that way. "I think the poor thing is lost. Come on, let's go."

Fish and Sherlock are ten steps ahead of me as I make my way across the grounds. The festivities seem distant now, the laughter and chatter fading with each step toward the tree line.

We continue to head that way, and just as we come upon the cute kitten, she darts into the woods and we follow along.

"Don't be afraid," I call out. "We'll help you get back to your owner."

The little cat stops short of what looks like a scarecrow face down in the dirt just beyond the first row of trees. Except the festival doesn't have any scarecrows.

My heart plummets into my stomach as I get closer and dread builds with every step.

That's no scarecrow.

It's the cat's owner. And if that crimson gash on the back of his head is a telltale sign—he's not breathing.

Just a foot away from him, I spot a gold foil-wrapped bunny with the same crimson stain on it and I gasp.

Looks like I was right after all. It wasn't a matter of if —it was a matter of when . And when just happened.

Hamish Westoff is dead.

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A scream rips from my throat before I can stop it, echoing through the woods and most likely scaring off every bunny—chocolate or otherwise—within a five-mile radius.

The tiny black and white cat at my feet belts out a sharp yowl right alongside me and both Fish and Sherlock quickly herd her away from the scene.

I'm taking her to the cottage , Fish yowls. She doesn't need to be near this.

I see help headed this way, Sherlock barks. It looks like you'll be safe, Bizzy. And I'll make sure to keep the cats safe from any killers.

He helps Fish and the tiny cute kitty scamper out of the area just as Jasper and Leo appear by my side.

In fact, they appear so quickly it's as if they've come to recognize my Bizzy-found-another-body scream.

“ Bizzy .” Jasper pulls me into his arms in an instant. My poor husband is out of breath and has a clear look of panic on his face. “Are you okay? Is the baby?—”

“We're both fine,” I assure him even though my heart is doing jumping jacks in my chest. “But he's far from fine.”

I point to Hamish lying still on the ground, then to the gold-foiled nefarious—albeit adorable—weapon nearby.

Leo crouches down beside Hamish and quickly checks for a pulse. “He’s gone.” Leo shakes his head as he jumps back to his feet. “I’d better call it in.” He steps away with his phone already poised to do just that.

The air grows frigid in the shade of the massive pines and eucalyptus trees despite the fact it’s been a balmy afternoon.

I glance back at poor Hamish, face down with his limbs splayed out, then to that bunny once again. It’s only then I note the dark, flat bottom.

Jasper frowns at the scene, but it’s that gold-foiled menace that has his attention. “Don’t tell me they used a sweet chocolate bunny as the murder weapon.”

“I think they may have, but there’s nothing sweet about that bunny.” I lower my voice as if there were a cast of thousands surrounding us—well, there are, they’re just not anywhere near the vicinity. “I saw Matilda holding a gilded bunny just like that one earlier. That’s no chocolate bunny. It’s a wrought iron bookend, dressed up like a sweet treat. I think it has some serious heft to it.”

“Judging by that cut on his head, I’d say it had a lot of heft.” His frown deepens. “Actually, I think I saw these for sale at one of the vendor booths.” He shrugs my way. “I was going to pick up a pair for you.”

“Aww ,” I coo and the baby gives a swift kick from my stomach to Jasper’s and we both bite down a smile. “You know how to make a pregnant bookworm feel mighty special.”

He ticks his head to the side. “You know what they say. Nothing says ‘I love you’ like matching potential murder weapons.”

“Touché,” I say with a sigh.

The sound of approaching footsteps garners our attention and Jasper whips out his phone.

“I’d better document the scene and land that bookend in an evidence bag before company arrives.” He starts snapping photos posthaste. “Let’s keep this gold-foiled weapon quiet until we have more to go on.”

“I won’t say a word,” I say, crossing my heart and taking a step back to give him space to work while Leo strings up yellow caution tape between the trees. And on a play on Jasper’s words—nothing says “the festival is over” quite like police tape. Here I thought we were going to get away without a murder. We’ve been on such a good streak, but unfortunately it seems our killer streak is winning out instead.

The baby stirs in my belly. Most likely because it’s ready for its next chocolate fix.

I’ll admit, I’ve been mainlining chocolate starting at Christmas, then sailing right into Valentine’s Day, munching my weight in milk chocolate in March, and, of course, I can’t resist some scrumptious Easter chocolate bunnies—especially not during the month of April. And judging by the way my sweet baby is tugging at its umbilical cord, I’d better get back to the festival and snag a bunny or two before we close up shop.

I cast another quick glance at the body and its proximity to the gold-foiled bunny nearby when something odd catches my eye—a set of tiny indentations in the dirt that seemingly nestle around the body before leading back to the festival.

Are those footprints? What animal leaves behind little indentations like that? A rat? And just beyond that, I spot a pair of slanted footprints—definitely not that of an animal, unless of course, it was a human animal also known as a killer.

More footfalls rush in this direction and I suck in a quick breath. Without putting too

much thought into it, I pull out my own phone and quickly begin to document the scene myself. I can't help it. At this point, it's my favorite morbid habit.

"Oh my living word," an older woman booms from behind and I turn to see Matilda Westoff with her very pregnant daughter on her heels—along with that aforementioned cast of thousands in tow.

"What in the world?" Matilda's voice cuts through the air like a knife through chocolate fondant as she stands at the edge of the trees with one hand pressed to her mouth. "Is that?—"

"Dad?" Hammie Mae pushes past her mother as her freckled face quickly goes pale. "Daddy!" she thunders so loud that she shakes the birds right out of the evergreens towering above us.

The baby offers up a swift kick to my ribs and suddenly my heart breaks for Hammie Mae. No matter how much they might not have gotten along, he's still her father.

Jasper moves in to intercept. "I'm sorry, ladies, I need you to take a step back. This unfortunately is an active crime scene."

"An active crime scene?" another voice chirps in distress as Verity Westoff pushes her way through the crowd, still looking impossibly put-together in her hot pink suit. "What happened to my husband?"

"Your husband?" Matilda's voice could freeze hell over. "You mean my husband? You haven't been married for all of five minutes! I spent thirty years with the man."

Verity wastes no time jumping in Matilda's face. "Thirty miserable years that man will never get back!"

“Ladies.” Jasper pulls out his badge and waves it at the burgeoning crowd that happens to be gasping, screaming, and overall whispering amongst themselves. “I need everyone to please step well behind the caution tape.”

“But that’s my father ,” Hammie Mae wails with one hand on her belly. “I have a right to?—”

“Know exactly what’s going on.” Georgie strong-arms her way through the crowd, and just a few feet away I spot my mother’s red mop bopping in this direction as well. “And you will know everything, Toots,” Georgie continues as she reassures Hammie Mae. “Just as soon as the real detective does her job.” She loops her arm through mine. “Right, Bizzy?”

I recognize that demented gleam in her eye. It’s the same one she gets when she’s about to suggest we do something incredibly ill-advised—like hunt down a killer while I’m playing the part of a human incubator.

“Georgie”—I shake my head at her—“I’m leaving this to the professionals.”

“Thank you,” Jasper says, sounding more than mildly surprised. And I hope you mean it. He offers me a sober nod with the thought.

“Yeah, yeah .” Georgie waves Jasper off. “We know you’re the hunk with handcuffs—and seeing the state of your wife, it’s clear you’ve used them a time or two.” She reverts her attention back to me. “I’m just saying, between your special skill set ”—she taps her temple—“and my natural ability to be nosey...”

“ Ha .” Mom plucks Georgie a good foot away from me. “You mean your tendency to land yourself in trouble?”

“Potato, po-tah-to,” Georgie growls. “We could solve this case before dinner!”

“What do you mean we ?” Jasper lifts a brow. And for as unamused as he might be, he’s inadvertently twice as handsome.

Crass of me to notice with a body nearby, I’m well aware. But I can’t help it. This sweet baby in my belly has turned me into a factory of hot-to-trot hormones.

Who knew having a baby on board would make me crave my husband more than I do chocolate? And believe me, neither of us is complaining.

“Don’t worry, Jasper”—my mother says, grabbing ahold of Georgie’s hand and mine—“I’ll make certain that both of these women stay out of your hair.” She tugs us along into the crowd and away from the body. “Bizzy, you have a baby on the way. I forbid you to insert yourself in danger.” She turns to Georgie. “And you’ve got another mystery on your hands. I just walked by your cottage and spotted a big bouquet of flowers at your door!”

“You mean I’ve got a secret admirer?” Georgie squeals so loud, she can almost wake the dead. I glance back at Hamish, but he’s still face down. Almost being the keyword there.

“I guess you do have an admirer,” Mom says and within seconds they leave me in the dust as they speed off in the direction of Georgie’s cottage that sits just west of the inn.

I’m about to head in that direction myself when I pause to catch my breath. I glance back at the stark cold woods as the crowd presses up against the tree line, trying to get as close as they can to see what’s happened.

Poor Hamish.

I can’t believe my eyes. Alas, he’s dead , a disembodied voice calls out and my head

snaps every which way.

If I'm not standing directly in front of someone, it's hard to tell who's thinking what, or even if it's a man or woman having the thought. At a fair distance, everyone seems to sound a bit androgynous.

I can't believe he's gone, another voice chimes. And sadly, now I might finally have some peace. My secret is safe forever.

I can't believe I actually killed him. The perfect plan on the perfect day. It seems almost poetic.

I suck in a quick breath and quickly scan the crowd for anyone who might look guilty in the least, but I come up empty.

And the best part? I'm about to get away with murder.

Another breath hitches in my throat before I give an incredulous huff.

Nobody is getting away with anything around here—least of all murder.

Not on my watch and not at my inn.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

The early morning light streams through the inn's floor-to-ceiling windows, catching on the sparkly Easter eggs dangling from pastel ribbons and making them dance like disco balls.

The marble reception counter where I'm checking out the last of our overnight guests is adorned with a centerpiece of chocolate bunnies wearing tiny bowties, surrounded by candy-filled baskets and artfully arranged spring flowers. There's even a ceramic bunny family that looks suspiciously like my own family (complete with a pregnant mama bunny, a cat, and a dog).

The Country Cottage Inn isn't just any coastal Maine establishment—it's the grande dame of hospitality, rising proudly against the crisp Maine sky with its stately white walls covered in climbing ivy and trimmed with those signature bright blue shutters I insisted on keeping when I took over. With over seventy rooms in the main building and three dozen charming cottages dotted across the rolling grounds like cute little Easter eggs in a basket, we're practically our own little village here.

Jasper and I happen to call one of those cute little cottages home, as do Emmie and Leo just down the winding path from us, and even Georgie has taken up permanent residence in one of the cottages on the property.

There's something magical about coastal Maine in any season, but spring might be my favorite—though don't tell that to the fall foliage. Every morning when I open up these doors, I still can't believe this place is mine, even if it does occasionally double as a crime scene.

Have I mentioned that the back end of the inn butts up to the sandy cove? Yes, we've

got beachfront property with unbelievable sunrises and sunsets.

The Country Cottage Inn is a dream come true in every way—with the exception of the rash of homicides. In that respect it's been a bit of a nightmare.

My little one gives an insistent kick, and I know exactly what they want. More chocolate bunnies.

I eye the display on the counter with a twinge of guilt. You'd think after yesterday's tragedy I'd be put off by chocolate bunnies for life, but apparently my baby didn't get the memo—and neither did my appetite.

The fact that one of these innocent bunnies was used to take a man's life should give me a pregnant pause. But then again, the one used to kill Hamish wasn't actually edible, so I suppose that makes gobbling up my weight in chocolate more than okay.

A furry parade bounds toward me—Fish, Sherlock, and our newest addition, Jellybean. It turns out, Hamish's sweet black and white cat is just as adorable as her name suggests.

She took his death pretty hard at first, but as soon as Fish and Sherlock convinced her that I would find his killer in no time, her devastation turned into steely resolve.

I'm going to claw their eyes right out of their sockets, Jellybean announces rather proudly, adjusting her pink bow with one delicate paw.

It's clear the murder is still on her mind. After all, it's been less than twenty-four hours.

Fish gives an approving nod. That's the feline spirit. Though maybe we should start with something a little less messy. Like their shoelaces.

Don't even think about it. Sherlock gives a soft woof while pausing to sniff at a basket overflowing with—ironically—jellybeans. Let's let Jasper handle the investigation. We'll just supervise from the delicious sidelines. He steals a few jellybeans for himself and makes quick work of them before I can reprimand him.

Don't listen to the big oaf, Jellybean, Fish mewls with a twitch of her whiskers. It's going to be Bizzy who solves this case. That's just the natural order of things around here.

I'd contest the fact, but there's no point. Up until now, that's exactly how it's been. I'm horrified to say that we've had an entire string of homicides near and around the inn for the last few years. Personally, I'm shocked people still want to book a room, seeing that their odds of landing toes up in the morgue skyrocket simply by setting foot onto the property.

I'm about to remind Fish that I'm truly leaving this one to the professionals—meaning Jasper—when Grady and Nessa return from their break looking slightly more disheveled than when they left.

These two have been in the honeymoon phase of their relationship for so long, I'm starting to wonder if it's a permanent condition. Not that I can blame them—young love is sweet, even if it does occasionally involve making out in the supply closet.

Both Grady and Nessa have worked with me for years. Grady is a dark-haired looker of Irish descent, and Nessa is actually Emmie's cousin. Nessa, too, has dark hair and gorgeous features and is as easygoing as the rest of her relatives.

"You've got lipstick on your neck," I whisper to Grady as he passes.

He grins with a look that is completely unabashed. "And it was worth it."

The front doors swing open and in walks Emmie, my sweet yet waddling bestie, looking like a spring garden come to life in her pink daisy-printed sundress, her belly seemingly bigger than it was yesterday—and honestly, that’s hard to believe.

In her hands is a tray of what looks like pastel candy Easter eggs and I can only hope she’s about to offer them all to me.

She weaves her way through a maze of Easter displays—towering chocolate bunnies wearing pastel bowties, baskets overflowing with bright green grass and foil-wrapped eggs, and what appears to be an entire family of topiary bunnies that someone has adorned with floral wreaths (that someone would be me).

It’s safe to say I’ve gone overboard with the decorating around here. But I can’t help it. I just love any and every holiday.

“Chocolate peanut butter eggs, anyone?” Emmie laughs as she sets the tray onto the marble counter. And thanks to the guests nearby, as well as Grady and Nessa, half the tray disappears in no time.

The baby gives another swift kick to my ribs and I gasp. Clearly someone has inherited their mother’s chocolate radar.

Time for your hourly chocolate fix . Fish observes from her perch near a particularly elaborate Easter basket with polished pink and gold eggs.

At this rate, the baby will come out in the shape of a chocolate bunny , Sherlock adds with a woof.

Ooh, that would be delicious, I muse to myself.

We get lots of babies at the restaurant, Jellybean says. And believe me when I say,

they're not as quiet as chocolate bunnies.

"That's for sure," I mutter under my breath.

"These are my latest creations," Emmie says as she pulls the platter my way. "Easter peanut butter chocolate eggs in every pastel shade imaginable. White chocolate dyed pink, green, blue, and yellow. Go on and have one or six." She nudges the platter my way once again.

"I don't need to be told twice," I say, popping one into my mouth as Grady and Nessa swoop in once again like chocolate-seeking missiles before turning to help a new wave of guests who are oohing and aahing over our Easter wonderland.

I take a bite into one and moan. "Oh my goodness," I say as the baby does a little wiggle and a jiggle. "I think my baby just did a backflip from sheer joy. Though that might be the sugar rush from the three chocolate bunnies I had for breakfast."

"Speaking of joy..." Emmie's eyes light up as she adjusts a tilting Easter lily to my left. "You'll never guess what Leo's mother gave me as a little babymoon gift."

A babymoon would be a respite that a couple takes before the baby is born, and believe you me, Jasper and I are taking this little vacation-like detail quite seriously. Although I'm already feeling too big to actually leave the state of Maine, or Cider Cove at the moment. In fact, I'm feeling the size of the state of Maine or Cider Cove at the moment. I doubt I'll be anxious to pack a bag come August.

"Don't keep me in suspense," I say. "What did you get? A cruise? A trip to Hawaii? A trip to the actual moon?" I tease. "Here's hoping it's made of cheese for you." I give a little wink and she shakes her head.

"A spa gift day for two couples! And she wanted me to let you know that it's for you

and Jasper, too.”

I nearly choke on my second chocolate egg. “Oh, that’s so sweet of her! Wow, I can’t wait. When? Where? How long will this bliss last? And how far do we need to drive to get there?”

“Actually, it’s coming to us.” She laughs, absently rubbing her belly. “I get to schedule it. How does tonight at my place sound? That way you can see where I’ve hidden all the loot from my baby shower. And Leo and I have been adding new touches to the nursery every day.”

Tell her you want to see the stuffed bunny collection , Jellybean pipes up. I spotted at least twenty through the window when Fish and Sherlock took me on a tour of the grounds this morning.

I nod at the cute little kitty. “We’ll be inspecting every inch of that place,” I assure her before turning to Emmie. “I’ll let Jasper know. We wouldn’t miss it.”

I can’t help but smile at the thought of Emmie’s over-the-top baby shower that was held right here at the inn just last month. Between the custom-made cake that looked like a sleeping baby made by Emmie herself (slightly creepy, yet delicious), the mountain of designer baby clothes, and enough baby gear to stock a small department store, it’s safe to say her baby shower was a hit. Not to mention she could probably open her own baby boutique at this point.

A group of guests pauses near the giant Easter egg topiary set by the counter, and while they start snapping selfies of it and the pets as if their lives depended on it, I help Emmie wolf down what’s left of her chocolate peanut butter eggs. And oh my word, a new addiction slash craving is born just like that.

“Speaking of mothers and mothers-in-law”—I start—“which grandmother-to-be is

claiming squatter's rights in your guest room?" I ask while sneaking another chocolate egg.

Emmie shoots me a look. "This is exactly why I shouldn't have upgraded to a three-bedroom cottage. Both our mothers have threatened to move in permanently—and they both live in town!"

I can't help but laugh. "Better you than me. I'm staying put in my two-bedroom. You're going to have one serious baby war on your hands in no time," I tease, adjusting the pink satin bow on a nearby chocolate bunny. My own little one gives another kick, clearly offended that I'm touching the chocolate rather than eating it. "I'm lucky in the mother-in-law department because despite having five children of her own, Jasper's mother isn't all that maternal." I give a contented sigh at the thought. "And well, my mother has her hands full with baby Mack."

That tiny human is a menace, Fish meows. He tried to smash his beanie onto my head last week until I was forced to run for cover. He was determined to suffocate me. I lost at least six of my nine lives.

It's true. I'll have to keep a better eye on my sweet nephew when he's around Fish. But the joy on that sweet boy's face was unforgettable. Besides, Fish survived and we even got a few cute pictures of her wearing his beanie while pinned strategically in Mack's little chubby arms. I'm going to frame them they're that hilarious.

Baby Mack is the son of my brother, Huxley, and his surprising choice of a bride, Mayor Mackenzie Woods. The fact that my brother married my former nemesis still gives me whiplash. Hux has always been a renegade that way.

But baby Mack has been the light of our lives since he arrived. He'll be two this fall, and somehow his existence has made me actually like Mackenzie a little more. Mostly.

A commotion erupts at the door and interrupts my thoughts as my sister Macy sweeps in, managing to knock over a display of cellophane-wrapped Easter baskets in her wake.

Her sweet Samoyed, Candy, prances dutifully by her side like the fluffy cloud on a leash she is, complete with bunny ears because she is indeed the queen of every season.

Candy stops short. What's this I smell? Her bright pink nose twitches, her furry little neck jerks around, and once she spots Jellybean, chaos erupts and the chase is on.

Suddenly, fur zips in every direction at once as barking ensues, yowling pierces our eardrums, and the entire foyer explodes with both laughter and screams from our guests.

But that doesn't stop Macy from stomping my way looking lean, mean, and dressed for success in a sharp powder blue pantsuit. Speaking of renegade siblings.

"Get ready to meet your maker, Bizzy Baker," she growls. "Because I'm going to end you."

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

The soft hum of spring mingles with the sweet aroma of chocolate as sunlight filters through the inn's windows, catching on the glittering pastel egg garland I insisted on draping everywhere. Easter has definitely exploded in the Country Cottage Inn, and I have a feeling my sister is about to do the same.

“What’s this I hear about you poaching my customers?” Macy’s blonde bob bounces as she points a glossy red fingernail my way. “Bizzy, why did you have a booth out on your lawn yesterday that featured both candles and soap? You know that’s my territory!”

Macy’s words are laced with loose threats dipped in sarcasm. It’s her signature tone. One I’m all too familiar with.

“Macy, what are you talking about?” I ask, managing to keep my voice even. With Sherlock and Fish joining Candy as she chases poor Jellybean, the inn has enough chaos and drama at the moment. Sorry to inform Macy, but we’ve met our quota for the day.

The baby gives a swift kick, clearly not enjoying the chaos either. Or maybe he or she is just politely asking for another chocolate egg. Honestly, it could go either way.

Come to think of it, it’s definitely the chocolate.

Macy doesn’t even let me finish before she launches into her rant. “Hammie Mae Westoff has plastered that cheap gift shop of theirs all over social media, letting the world know they sell far more than chocolate. As in candles and soap, Bizzy! Candles . And. Soap .” She pauses with all the drama she can afford. Never mind the fact her

words are laced with enough venom to make a cobra envious. “She’s letting everyone know they were the best sellers at that Hop Until You Die Festival you hosted. Every last comment mentioned what a great time they had at the Country Cottage Inn.” She stops just long enough to narrow her eyes at me. “Okay, some of them mentioned what a house of horrors this place is and that it should be demolished as an act of public safety, but I digress. My sales are down this morning—and you’ve singlehandedly demolished them.” Sometimes I wish I had another sister, she seethes that last part to herself and I gasp. One that wasn’t successful at anything she did. An unmarried sister, unpregnant, and unemployed. One that lived in my mother’s basement playing video games—so that my light could shine a little brighter for once.

I press my lips tight to keep from laughing.

“Macy, you’ve only been open for an hour,” I counter, popping another pastel chocolate egg into my mouth for the sustenance I need to deal with the sister who wishes I didn’t exist. “All business is down at this time. Besides, Easter is this Sunday. You know your customer base is too busy filling baskets and baking sweet treats to do any shopping. It’s as if all time stops for a few days in their lives and they have chocolaty things to tend to.”

Which reminds me... I snap up another chocolate peanut butter egg as if to prove a point.

“It truly is the most wonderful time of the year,” I tell her. “Or at least it’s a tie for the second.”

“That’s not the point, Bizzy.” Macy doesn’t miss a beat. “My point is, you’re stepping on my ruby red toenails.” She leans in and that perfectly manicured finger is wagging dangerously close to my nose. “And if you think for one second that I’m going to let some bargain-bin gift shop encroach on my Lather and Light empire, you’re sorely mistaken.”

Empire? I raise a brow her way.

Someone thinks highly of herself.

Oh, who am I kidding? Macy entered this world thinking highly of herself.

Macy is not only my older, far saucier sister who happens to own Lather and Light, a soap and candle shop on Main Street, just a skip and a hop from the inn, she also happens to be dating my ex-husband.

Jordy Crosby is Emmie's older brother, and well, we may have accidentally gotten hitched on a trip to Vegas once. Bad whiskey and an Elvis impersonator were involved.

Suffice it to say, our union was never consummated, and we quickly sought the assistance of Huxley's shiny new law degree to help dismantle it.

Ironically, Macy and Jordy are basically the same person. She's spent her thirty-plus years on the planet as a maneater, and he's logged equal time as a rather prolific womanizer. It's a match made in hot-and-heavy heaven—or more accurately, that other, far more hotter place. Jordy and Macy are still pretty new, but they're not shy about it. At all.

The front doors swing open, and in walks Mom in all her glory—sporting a turquoise windbreaker that screams 1985 and her signature red curls bouncing with each step. Behind her comes Georgie, floating along in a pastel kaftan that looks like a pastel Easter egg rolled right over it (her signature look for any season—yes, even our brutal winters). And in Georgie's arms is the most enormous spring bouquet I've ever seen.

“Wow, are those the flowers from your secret admirer?” I ask as Emmie gives an

appreciative whistle at the sight.

“You bet your knocked-up britches they are,” Georgie beams. “But here’s the oddball kicker?—”

Mom lifts a finger. “There’s a QR code we’re supposed to scan to find out who sent them,” she says, practically vibrating with curiosity. “But nothing happens when we try.”

Georgie nods. “I’ve scanned all night until my phone battery died, and I still don’t have answers.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell her. “But from the sound of it, you have one very tech-savvy admirer.”

“Let me see if I can help,” Emmie offers, and both Mom and Georgie follow her to the bay window where sunshine pours through the stained glass.

“Georgie has a stalker?” Macy asks as if her curiosity were piqued.

“I said secret admirer,” I correct.

She shrugs. “I find there’s very little difference. Why does Georgie get to have all the fun?”

I’m about to say something to Macy when that aforementioned tall, dark, and handsome ex of mine strides through the door in a white T-shirt and well-worn jeans.

Jordy is the handyman here at the inn, and judging by Macy’s sudden intake of breath, the way she’s just pulled back her shoulders and hoisted her boobs out for the world to see, she thoroughly approves of how those jeans fit.

“Ladies.” Jordy tips his ballcap our way. “Bizzy, just so you know, it’s raining eucalyptus branches all over the main walkway in the back.”

He grabs Macy and they dive into a rather sloppy smooching spree right here at the reception counter.

“Are you kidding me?” I gasp and it has nothing to do with the aforementioned sloppy kisses I’m currently subject to. “Jordy, those branches could kill someone!” While eucalyptus trees aren’t all that common in Maine, the last owner took a liking to them and dotted them all over the property. He thought it was a nice break from all the evergreens surrounding the place.

Falling tree limbs?

All sorts of dark thoughts run through my mind. The last thing I need is a trail of bodies lining the walkway. Heaven knows it’s happened before.

“Those kinds of trees are self-pruning,” he says with a sigh. “And that’s exactly why I’m going to spend the day hacking them back.”

“ Ooh .” Macy wraps her arms around him with far more vigor and more steamy kisses ensue. It’s all I can do not to roll my eyes.

She comes back up for air while looking right at him. “I guess that means you’re going to get all hot and sweaty today?”

“And I guess that means you’ll be coming over tonight,” he counters.

Macy giggles. “Jordy Crosby, sometimes I think you can read my mind.”

Now I’m really rolling my eyes. Anybody can read my sister’s mind and her body

language. And those dirty looks she's prone to cast aren't harboring any secrets either.

Neither of them knows that I have the ability to pry into their grey matter. And thankfully so.

Jordy gives a dark laugh as his thoughts begin to stir. If Macy knew half the spicy stuff that runs through my mind about her—well, it's probably the same spicy stuff that runs through her mind about me. That's exactly why we're so perfect for each other.

I nod his way because I couldn't agree more.

The doors to the inn open with another whoosh, and in strides my sister-in-law, Mackenzie, with her long chestnut locks bouncing in stride and her hot pink power suit showing off the healthy tan she sports year-round.

Mackenzie is a stunner. It's no wonder my brother is so smitten with her.

"Mayor Woods," I say with a sigh because I know what's coming.

"Another murder, Bizzy? Really?" She doesn't disappoint. "The Hip Hip Parade had better go off without a hitch on Easter Sunday. The entire school district is participating, and the Women's League has been working on those floats since Valentine's Day!"

"Everything will be fine," I assure her, though the baby offers up a skeptical kick. It's clear this baby is already too smart for their britches. "The Hip Hip Parade will end here at the inn as planned," I continue. "The egg hunt on our glorious green lawns will be epic, and the prizes will be amazing. No drama, I promise."

I sincerely hope.

Mackenzie glares my way. “There had better not be, or so help me—” she lets the threat dangle before spinning on her designer heels and marching out, leaving my imagination to fill in all the catastrophic ways she could make my life miserable. There are so many tried-and-true methods she’s already implemented, the possibilities are endless.

Macy and Jordy take that as their cue to leave, too, with Candy taking off behind them, but not before casting one last suspicious glance at poor Jellybean.

Emmie takes off for the café, leaving Mom and Georgie to sidle up to the counter. Apparently, they’re still at a loss as to who sent those flowers.

“So...” Georgie grins. “When are we going to start shaking down some suspects? You know, before someone else gets shaken down permanently? Word on the mean streets of Cider Cove is there’s a killer on the loose. And your mama and I are hot-to-trot to catch them. And I hope they’re hot, too. I could use a killer good time in the bedroom, if you know what I mean.”

Mom gasps in horror. “Would you hush? Someone is bound to hear your ramblings and think you’ve lost your marbles. Little would they know you landed on the planet this way.” She shakes her head at me. “Never mind what she said. We’re not shaking down any suspects—especially not you, Bizzy.” She motions to my growing belly.

“Maybe not,” I say, looking over at Jellybean with her sweet pink satin bow. “But I just so happened to have some business to conduct with the daughter of the deceased.”

Hammie Mae Westoff, ready or not, here we come.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

Mom, Georgie, Fish, Sherlock, and Jellybean pile into my car as we head over to the upper west side of town where the fields are verdant, the spring flowers dot the hillsides in every shade of pastel, and the sky is the perfect shade of robin egg blue.

The winding drive to Blueberry and Chocolate Heaven at Westoff Farms feels like ascending into an ethereal dream.

The sprawling property sits regally atop rolling hills overlooking Cider Cove, with the Atlantic Ocean stretching endlessly beyond its reach in a shade of gorgeous cobalt.

The dirt parking lot is relatively full, which assures me this is the farm's busy season. Miraculously, I find a spot near the front before we all jump out of the car and stretch our legs as if we drove fifteen hours and not fifteen minutes.

The earthy scent of the surrounding pines mingles with the sweet scent of warm chocolate, and suddenly I can't take in enough air to satisfy my cravings. The baby gives a little tap to my ribcage as if beckoning me to go straight to the chocolaty source, and I pat my belly, assuring them of just that.

I don't make it a practice to miss out on any available chocolate, and I'm certainly not going to start now.

I take in the sights and gasp.

"Geez, I haven't been here in years. Just look at this view," I say, looking out over the rest of Cider Cove below, and from this height, I can even spot the Country

Cottage Inn looking like a tiny little dollhouse among the spring greenery below.

“I came last week with the Women’s League,” my mother is quick to say.

“Showoff,” Georgie says, scooping up Fish and Jellybean and helping me land them in my tote bag. A lot of places don’t mind dogs coming along for the ride, but a loose cat usually turns some heads.

“I am not showing off.” Mom swats Georgie on the arm. “While I was here, I spoke with the manager of the gift shop and got them to take a few of our Easter-themed wonky quilts for us. They’ll get a commission, but we get the bulk of the sale, and I attached a business card to every quilt with a thirty percent off coupon if they visit Two Old Broads.” Two Old Broads is the boutique that Mom and Georgie own and run over on Main Street. Macy gave the shop its moniker as a joke, but the name stuck and I think some of their success exists because of it. “It’s called networking”—Mom continues—“and advertising . You’ll thank me at the end of the month, when our bottom line expands.”

Georgie huffs. “The only bottom line I’m interested in expanding is right here.” She gives her rump a light tap. “Now get a movin’. It’s time to get my chocolate game a groovin’.”

“Hear, hear,” I say, giving my belly a rub and the baby gives a little happy dance because they clearly agree, too.

The grounds here at the farm are laid out in a sprawling fashion. There’s a large sign to the left that reads This Way to Make Your Wildest Blueberry Dreams Come True—where acres of green bushes happen to be dotted with those cute juicy little berries just waiting to be picked.

Another sign points to the right and reads Guided Tours and Hayrides , and sure

enough, I see a tractor pulling a flatbed piled with hay, pluming with dust in its wake as it heads down a country road.

And the most glorious sign of them all reads Gift Shop and Chocolate Heaven Straight Ahead as it points to the large crimson structure.

Sherlock gives a soft woof as he happily leads us in that direction.

The historic red barn dominates the landscape with its weathered crimson exterior glossy in the spring sunshine. Double doors decorated with oversized wreaths stand wide open, welcoming visitors into what has to be the most magical gift shop in Maine.

The wreaths are adorable with pastel eggs, spring flowers, and cute little chocolate bunnies peeking out from silk flower nests. They're so cute, I hope they sell those in the gift shop.

As much as I've been craving chocolate, I've been craving some seriously cute Easter décor, too. Of course, that stood for Christmas, Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, and I'm sure this odd craving of mine will still be in effect for the rest of the holidays until I give birth. Suffice it to say, I've amassed quite the army of storage bins because of it, too.

We take one step inside and are treated to a light and bright palatial space with rustic wood floors, giant wicker chandeliers up above, and a glorious gift shop to the left with a country appeal where most of the goods are brimming from barrels or stacked on wood crates.

And to the right, at the back of the converted barn, a magnificent floor-to-ceiling glass wall offers a tantalizing view into the chocolate factory itself. It's an all-white room filled with women and men in white chef's clothes, working on what seems like

an endless line of chocolate creations.

Soft country music plays from unseen speakers as mobs of people move around every which way, but most of them seem to be migrating toward chocolate heaven and that's because of the scent of this place. It is heaven indeed.

The thick aroma of warm, sweet chocolate dominates our senses.

Georgie gives a hard groan as she looks longingly at the chocolate dream team. "I think it's time to butter my chocolate britches."

Mom groans as well but for entirely different reasons. "I don't know what that means, but I don't like it one bit."

"You don't like anything," Georgie says, hooking her arm to my mother's. "How about we dive into a vat of chocolate and loosen you up?"

Mom huffs. "More like get me arrested."

"I never said I didn't have a whole day of fun mapped out." She whisks my mother off in that direction, despite my mother's sputtering protests.

"I think they're making chocolate bunnies as we speak," Georgie calls over her shoulder at me before weaving through a forest of people. "Look at those little conveyor belts! The tiny molds! The— ooh , is that a chocolate waterfall?"

Heaven help, Mom wails internally.

"And they're off," I say as I scan the vicinity in hopes to find my target for the day, Hammie Mae Westoff, but if she is here, she blends in with the thicket of people.

The place is more or less packed, and there's a buzz of excitement in the air as mostly women with children zip from the gift shop to the window at the chocolate shop and vice versa.

"How about we scour the gift shop first?" I say to my furry menagerie. "I have a feeling that's where the chocolate is sold. We can always see how it's made once I'm stuffing my face with it."

Sherlock barks, I sure hope they have something I can stuff my face with, too.

That's all he thinks about is food, Fish mewls to Jellybean as they both poke their heads out of my tote bag.

That's all Hamish thought about, too, Jellybeans says with a sigh. That's why he opened a restaurant. Verity says he was good at one thing and one thing only: eating all of the profits away.

I give a slight nod. "I could see the hazard in that," I whisper. "Jasper and I have put a good dent into the profits at the Country Cottage Café ourselves. But that's because I don't cook."

Fish chitters with a laugh. Bizzy has been officially banned from the kitchen. If you need a good structure fire, she's your girl.

"It's true." I sigh. "Heaven help this little one." I give my belly a pat. "Unless Jasper starts tossing around pots and pans in the kitchen, there's no hope of a home-cooked meal."

We head for the gift shop and soon we're enveloped in a boutique wonderland. Rustic wooden beams strung with twinkling lights soar overhead, while below, artfully arranged displays showcase everything from handmade chocolates to local crafts.

This place has changed so much , Jellybean observes as she does her best to stand tall. Hamish used to say it was just a humble blueberry farm before he met Matilda.

And now it's a chocolate wonderland , Sherlock woofs as his nose twitches at the heavenly scents wafting from the factory. Is that chocolate-covered bacon I smell?

“Don't even think about it,” I warn him. “Chocolate is lethal to dogs, remember?”

Oh, let him dream , Fish purrs wickedly. Natural selection at its finest.

I shoot my beloved but occasionally murderous cat a look. “Behave.”

The gift shop portion of the barn is basically a Pinterest board brought to life with pastel Easter trees dripping with hand-painted eggs, artisanal chocolates arranged in displays that belong in an art museum, and shelves lined with everything from locally made soaps (none of which were made by my sister—no wonder Macy is so furious) to chocolate-scented candles (a must-have before I leave).

Those twinkle lights draped over the exposed beams up above are lined with vintage copper pots and they give the whole space a magical warm glow—especially the chocolate. And there's so much chocolate! Truffle eggs, chocolate peanut butter eggs, chocolate bunnies in every size and color, and they even have something called a chocolate flower pot dessert, small little pots made of chocolate with chocolate “dirt” and the most beautiful pink and white chocolate roses sitting on top. I'll need to pick up at least a half dozen of those before I leave.

Hamish wasn't allowed to spend much time here after the divorce, Jellybean continues, her voice tinged with sadness as we weave through displays of chocolate-dipped everything. But he told me all about how he started the farm with just a few blueberry bushes. Then his manager at the time, Verity, came along and convinced him to expand into chocolate. She had all these grand ideas.

The baby gives a swift kick as if sensing the undertone of scandal. Or maybe they're just reminding me that we're surrounded by chocolate and not eating any of it. These days, it's hard to tell the difference between my craving for justice and my craving for chocolate-covered everything. Honestly, they may as well be one and the same.

A thought occurs to me. I don't know why I didn't think to return Jellybean to Verity first. I'm sure she's worried sick about her sweet cat.

My initial thought was to bring Jellybean to Hammie Mae, but since we're already here, I don't see why I couldn't ask her a few questions. You know, just to help Jasper out a bit.

Okay, who am I kidding? It's to help myself with my own investigation. I'm hardwired for solving mysteries just the way this baby is hardwired for demanding chocolate at all hours.

"Excuse me, ma'am"—a sweet voice calls from behind—"can I offer you a sweet treat?"

"No need to ask," I say with a laugh as I turn around a little too abruptly. My protruding belly knocks into something and sends an explosion of pastel cookies flying all over.

Now we're talking, Sherlock barks as he does his best to snap them all up midair.

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The aroma of chocolate and warm sugar mingles with the earthy scent of the old barn's wooden beams as pastel Easter treats sparkle under the twinkle lights.

Hammie Mae Westoff stands before me, holding a now-empty tray while Sherlock Bones does his best to aid in the clean-up effort by way of inhaling the scattered cookies at record speed.

"I'm so sorry," I gasp as I say it and watch helplessly as Sherlock performs his version of community service—cookie-based community service, that is. "My expanding belly seems to have its own zip code these days."

Hammie Mae laughs and a sprig of her strawberry blonde hair escapes from a messy bun sitting on top of her head. Her freckled face lights up as she pats her own prominent baby bump beneath her denim jumper.

I can't help but note that outfit makes her look like a quintessential berry farmer—if that berry farmer happened to be about seven months pregnant and specialized in chocolate as well.

"My belly has its own zip code, too." She laughs. "Just yesterday, I knocked over an entire display of chocolate bunnies. Lucky for me, they all broke and so I took them home to my place. That's one way to feed my addiction."

We share a robust laugh at that one.

I don't really know Hammie Mae personally, despite the fact we both grew up in Cider Cove. She's a few years older than Emmie and me, and we were busy running

around with our own circle of friends—which, believe it or not, once included Mackenzie Woods.

Yes, the same Mackenzie Woods who helped introduce me to my supernatural abilities by trying to drown me while bobbing for apples one Halloween. And to make matters worse, she actually pushed me into the barrel.

Four things came from that horrific day. One, I'm afraid of confined spaces. Two, the fact I'm now extremely wary of large bodies of water. Three, my distrust of Mackenzie Woods was born, and four, I walked away with the ability to pry into other people's minds.

Come to find out, I'm something called transmundane, further classified as telesensual. There are others like me—my bestie's hubby Leo, for instance. Though he's never been dunked in a barrel of apples, thank goodness.

Hammie Mae does a double take at the tote bag hanging from my shoulder.

“Oh my word!” she screeches as she spots Jellybean and Fish peeking out from the top of my bag. “I love cats.” Before I can blink, she's scooped them both out and is snuggling with them posthaste. “Wow”—she muses as she inspects Jellybean—“this spotted one looks just like the cat my father adopted.”

I cringe slightly. “That's because she is. I was bringing her by in case you were looking for her, but then I just remembered she might belong to your father's new wife.”

Hammie Mae's smile falters. Just about everything belongs to that witch these days.

A breath hitches in my throat at her internal musing.

“Thank you,” she says just above a whisper and her voice is warm despite her thoughts. “That was very thoughtful of you.” Her eyes moisten with tears and she quickly blinks them away. “So when are you due?” She plasters on a manufactured smile as she quickly changes the subject away from her father.

I get it. If something happened to my father, I couldn’t talk about it either.

And that means getting her to talk about what happened will be harder than I thought.

“I’m due in late August.” I’m quick to say. “And you?”

“June and it can’t get here soon enough,” she says and we share another laugh. “Who are you seeing?”

“Dr. Grace Applewhite,” I say with a touch too much enthusiasm, but I can’t help it. I just love my obstetrician to death. I cringe a little with the thought, considering my track record with dead bodies.

“Really?” Her face lights up. “I’m seeing Dr. Applewhite, too. She’s fantastic!”

“Oh, I love her. My best friend Emmie is seeing her as well.” The baby gives an enthusiastic kick when I mention Emmie. I like to think that our babies are already besties. “In fact, I always go to Emmie’s appointments with her, along with her husband, of course,” I say. “Then we get Mexican food after—Emmie’s favorite food. And she comes to mine, along with my husband Jasper, then the three of us hit up that great Chinese place on Main Street—my favorite food.”

Her expression dampens. “I wish I had someone interested enough to come to any of my appointments.” Hammie Mae sighs.

“Oh gosh, I’m so sorry.” My hand flies to my mouth. “I didn’t mean to?”

She laughs again, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes this time. "It's fine. The father was a loser boyfriend who took off after he found out the news. I'm better off without him. I can support myself—I'm the manager here at the farm. And lucky for me, my mother got the farm in the divorce."

She stares out at the bustling crowd. I hope Mom is on the phone right now canceling that nasty tell-all book with the publisher. What kind of a title is *Chocolate-Dipped Deception: What Really Happened at Westoff Farms*, anyway? One that screams I'm about to air all of my dirty laundry and I don't care what the fallout might be .

The divorce was bad enough to live through. Must she tell every sordid detail of how my father wronged her?

She gives a few rapid blinks before forcing a bright smile my way. "Bizzy, I just must show you all of our baby things. You're going to love them."

The next few minutes are a whirlwind of adorable Easter-themed baby clothes—tiny bonnets with bunny ears, onesies with chocolate-dipped strawberry prints, and the sweetest little baby chick knit booties I've ever seen.

"Oh wow ," I moan at the sight of all the adorableness. "Good thing these are all gender neutral. I'm going to snap every single one of these up. Make that two of each. I'd hate to leave my best friend out of the cute loop."

"Can't say I blame you." She tips her head at the thought. "I've already beat you to the cute punch. Do you know what you're having?" she asks while holding up a pink dress with embroidered spring flowers and a glittery bunny embossed on the front.

"No. I guess you could say we like surprises," I tell her just as the baby kicks as if to protest this decision. I won't lie. The suspense is killing me. "How about you?"

“A girl,” she beams, then shows me about a half dozen more precious girl items. “I’m thinking of naming her Michaela.”

“Oh, that’s beautiful ,” I say. “Speaking of names, how did you get yours? “Hammie Mae is pretty unique.”

“I’ll say.” She laughs, but it sputters out quickly. “It’s so unique, I’ve never seen my name on a pen or a mug.” Her expression darkens as she glances into the crowd. “I was named after my father.”

And just like that, we’re about to dive into the very subject I was hoping to explore. The baby gives another kick, as if they were pleased by this, too. And let’s face it, the sooner we interrogate the suspect at hand, the sooner we can stuff our face with all the chocolate bunnies we can get our mitts on.

After all, ’tis the season.

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The thick, sweet scent of chocolate suddenly feels heavier, weighted down by the tension that's crept into our conversation.

Even the twinkle lights seem to dim a bit as if sensing the shift in mood.

"My father is— was —actually Hamish Westoff the third." Hammie Mae's voice hitches a notch as she references her father in the past tense as we stand in the gift shop here at Westoff Farms. She closes her eyes for a long moment, drawing both Jellybean and Fish closer as she drops a kiss to their furry foreheads. "He was hoping for a boy to carry on the tradition, but he got me instead. My formal name is Hammatha Matilda." She wrinkles her nose and sheds a whisper of a laugh. "My mother thought it up as a conciliatory prize since she knew she didn't want more children. And my mother, not one to be left out, threw her name in there, too."

The baby gives a sympathetic kick, or maybe it's just reminding me we still haven't sampled those chocolate-covered blueberries. That or it's putting in its vote against me combining my name and Jasper's. And don't think I haven't thought of it. Although Jizzy and Basper haven't exactly made it on the long list.

"But thankfully, Hammie Mae was quickly gifted to me as a nickname," she laughs as she goes on. "How did you get your name? I just love it."

Don't let her change the subject, Bizzy. Fish's whiskers twitch with the warning. We've got her right where we want her!

Where do we want her? Jellybean sits up straight in Hammie Mae's arms and the alarm is clear in her voice. You don't think Hammie Mae killed my precious Hamish,

do you?

I bite my lip, unable to offer the sweet cat any reassurance. The odds seem low, but in Cider Cove, stranger things have happened. Usually around holidays. And usually, they somehow involve me.

Sherlock gives a soft woof. Don't worry, Jelly Belly. Jasper will get to the bottom of this.

Jelly Belly? I fight the smile curving my lips until it occurs to me that he might have been referencing yours truly.

"My name is Elizabeth, same as my best friend Emmie," I offer up. "We've always gone by the nicknames our families gifted us, to avoid confusion." I wince a little. "And... I'm so sorry about your father."

"Thank you," she mouths the words. "You know, he wasn't perfect but..." she trails off, absently pulling Jellybean close. "Things changed between us after the divorce. After my mother found out he was having an affair with our longtime manager at this place." Her face darkens. "That would be his new wife." She rolls her eyes. "Our longtime farm manager. Can you imagine? Thirty years of marriage, and he throws it away for someone who could hardly tell a blueberry from a blackberry. My mother was furious." So much so that she threatened to kill the man nearly every single day thereafter.

I gasp as that last thought she let fly.

Hammie Mae blinks my way.

"Oh"—I pat my lips—"I'm sorry to hear it. My own father blew apart my family in the exact same way. My mother was pretty furious, too." Thankfully, a homicide was

averted, but not by much. Everyone gets along today, although it took some time to heal from the trauma. “My father proceeded to marry every woman in sight,” I tell her and she gives a mournful giggle.

“Oh dear. Well, my father stopped at Verity.” She pauses to lift her finger as if an idea just sparked in her mind. “Although they were on the brink of divorce.”

“They were?”

“Oh yes.” She nods furtively. “Verity is a pill and super hard to get along with. And she’s materialistic to the hilt. I mean, you can tell just by looking at her. That orange spray tan? Those tissue paper white teeth? They’re all capped by the way. She had my father pay for them along with her boobs and her new nose. The woman is a walking, talking testament to plastic surgeons everywhere. In fact, rumor has it, she had an affair with her plastic surgeon, that womanizer from Brambleberry Bay, Dr. Stanton Troublefield. Have you heard of him?”

I give a little gasp. “I have. My cousin Hattie works up at the country club in Brambleberry Bay and he’s a member. Believe me, I’ve heard every story about Stanton Troublefield. I guess his wife dumped him and took off to live on a cruise ship.”

“Now she sounds smart.” Hammie Mae gives Fish a quick scratch on the back. “I’d like to think my father was about to give Verity the boot any day now.” Her lips clamp up and I can tell she’s thinking about something. My poor mother. I can’t let it end like this for her. I have to protect her.

A breath hitches in my throat as I listen in on the thought. She obviously thinks her mother is guilty! And well, according to that wrought iron gold foil bunny left at the scene of the crime, she very well might be.

The baby kicks again, harder this time. Even they can sense there's more to this story. My sweet baby is intuitive just like their parents.

Hammie Mae presses her lips tight once again. Focus .

“Verity had all these grand ideas,” Hammie Mae continues, her voice far more bitter than before. “Expanding the gift shop, adding the factory tours, building a chocolate empire. Mom just wanted to keep things simple. Traditional. But as it turned out, they were pretty great ideas.” She gives a humorless laugh. “I guess we know which vision won out.” And who won my father's black heart. She averts her eyes with the thought. My mother didn't deserve that. And it's exactly why my father landed in the morgue. How am I ever going to live with this?

I pause a moment to absorb the thoughts that just flew through her mind.

“Verity does sound like a lot,” I say. “I'm so sorry you and your mother had to go through all that.” I nod, hoping to spur her thoughts along regarding her mother once again.

“Oh, Verity is a living, breathing nightmare.”

Okay, so she didn't lead with Matilda, but I'll take Verity for now.

“She actually had an employee sue her and my father to the hilt,” she continues. “She had this bright idea to pit her employees against one another in a competition to see who could work the hardest for a month solid, and in exchange she said she'd give them a Corvette.”

I gasp. “Wow, talk about an incentive. That was generous of her.”

“More like wicked ,” she points out. “At the end of the month, she gave some poor

girl a Hot Wheels instead of the real deal. And well, that woman sued and, rumor has it, she can now afford to buy an entire fleet of Corvettes.”

My mouth rounds out.

Hammie Mae nods. “The woman is a dingbat if she didn’t see that coming.” She curls the cats in her arms. “And get this, for my dad’s last birthday, she gifted him one of her wisdom teeth dipped in gold.” She rolls her eyes.

“She gave him a tooth?” I balk.

She nods. “I’m telling you the woman is off her rocker.” No more than my mother seems to be these days, she muses that last bit to herself.

Before I can process that particular thought, a commotion erupts from the direction of the chocolate factory.

The crowd parts like the Red Sea, only to reveal two familiar figures—one of which is wearing a pastel kaftan. Both are bent over the conveyor belt, shoveling chocolates into their mouths as if they’re training for the chocolate gobbling finals.

“Oh no,” I groan as I quickly recognize the pair.

“Oh no is right.” Hammie Mae sighs. “I’d better handle this before someone calls the health department. Last week someone tried to swim in the chocolate fountain. Let’s hope we don’t have a repeat.”

Knowing Georgie, we will. It seems to be a theme with her.

She hands me the cats and hurries off with Sherlock right by her side.

I think that's where they keep the bacon, he barks as he heads toward the chocolate-covered calamity.

And that leaves me to quickly gather armfuls of adorable Easter baby clothes—two of everything, because Emmie would never forgive me if I left her out of this cuteness overload.

I also stock up on enough chocolate to satisfy both my baby's cravings and mine—and probably put us on some sort of chocolate watch list at Dr. Applewhite's office.

Not long after I ante up at the register, I watch as Mom and Georgie are being chased around that crime scene as vats of liquid chocolate splash all over the walls and windows of that delicious yet somewhat disastrous factory in the back.

Hammie Mae howls and screams along with the rest of the crowd here in the barn as all out chaos breaks out.

I can't help but think that while Hammie Mae had plenty to say about her father's relationship with Verity, I still need to hear Verity's side of the story. That and return her sweet cat.

One way or another, I have a feeling I'm getting closer to solving this case.

The baby kicks in agreement with my detective work. That or they're staging a protest until I unwrap one of the chocolate gold foil bunnies I just invested in.

These days, it's getting harder to tell the difference.

But I'd like to think it's both.

Georgie and my mother run this way, covered in brown goo from head to toe. If I didn't know better, I'd think they'd gone mudding.

“Let's go, Preggo,” Georgie shouts as she links arms with me. “It's time to make the great chocolate escape!” She turns back to look at my mother who seems to be lagging. “We're going to get away with it, Red!”

We make our way out of the barn and into my car, with all of our furry friends included.

Georgie and my mother might be getting away with something, but there's a killer out there who won't be getting away with anything—especially not murder.

I'll see to it myself.

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The evening air is sweet with honeysuckle as Jasper and I make our way down the winding path to Emmie and Leo's cottage.

The grounds here at the inn are peppered with individual cottages available for rent or lease. And it was these exact adorable tiny dwellings that first caught my attention when it came to this place as far back as when I was a child. So when I was in college and heard they were hiring at the front desk, I jumped at the chance. I was quickly moved up to manager, and when the owner passed away a few years back, I was stunned to find out he left the entire sprawling estate to me.

It's safe to say, I've been in love with the grounds here for as long as I can remember, and now I more or less have this coastal gem running through my veins.

The inn is part of me just as much as Jasper, this baby, Fish, and Sherlock are, too. And I wouldn't want it any other way.

We come upon Leo and Emmie's cottage and it looks like something straight out of a fairy tale, with pastel twinkle lights strung along the porch rails and plastic Easter eggs hanging from the flowering dogwood in their front yard.

Someone (definitely Emmie) has arranged a family of topiary bunnies near their front steps, complete with tiny Easter bonnets. It's so stinking cute I stop and take about a dozen pictures of it before we head up.

"Remind me again why we're doing this?" Jasper asks as our furry entourage—Fish, Sherlock, and our temporary ward Jellybean—trots ahead of us.

“Because Leo’s mother gave Emmie a special gift for two couples and we’re about to have the spa experience of a lifetime,” I tell him, landing a kiss on his lips. “Leo’s mother specifically said she wanted to include us. Isn’t that nice?”

“I guess that is nice.” He ticks his head, looking far more bewildered than taken aback by kindness. “A spa experience, huh? And she does realize that Leo and I will be participating?” He raises a brow. “I’d rather chase down armed suspects while dodging lightning bolts.”

A sharp laugh escapes me. “I’ll hold your hand. I promise you’ll be fine.”

“Why, thank you.” He kisses my cheek and his playful expression morphs into something just this side of worrisome. “I can’t believe I’m stressing over a massage when you have to actually push a human being out of your body. I’d do anything to trade places with you, Bizzy.”

“You’d make both medical history and the news if you did,” I tease.

He gives a mournful laugh. “I mean it, you’re my hero. I owe you everything.”

“Remember that when our credit card bill comes in. My wallet is still smoking from my little trip to the Blueberry and Chocolate Heaven Gift Shop this afternoon.”

I hold up the brimming bag in my hand and he blinks back.

Oh no. I can already see him putting two and two together in his mind.

“You went to Westoff Farms?” He frowns at the thought. “And what exactly happened there?” he adds, in that tone that says he already knows exactly what happened.

Here we go. I run up the porch and quickly give a swift knock on the door, hoping to avoid this particular conversation, though I'm not one to hide things from Jasper. He wouldn't let me even if I tried.

"My day went well," I say brightly. "I took Jellybean down to the farm thinking I was taking her home, but it turns out, she actually belongs to Verity Westoff. I guess I'll have to track her down tomorrow."

I would have gone straight there after the farm, but I spent the rest of the afternoon cleaning the chocolate carnage out of my car. Once Mom and Georgie realized they were about to be apprehended, they split up like a couple of kids caught raiding an Easter basket. Mom knocked over a wall of colorful sprinkles, Georgie upended a vat of warm chocolate, and they both ended up looking like a far more delicious version of being tarred and feathered. So did my car's interior. A far tastier event than mudding.

"Bizzy ." Jasper leans back to get a better look at me. "You spoke to a suspect today, didn't you? And you're off to speak to another one tomorrow?"

"I guess you can say I'm efficient," I tease.

Before he can launch into his "leave the investigating to the professionals" diatribe, the door swings open and we're greeted by two adorable pooches—a curly-furred labradoodle named Cinnamon and a golden retriever named Gatsby, Emmie and Leo's sweet fur babies.

Jellybean lets out a yowl and darts straight into the cottage, disappearing to who knows where.

Don't worry, Jelly Roll , Fish yowls twice as loud. These big oafs are friendly! In fact, I prefer them to Sherlock!

I heard that. Sherlock bounds inside after them. But I smell pizza, so I'll let it slide.

And judging by the heavenly aroma wafting from inside, I might have to side with Sherlock on this one. The baby gives an enthusiastic kick of agreement.

Inside, Emmie and Leo have transformed their living room into a cozy pizza parlor, with several boxes from Antonio's, a local pizza shop, spread across their coffee table alongside bottles of sparkling cider.

The interior of the cottage is impeccably put together. Emmie really does have this place looking like a model home. The walls are painted a light hue of gray, the distressed gray wood floors have a thick wool rug over them, and their cream-colored sofa and white marble coffee table give this place an elegant touch. And then there is the endless mountain of baby items, most of which are still in boxes lining all four walls. Come to think of it, maybe Emmie should open a baby boutique?

I quickly exchange hugs with both Emmie and Leo and thank them profusely for including us in the fun.

"I wouldn't thank us yet," Leo smarts, looking relaxed in a T-shirt and jeans. Jasper came right over after work so he's still in a suit and looking as dapper as ever. Emmie and I often marvel at what handsome husbands we've nabbed.

As you should. Leo winks my way.

I make a face at him. It's easy to forget when there's another telesensual in the room—especially since he's the only other one in Cider Cove.

"Before we dig in"—I say, holding up the shopping bag—"look what the Easter Bunny dropped off early for baby Granger!"

Leo and Jasper hit the pizza while Emmie pulls me to the sofa and quickly empties the bag of its contents. Her squeals of delight at the matching baby outfits could probably be heard clear in the next county.

“I can’t thank you enough for all of this,” she coos. “We just painted the nursery gray. It’s so neutral we can add pink or blue accents once the baby is born.” She takes a moment to frown at her belly. “That is, if it ever decides to come out. But thank you again in case it decides to make its debut. Like I said, we can’t thank you enough.”

“Well, we can’t thank you enough for this spa day,” I tell her.

“Not so fast,” Leo says with a dark chuckle. “Emmie? Did you tell them about the news?”

Emmie grunts. “It turns out, Leo’s mother is a detective herself. She’s arranged for us all to take one of those DNA ancestry tests.” She shoots Leo a look. “Go on, tell them what you heard her thinking to herself.”

Leo chuckles a little harder. “For some reason, my mother has convinced herself that these tests will prove whether or not I’m the father.”

We all share a riotous laugh on his mother’s behalf.

“I knew that woman didn’t care for me,” Emmie says while trying to calm down.

“It’s not that,” Leo says. “She loves you. She just likes to exercise an overabundance of caution. Besides, we all know these tests don’t work that way.” He ticks his head to the side. “I guess the baby’s paternity will have to remain a mystery.”

“You’re terrible.” Emmie swats him and gets right back to pulling cute little outfits out of that bag. “Oh my goodness, these are adorable! Leo, look at the tiny bunny

ears!”

Gatsby turns to Sherlock. I think they should make bacon bunnies for dogs .

Or dog-shaped treats for cats, Fish mews, and Jellybean snickers in agreement.

“Speaking of bunnies”—Jasper says dryly—“maybe we should discuss my wife’s habit of hopping into murder investigations?”

“ Bizzy ,” Emmie says my name like a dire threat. “You did not. You know how I feel about you getting involved in your condition.”

“ Our condition,” I say, picking up a slice of pizza and handing it to her before taking one for myself. “And speaking of which, sorry, can’t talk now. I think the baby needs to be fed.”

Jasper tips his head my way. “I just want you to be safe.”

The baby gives another kick, either agreeing with Jasper or reminding me that we never did get around to eating those chocolate-covered blueberries. These days, even my unborn child is better at solving mysteries than I am—they’ve already figured out that every investigation leads to chocolate. Or in this case, pizza.

Speaking of which, the four of us get down to business and do our best to devour all six boxes when a brisk knock erupts at the door.

Emmie gives a light clap. “It’s showtime.”

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It's showtime indeed as four older women show up with enough paraphernalia to transform Leo and Emmie's living room into a Zen paradise complete with four massage tables and the soothing sounds of ocean waves.

The women all look as if they could be our mothers with their short curly hair and sensible shoes, dressed in matching lavender scrubs that somehow make them look even more maternal. I spot a few "World's Best Grandma" pins and at least three different cat-themed brooches between them. And they quickly assure us that they're all licensed massage therapists so we don't have a thing to worry about.

Honestly, my pregnant hormones are secretly relieved they're not the young, gorgeous massage therapists I'd been irrationally dreading.

First thing is first, we get that DNA test out of the way. And once the spitting into a tube is through, one of the therapists claps us to attention.

"Strip down to your towels," the lead therapist announces cheerfully. "It's time to get naked."

"You don't have to tell me twice." Leo grins and earns an eye roll from Emmie in the process.

"Getting naked is what got us into this predicament," I say, patting my belly and the women all laugh at that one.

"Hey, let's keep it PG," Jasper teases. We'll get to the fun part later and do a reenactment of how we got into this predicament.

Leo chuckles and my face turns red as a beet.

We all disappear for a minute, and while Leo and Jasper strip down to the white fluffy towels provided, Emmie and I are gifted what amounts to short terrycloth tents just long enough to cover our chest and bottoms.

The men lie on their stomachs, but the therapist guides Emmie and me through a series of pregnancy-safe positions that make me feel like a beached whale attempting yoga.

“On your side now, ladies,” our therapist says cheerfully.

“If I roll over one more time”—Emmie groans—“I might just keep rolling right out the door.”

I sigh at the thought. “You and me both, sister.”

The treatments progress from Swedish lymphatic drainage (which feels like being patted down by angels) to hot stones placed strategically along our shoulders.

You humans and your odd relaxation rituals, Fish mewls with typical feline disdain. A proper sunbeam is all anyone needs.

The baby gives a playful flip as if agreeing with Fish’s assessment. I smile and adjust the heat setting on my foot bath, letting the warm water soothe my swollen ankles. The makeshift spa at Emmie’s cottage feels like a slice of heaven after the chaos at Westoff Farms.

Then comes the cupping, where they suction tiny cups to our flesh in hopes of extracting toxins, or maybe it’s bad vibes? Either way, Jasper swears it makes us look like we’ve been attacked by a bunch of octopuses.

“We’re going to have polka dots for days.” He chuckles.

“Now for the body scrubs,” one of the therapists announces. “Coffee grounds and brown sugar for the men and lavender and honey for our mamas-to-be.”

“Must the entire world deny us coffee?” Emmie teases as we continue to get the royal treatment.

“We’ll make up for it later,” I tell her. “I may not be able to boil water, but I can make a mean pot of decaf.”

The seaweed wrap is next, making us look like a bunch of spring rolls. I feel like I’m being prepared as someone’s dinner—and despite the fact I inhaled six slices of pizza, I’m suddenly craving Chinese.

Once that’s through, Emmie and I are moved to the sofa where we’re given foot massages, and our legs are rubbed down with lavender oil before the royal treatment is topped off with a heated foot bath.

Emmie moans with delight. “I think I just heard a heavenly choir.”

“I’ll be walking on a cloud for a week,” I add.

All five pets are lined up at the front of the living room watching with bated breath as to what’s about to happen next and most likely whether or not they’ll need to attack.

“So”—Emmie says as she splashes with her feet—“how did it go with Hammie Mae?”

I tell them about Verity’s employee contest—promising a Corvette to the top seller, only to deliver a Hot Wheels car instead.

“You’re kidding.” Emmie gasps.

“Nope.” I shake my head emphatically. “Though karma came calling when the employee sued and won enough to buy a whole fleet of real Corvettes.”

Both Leo and Jasper groan.

“Oh, it gets better,” I say. “For Hamish’s last birthday, Verity gave him one of her wisdom teeth dipped in gold.”

“WHAT?” Jasper and Leo shout in unison.

“Apparently, it’s the new hot thing.” I shrug in disbelief. “Too bad I threw mine out.”

“I have no idea where my wisdom teeth ended up,” Emmie says. “We are so behind the times.”

“Don’t worry,” I assure her. “We’ll save all our children’s teeth and put our kids way ahead of the game.”

“Agree,” she says. “See? We’re already great mothers.”

Jasper chuckles. “I say focus more on chocolate and less on gold-dipped teeth. I have a feeling that fad might fade out by the time our children are of age to gift their molars to anyone.”

“Here’s hoping,” Leo says. “So what’s next in the investigation?”

Jasper sighs. “I’ve got some research to do come morning.”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Leo tells him. “I was talking to the lead detective in

charge.”

A robust laugh strums from me. “I knew I liked you.” I offer up a quick wink. “But speaking of detective work, I was thinking about taking Jellybean to Verity Westoff tomorrow,” I say and Jasper frowns my way.

“She’s on my list next, too,” he says. “Word is, she’ll be working a shift at that restaurant she owns down in Seaview—and they happen to allow pets on the patio. Lucky for us, the weather will be warm. Are you up for lunch?”

I suck in a quick breath of delight. “Are you asking me to join your investigation?”

Leo belts out a laugh. “More like he’s asking to join yours.” He reaches over and pats Jasper on the back. “You know what they say, buddy. If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em.”

“Ooh, I want to join,” Emmie says. “I hear that place is really snazzy.”

“Sure,” Jasper says. “The more expectant mothers, the safer I’ll feel,” he teases before looking at Leo. “Are you in? We could double our weaponry if you join us.”

“I’m on patrol tomorrow. I’ll leave the heavy homicide lifting to the three of you—especially you, Bizzy.”

“Very funny,” I quip.

“He’s not teasing,” Emmie says. “Leo thinks you’re the best homicide detective in the country.”

Fish whips her tail back and forth. I’ve always liked you, Leo.

“Thank you,” he tells her.

Sherlock gives a soft woof. And I always like a visit to a snazzy restaurant .

The Celebration Grill is the best of the best. Jellybean lifts her whiskers with a touch of pride. They always provide fresh water for pets and the waitstaff has a pocket full of treats. It’s how they garner their biggest tips.

Treats! Treats! Treats! Sherlock sings and spins in a circle.

Oh, good grief . Fish sighs. Bizzy, I think he’s broken. How about we lock him in a cage for the safety of humanity?

I wrinkle my nose at her for even suggesting it.

Gatsby gives a sharp bark. I’d go, but I smell danger. I’m a lover, not a fighter.

Cinnamon sighs as she rolls her eyes. And this is why the vet has put you on a diet. You do realize they feed us the same food. Now we both have to suffer because you’ve essentially turned into a hairy couch potato .

I turn to Emmie. “It looks as if we’ll be treated to a fancy lunch tomorrow.”

“And maybe a killer,” she says just below a breath so Jellybean doesn’t hear.

And maybe a killer, indeed.

I look over at Jasper and he nods my way with a sober expression.

Someone out there killed Hamish Westoff.

Here's hoping his widow has some insight as to why—or in the least a few incriminating thoughts that might just help land her behind bars.

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The Celebration Grill sits perched on a cliff with its weathered cedar shingles and crisp white trim that glow in the spring sunshine.

The glorious oceanfront structure is just a stone's throw from the sheriff's department here in Seaview, and I can see how this place could quickly become the centerpiece of this town. The building itself is framed with the bold blue Atlantic and looks like a painting that's come to life.

The wraparound porch is dotted with umbrella-shaded tables, pastel ribbons flutter in the wind from the railings, and strategically placed Easter lilies flaunt themselves as if they're auditioning for a floral calendar.

"Fancy ." Emmie whistles as we pull into the parking lot. "I feel underdressed already."

"You look beautiful," I tell her, even though I'm starting to doubt my own fashion choices.

Maternity jeans and a flowy blouse seemed like a solid move this morning, but now... maybe not. At least the blouse is a cheerful spring green, and given the enthusiastic kick the baby just delivered, they clearly approve of it. Either that or they really want me to get a move on into the fancy establishment before us and find something fancy yet delicious to send down the pike. Most likely that.

Turns out, I've got a real foodie on my hands. Although I'm not surprised. I know for a fact this little sweet thing got their appreciation for all things culinary from both of their parents.

Fish twitches her whiskers at the sight up ahead from the tote bag that I've landed both her and Jellybean in.

Oh, great, Fish mewls. Another one of those places where they serve food that's smaller than the plate it comes on.

"Oh, I hope not," I mutter. "I'm starved."

"Ditto," Emmie says, regardless of the fact she didn't hear Fish's comment. Come to think of it, it's for the best.

I smell truffle fries. Sherlock's tail thumps against the seat, his nose twitching like mad. And wagyu beef! And ? —

We get it, we get it, Fish interrupts with a huff. Your nose is practically reciting the menu. Stand down, Bones.

He doesn't look like a bone, Jellybean points out.

Fish chuckles at that one. You said it, not me.

We park and head toward the entrance, where all of the beachy charm kicks into high gear.

Elegant French doors are flanked by topiaries shaped like Easter bunnies and there are white glorious Easter baskets sitting on crates as you come up the walk, filled with bright green grass made of raffia and stocked with gold-foiled bunnies surrounded by bright orange carrots with glorious green plumes.

The closer we get to the entrance, the more I notice the little details that scream understated elegance like the door handles shaped like antique keys, a welcome mat

featuring a fancy compass rose, and menu boards with calligraphy so elegant I half expect them to start reciting poetry.

We step inside and are instantly engulfed with the scent of fries as well as the tantalizing scent of a fresh grilled steak. Its dimly lit and dreamy atmosphere takes us the rest of the way to a culinary paradise.

Dark wood tables and chairs match the dark wood floors. The ceilings are twenty feet high at least and it gives off a posh warehouse vibe. Easy listening music seeps through the speakers and there's a marble reception counter with a waitstaff clad in black, looking mildly bored and offering up barely-there smiles our way.

A cute blonde hostess greets us and quickly points to a large silver bowl brimming with bottles of champagne and sparkling cider that are nestled in crushed ice which looks more like a bed of diamonds. Pastel ribbons adorn their glass necks and everything in this place is giving off a festive spring vibe.

“Welcome to the Celebration Grill,” the young blonde chirps. “We’d be delighted to start your afternoon with a complimentary glass of bubbly.” Just my luck. Two preggos. I’d better warn the kitchen. Every time a baby factory walks through the door, the kitchen has to double production. And wow, the one on the left is huge. I so hope she doesn’t drop a kid while I’m on my shift.

I press my lips tight and try not to make bug eyes at Emmie. She’ll so know she’s being talked about, and not exactly in the best way. But the blonde isn’t wrong. Emmie does look as if she’s about to pop. And in all honesty, if Emmie were about to “drop a kid” on this woman’s shift, Emmie would be both thrilled and relieved.

The blonde shifts her attention to me. Come to think of it, the one in the green looks ready to pop herself.

“What?” I quickly grip my belly and Jasper gasps.

“Bizzy, is something wrong with the baby?” he asks with a severe note of panic.

“Oh no, we’re fine,” I quickly assure him. My husband is as brave as they come, but I have a feeling when it’s time to give birth, he’s going to need smelling salts and a tranquilizer dart to get through the event. “I was just—so surprised that they’re offering a complimentary glass of bubbly.” I nod to the blonde. “Sparkling cider for us two baby factories, please.” I sling an arm over Emmie’s shoulder when I say it and the blonde’s mouth falls open.

Is calling people a baby factory really a thing? she muses to herself. I so thought I made that up.

She quickly delivers on the sparkling cider and Jasper accepts a glass of champagne.

“Now this is the kind of greeting I can get used to,” Emmie says with a grin as she lifts her crystal flute my way. I do the same and take a quick sip and the baby gives a somersault of approval.

Bubbly drinks for the win every single time—with the exception of the fact I don’t drink alcohol. I find it exacerbates that little mind-reading quirk of mine. And seeing that I nearly just launched Jasper into a full-blown panic attack because of my mind-prying prowess, I find it’s best I steer clear of anything that can amplify the situation.

“This place has been all over my social media lately,” I tell Jasper as we follow the hostess inside. “Apparently, their chef trained in Paris.”

“And charges Paris prices,” Emmie says with a nervous laugh. “But everyone swears it’s worth it.”

We follow the blonde as she weaves us through a maze of tables and chairs. I can't help but note all of the gold goblets and matching chargers. Even the utensils are gleaming with gilded pride.

Someone has expensive taste, Fish quips as dry as a martini.

That would be Verity, Jellybean mewls. Hamish used to say she had champagne taste and a beer budget. He kept promising that she'd take us to the poorhouse one day. But she never took us. And I was so looking forward to going. I hear they serve the best mice there—caught fresh daily right there within their walls.

Fish gasps. Oh Bizzy, quick, take us to the poorhouse!

I nod over at my sweet cat. "Don't worry. I have a feeling if we keep eating at places like this, we'll land there sooner than we think."

We quickly make our way to the expansive back patio, and just before we're about to step outside, that's when I spot my shiny new suspect.

And judging by that horrified look on her face, she knows exactly who we are and perhaps why we're truly here.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

We step out onto the patio here at the Celebration Grill and the balmy breeze engulfs us just as the salty brine from the sea does the same.

But it's the fact that our next suspect is gawking in our direction that has our full attention.

Verity Westoff freezes mid-stride as if she's just seen her bank account after a shopping spree. Her perfectly coiffed blonde hair and crisp white blazer scream "polished professional," but the look on her face? Pure panic.

"She looks perfectly jolted," Emmie whispers. "Maybe she thinks Jasper's caught the killer and he's come to break the news?"

Or maybe she is the killer and she's afraid he's here to make an arrest, I want to say but give a little nod instead.

That cat is still alive? Verity's mouth squares out in surprise as she heads this way and I pick right up on her thoughts. She was there that day with Hamish. I thought for sure she was long gone. Could she have seen what happened? Although it wouldn't matter. She's just a ridiculous little cat...

"Speaking of looking jolted..." Jasper murmurs, leaning in close. "Is it me, or is her reaction something just this side of a confession?"

"No confession yet," I whisper back. "She's marveling that we've brought Jellybean."

“That makes more sense.” He gives a slight sigh of disappointment.

I know Jasper is just as anxious to catch the killer as I am. And I also know that he wishes I wouldn’t be just as anxious in that department.

The baby delivers another kick—either agreeing with Jasper or demanding food. Honestly, it could go either way at this point.

Well, well, Jellybean gives a mewl that’s as smooth as butter. Looks like someone isn’t thrilled to see me. And why am I not surprised?

A waiter breezes past us with a seafood tower that looks like it belongs in an underwater palace. Dry ice cascades over its edges in dramatic waves, and I’m pretty sure I just saw a pearl wink at me.

“I see why people rave about this place,” Emmie whispers and her eyes are wide with anticipation.

My stomach growls as if agreeing with her and I inadvertently startle a couple at a nearby table as we walk by. I believe one of them just said the words bear on the prowl .

They’re not wrong. If I get hangry , I can be quite the bear.

Verity approaches with her million-dollar paper white smile firmly in place. Her skin glows tangerine against the crisp white blazer she’s donned, her long milky blonde hair looks brittle from top to bottom, and her fuchsia lips stand out like a beacon against the bright blue sky.

But her thoughts? They’re swirling like a hurricane and one that I can’t quite decipher. I’m betting whatever she knows about that day in the woods is locked up in

there somewhere.

Time to put on a show. Fish sighs from my bag.

Oh, Verity knows how to put on a show, Jellybean adds. Hamish always said she knew how to bring on the drama.

Sherlock gives a soft bark. At least the view makes up for the drama we're about to endure.

He's not wrong. The ocean stretches endlessly beyond the cliff and sunlight dances on the waves like glittering confetti. It's the perfect backdrop for a lunch where I'm hoping a certain blonde someone won't be lying through her teeth.

Verity stops in front of us, and I can't help but think her face is more or less a picture of rehearsed surprise.

"Jellybean?" Her voice wavers before she catches herself and she plasters on an even brighter smile. "I've been so worried about her!" She nods my way. "The sneaky little kitty disappeared the afternoon... the afternoon it happened." She fans herself for a moment. "Where did you find her?"

"She was in the woods next to the inn," I say, watching the woman closely. "I found her the day your husband died. We're so sorry about your loss."

"Yes, so am I." Her smile doesn't falter, but her thoughts scatter like startled pigeons. And then her expression breaks and suddenly she looks crestfallen. "The poor dear," Verity says, giving Jellybean a quick nod. "I've been so lost in grief." She pulls a monogrammed handkerchief from her pants pocket and dabs at nonexistent tears. "I thought that by throwing myself in my work it would get my mind off of things and lessen the sting, but nothing seems to help." She offers a crumpled smile to Jellybean.

“She was always Hamish’s shadow. That little rat chaser followed him everywhere.” He loved that cat more than anything. Maybe more than me.

My heart cinches because I certainly know how deeply the love for a pet can run. It sounds as if Hamish adored Jellybean, and rightly so.

“We’ve been taking good care of her,” I say just above a whisper. “She’s been a pleasure. And she gets along great with both my cat and my dog.” I give Sherlock Bones a pat on the head as I say it.

“Oh, that’s wonderful to hear!” Verity’s relief feels genuine. “Hey? Would you mind terribly keeping her a bit longer? She was really Hamish’s cat. I’m not much of a pet person, and with everything happening... and now with the move. I’m not leaving town, I’m just ditching my house. It’s far too big, and I don’t want to be rolling around in it all alone. Besides, there are too many memories there. You understand.”

“We certainly do,” I say. “And I don’t mind one bit.”

“Wonderful,” she beams, blinding us with those glittering white teeth before her expression grows sober once again. “Detective”—she turns to my handsome hubby—“have you found whoever did this to my poor husband?”

Jasper quickly shakes his head. “Not yet. But I have high hopes this will come to a quick conclusion.”

“I’m sure it will,” she says with a single nod. In fact, I know it will. It couldn’t be more obvious who did this, and I’m going to make sure he hears an earful of exactly who and why.

A breath hitches in my throat at the thought.

I cannot wait to hear all about it.

The baby kicks again, reminding me that no matter how this conversation goes, at least we're guaranteed an excellent meal.

And maybe a killer on the side.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

Verity Westoff leads Emmie, Jasper, and me—and the furry among us by proxy—to a prime corner table on the patio, right here at the Celebration Café where the service kicks into overdrive.

A waitress materializes out of nowhere with heated hand towels scented with cucumber and mint—because clearly, we’re not in Cider Cove anymore. Another waitress follows with fresh flutes of sparkling cider and what looks like a five-star culinary cornucopia filled with edible flowers, tiny vegetables, and artfully arranged dipping sauces that I’m pretty sure cost more than my maternity jeans—and these jeans were not cheap.

“Our chef’s seasonal gift,” the server sings as if he were presenting us with the Crown Jewels. “And here are today’s menus.”

The leather-bound menu newly in my hands is a work of art with each dish described in flowing calligraphy so elegant it could make any wedding invitation green with envy.

The baby does an excited flip as I spot the Szechuan chicken lettuce wraps with pickled watermelon radish, crispy rice noodles, and house-made hoisin sauce. Oh yes, baby, we are definitely ordering that. I give my belly a pat as if to reassure them of the fact.

Fish sniffs from over my shoulder. Even the menu is trying too hard, she mewls from her perch on the seat next to me alongside Jellybean.

Sherlock gives a soft woof from down below. Get a load out of that seafood tower

heading our way! I have a feeling this place isn't trying too hard—they've got the food to back it up.

He's not wrong.

A server quickly walks by with what can only be described as a masterpiece set on four tiers of silver. Butter-poached Maine lobster tails. Oysters nestled in seaweed like they've just been plucked from a mermaid's dinner table. Massive king crab legs. Smoked salmon. And right in the center? A glass bowl of caviar, surrounded by tiny buckwheat blini that are almost too cute to eat.

Verity spots me drooling over it and snaps her fingers at the waiter, stopping him short and pointing at him hard to land the food on our table and he does just that.

Both Emmie and I gasp with delight.

"Compliments of the house," Verity says with a smile so tight I half expect it to snap like an overworked rubber band. "You simply must try our signature tower. The smoked salmon is Hamish's own recipe." Was his recipe. Was.

We thank her profusely and soon we're putting in our orders—the lettuce wraps for me, spring lamb for Emmie, and lobster thermidor for Jasper. And the longer Verity remains in our presence, the more her hand keeps drifting to the tiny rose pendant on her necklace as she zips it back and forth with a sizzle.

Interesting tic she's got there, Fish mewls my way and I nod in agreement.

She only does that when she's nervous, Jellybean points out. Like the night she and Hamish fought about the ? —

"Well, I guess I'll leave you to your meal." Verity's lips quiver as she says it.

“Please join us,” I’m quick to offer. And note to self: shake down Jellybean later to find out what Verity and Hamish argued about. Although they were married. They could have argued about leaving the toothpaste cap off, and that’s hardly grounds for murder.

I cast Jasper the side-eye. Unless, of course, they choose to do it over and over again no matter how many times being told not to. Then it’s murder by way of insanity on the part of the killer.

Verity’s thoughts begin to come in fast and furious as they cartwheel in my direction. Keep them happy... Keep them distracted... Matilda is obviously behind this whole thing... Why did Hamish have to get a cat, anyway?

“Join you?” She takes a breath and her smile falters. “You bet. But only if you don’t mind talking about my poor husband.”

Jasper nods her way. “We don’t mind at all.”

I nod her way as well. “Not one bit.”

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I take another sip of my sparkling cider, watching Verity like a hawk in her snow-white designer blazer and her matching snow-white dazzling smile. But it's the fact her fingers keep fiddling with that rose pendant on her necklace that has my attention. I have a feeling if nerves were an Olympic sport, she'd be on the podium clutching a bouquet right about now.

“Verity”—Emmie leans toward the pretty blonde while I nibble on the complimentary seafood tower before us—“that foundation you're using makes your skin absolutely glow. I must know what it is.”

My mouth rounds out. Is Emmie serious? The only thing Verity's skin glows like is a pumpkin.

Emmie wrinkles her nose my way. Don't look at me that way. I'm trying to get a conversation going. You know, ease her into the bit about the dead husband.

Oh. I give a hardly noticeable nod. Emmie is right, we should probably turn up the heat slowly. After all, Verity is Hamish's widow. Although you wouldn't know it by that flash of lightning smile and the fact she's dressed more like a bride than your traditional widow.

Not that I'm judging her. In fact, I learned long ago not to judge people over their wardrobes or their thoughts. After all, they don't realize anyone is listening in and what flits through a person's mind is sacred as far as privacy goes. Unless, of course, there's a mind reader around to listen in.

“What foundation?” Verity laughs openly at Emmie's seemingly silly little question.

“Oh hon, I don’t wear beauty products. I was born gorgeous.” She belts out an egregiously loud laugh and I can’t help but give a nervous laugh right along with her.

She’s confident, Fish muses. I’ll give her that.

That she is. Jellybean laughs herself. But she’s not telling the truth. Verity has an entire beauty store sitting on her bathroom counter and she spends at least an hour slathering it all over her face. Hamish used to say she was putting her mask on.

Sherlock gives a light growl at the thought of it. She’s not telling the truth!

Hmm . I wonder what else she’s willing to lie about.

“I’m just teasing.” Verity gives Emmie’s arm a quick tap. “All of my cosmetics are shipped straight from France, organic, fairtrade produced without harming the environment, of course, and custom made for my skin’s exact shade. I’ll give you one of their business cards before you leave if you’re interested.” Unfortunately, she’ll have to trade that baby in her belly for it. The stuff costs more than gold per ounce. And I would much rather have my cosmetics than a baby.

I shake my head at Emmie as if to say don’t bother with the business card . I’d much rather she keep that baby in her belly.

“So Verity”—Jasper starts politely—“Hamish sounds like he was quite a man. It must have been a lot to juggle the farm and this place.”

Verity’s smile tightens as if someone just adjusted the dimmer switch on her face.

“Oh, absolutely.” She clears her throat. “Hamish was—passionate. He lived and breathed that farm.” And he let it take over everything, she thinks that last part to herself. Even me.

“The farm is gorgeous,” I say, leaning her way, giving her what I hope looks like an expression that says tell me all about your husband and not so much tell me all of your deep, dark secrets . But the latter is at peak curiosity in me at the moment. “That must’ve been tough for him. Balancing the farm with everything else. And for you, too.”

“You’d be surprised how much energy Hamish and I had for the things we were passionate about.” She lifts her chin. We were especially passionate about each other, she muses to herself. At least in those early days while we were still fun and flirty right under that witch’s nose.

I cringe at the thought she just let fly. I know for a fact she and Hamish were having an affair. Everyone knows that for a fact.

“Wait a minute...” Emmie shakes her head at the woman. “I thought I heard Hamish’s ex-wife got the farm in the divorce?”

“Not true,” Verity says and the words come out quick and sharp like only the truth can. “But that’s the lie Matilda and his daughter, Hammie Mae, like to propagate.” She openly rolls her eyes. “I mean, maybe they’ve mistakenly told people that about the farm, but the truth is that Hamish is still— was still battling it out over the property.” She gives a heavy sigh. I meant what I said the first time. They’re both a couple of liars.

“Sorry.” Emmie winces. “I guess Hammie Mae didn’t mention that.”

“No, she wouldn’t.” Verity casts a steely look toward the water. “And I suppose neither she nor her mother would mention the fact the judge ruled that in the meantime Matilda give Hamish a monthly alimony allowance of sixteen thousand dollars.”

The three of us take in a sharp breath at the steep number.

“I’m sorry”—Jasper leans in a touch—“did you say sixteen thousand?”

“Dollars ,” Verity adds with an aggressive nod. “But don’t feel sorry for her. That farm generates thousands of dollars a day. It’s just a drop in the blueberry bucket.” Her lips press tight for a moment as she glances at the water again. “But then, Matilda has been battling that, too. Oh, she did not want to pay him a dime. Even though she agreed to the terms in the beginning, she’s been in contempt of nonpayment ever since. I believe the words she said last regarding the subject were I’ll pay you over my dead body .” Her shoulders give a playful bounce. “I guess it was over his dead body instead.”

I lean back as I take the woman in. “Verity, are you saying you think Matilda did this to him?”

“I didn’t have to say it.” She tips her head my way. “You were smart enough to figure it out.”

Heat fills my cheeks at the wayward compliment. And whether or not I’m being played, I seem to appreciate getting my ego stroked just the same.

“You really think Matilda is capable of murder?” Jasper asks point-blank, promptly ignoring my moment in the ego-stroking sun.

“Heavens no.” Verity’s eyes widen a touch as she shakes her head. “But look, I’ve been married before. And believe me, there were times when I wanted to murder my ex, too. And honestly? If we were locked in a heated argument and I was holding a ten-pound bookend in the middle of nowhere, I might be tempted to bonk him over the head with it, too.”

Emmie groans. “You think that’s what happened?”

“Most likely.” Verity shrugs. “I mean, who else would want Hamish dead? The man was as happy-go-lucky as you could get. With the exception of when he was with his ex. It seems that all they did these last few years was argue.”

Jellybean swings her furry little head my way. That’s the truth. They did nothing but argue whenever their paths crossed. And if it wasn’t about That Tramp, then it was about the farm . She twitches her whiskers to the sky. I’ve often wondered who That Tramp was.

I take a deep breath as I look over at Verity. Because it’s pretty obvious exactly who That Tramp was.

She waves me off as if she heard. “Look, I know all about the nasty names that Matilda Westoff calls me behind my back—Gold Digger, White Trash, Too Tan Barbie—” Verity shoots a dirty look into the sea, seemingly leaving out the other nickname—That Tramp. “And I guess I deserved them because of what transpired between Hamish and me while he was still married. But in the end, Hamish chose me, not her. And I guess she couldn’t get over it. Every time Matilda got him alone, she took a dig at me and harped about wanting full ownership of the farm. And just for the record, I’m no gold digger. I may have managed the Westoff farm for years, and I do the same for this place, but that’s because I like to keep busy. I have my own money. I’m an inventor by trade.”

“An inventor?” I blurt without meaning to.

Now this I’ve got to hear.

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Emmie, Jasper, me, and the pets all inch back at the very same time, right here on the patio of the Celebration Grill, taken by surprise at the fact Verity Westoff just announced she was an inventor by trade.

Obviously, those were the last words we were expecting to hear from her hot pink mouth.

Emmie clears her throat. “What inventions have you—um, discovered?”

“Just one.” Verity holds up an orange finger. “My ex and I invented a little kitchen doo-hickey that you may have heard of. It’s called the Bartender’s Dream.”

“That does sound familiar,” I say, lying through my teeth. But then, it’s my turn to stroke her ego, and I have a feeling if I do just that she’ll keep spilling the secrets like oil.

She gives an enthusiastic nod. “Everyone knows about it. It’s a kitchen gadget that works just like those coffee machines with the plastic pods? Only our machines make the very best mixed cocktails you ever did imbibe.”

“Oh, that does sound great,” I say with a genuine interest. “I mean, it sounds as if someone like me could even make a decent cocktail with that machine.”

“It wouldn’t be decent,” she quickly corrects. “It would be the best of the best. As you can see from this place, I don’t do junk.”

Four men who happen to be dressed rather dapper walk by on cue. Each one of them

is holding a string instrument as they take a seat near the water before beginning to play something soothing and classical.

Verity laughs. “And the string quartet shows up just in time to prove my point.”

“That they do,” Jasper says, tipping his drink to her before taking a sip. “How did Hamish seem otherwise during his last few days?”

“He managed.” Verity sighs. “Though, honestly, Matilda struggled a lot more. She never could let go. Even after the divorce, she was obsessed.”

“Obsessed?” Emmie asks. “You mean with Hamish?”

My bestie is the best when it comes to investigative subtlety.

Verity gives a hard nod her way. “Some people just can’t handle being replaced. She never forgave him for moving on. Matilda was always scheming, trying to make him regret leaving her. Even the day before he—” She blinks back tears. “Well, never mind. You’re not here to listen in on the latest dirt that was being slung. You’re here to enjoy your meals.” She quickly surveys the patio as if to assess the timing of those delicious dishes.

“Go on,” Jasper says kindly yet firmly. “Please, what were you going to say?”

Verity closes her eyes for a minute. “Hamish was dead set on getting Matilda to stop the presses on that tell-all she’s about to publish. He says it would have ruined him forever. And he didn’t care for the fact that she was going to profit off their dirty laundry either. He said he had a surefire way of getting her to stop the publication. Only he didn’t tell me what it was. But whatever he had over her—well, I think we all know how that ended.”

Emmie gasps as she looks my way. Is she insinuating that he blackmailed her?

Jasper nods my way as well. Blackmail.

Blackmail, indeed.

“That sounds so intense,” I say, keeping my voice even-keeled, like I’m not internally cataloging every single detail. “Tension like that can’t have been easy.”

“Well”—Verity says with a light laugh—“divorce is messy. And Matilda never made it easy. Neither did Hammie Mae.” That girl never appreciated him. Always questioning, always pushing. Just like her mother.

I think we’ve hit a nerve.

“That must’ve been hard for Hamish,” I say as innocently as I can. “Juggling all those strong personalities.”

Verity waves it off, still zipping that pendant across her necklace. “Oh, he managed. Hamish had a way of keeping everyone in line.” Until he didn’t.

I take a casual sip from my glass to hide the fact that my detective alarm bells are ringing so loud they could wake the baby—and not just the one I’m carrying.

Jasper leans in. “Sounds as if there was a lot going on in Hamish’s life.”

Verity’s fingers twitch against that rose pendant again. “Hamish was too trusting, honestly. He never believed anyone would actually hurt him.” Except maybe me. And she gives a meager laugh at that one because obviously, it was a joke.

A strangled silence fills the table as if we’ve officially hit our limit with small

talk—or interrogations, but before I can press her some more, a server swoops in with our meals.

It's like a page out of an elegant food magazine with each plate arranged like edible works of art. I hardly notice what's in front of me because my brain is still spinning, trying to unravel Verity's tangled thoughts. Although the Szechwan chicken lettuce wraps in front of me are begging to pull me out of my investigative trance.

Verity clears her throat, clearly ready to wrap this up. "Well, I do appreciate you bringing Jellybean by, and I thank you profusely for taking her in until I can get my life patched back up." And find a shelter who takes four-footed flea bags. She frowns at the cat. Oh heck, I did love her, too, but just looking at the cute little thing reminds me of Hamish. There's no way I could keep her, but I can't say that to these nice folks.

I force a smile. "No problem," I say lightly. "She's been a wonderful addition to the family. I don't mind holding onto her one bit."

Even if it turns out that I'll be holding onto her forever.

Verity nods, but her gaze is distant. "Good. Well, enjoy your meal. If you need anything at all, please let the staff know."

She walks away and I waste no time leaning toward Jasper and Emmie. "She's hiding something, but I didn't pick up exactly what it might be."

Jasper nods. "I think so, too. And I also think she's throwing Matilda and Hammie Mae under the bus hard."

"Maybe she's trying to distract us?" Emmie says before diving right into the spring lamb on her plate—speaking of distracted.

“Could be,” I reply. “But I have a feeling we need to talk to Matilda. Like, yesterday.”

“You mean, I need to talk to Matilda,” Jasper says while pulling apart that perfectly bright red lobster sitting on his plate. “Like yesterday.”

You think that’s going to help? Jellybean pipes up, dripping with sarcasm like only a feline or a female can. And she’s a double threat because she’s both. Good luck. Hamish always said that Matilda is slipperier than a greased pig in a thunderstorm.

The baby kicks hard, almost as if they’re agreeing with Jellybean.

Great. Even my unborn child thinks we’re in for a wild ride.

I take a deep breath and steel myself for whatever comes next. Because one thing is crystal clear, Verity knows way more than she’s letting on. And Matilda? She might just have the missing piece I need to crack this case wide open.

I just have to know what Hamish Westoff had over his ex-wife that might have been dark enough for her to crack his skull open.

One thing is for sure—proverbial thunderstorm or not—I’m about to try my best to catch a greased pig.

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Spring has exploded all over the Country Cottage Inn as if a pastel bomb detonated, and I just might have been the one who lit the fuse.

What can I say? When you're thoroughly knocked up and the nesting instinct kicks in, you don't fight it. You lean into it—hard. Hence the army of ceramic bunnies in Easter bonnets stationed all over the front desk, silently judging everyone who walks in.

These bunnies are creepy, Bizzy. The one in the pink hat is glaring at me, Fish growls from her perch on the counter while whipping her tail back and forth in annoyance.

You think everyone is glaring at you, Sherlock says with a soft woof. His own tail is wagging like mad as yet another guest leans down to take his picture.

Fish, Sherlock, and Jellybean have spent all morning posing for pictures like the camera-ready furry cuties they are. It's a pretty regular occurrence that the guests want to sneak a selfie with my magnificent yet slightly mischievous menagerie.

I don't think the bunnies are creepy, Jellybean meows as a little girl gives her a scratch under her chin. They remind me of the chocolate bunnies they sell back at the farm.

“Ooh, chocolate bunnies.” I moan at the thought of diving into a silky smooth milk chocolate bunny right now. I've already inhaled a plate of Emmie's pastel peanut butter and chocolate eggs. I've certainly had enough chocolate for the day—logically, that is. But judging by the way my stomach is clawing at me, I haven't met my illogical quota for the day. And I think both the baby and I know that is certainly

going to happen.

I'm scrolling through my phone at the reception counter, half-heartedly googling Matilda Westoff in an effort to track down her whereabouts, when the front door chimes.

I look up just as trouble waltzes in—and not just one dose, but two —both dressed looking like a couple of pastel Easter eggs themselves.

Mom and Georgie head this way, and I can't help but note that Georgie looks more than a little irate.

Mom is rocking a lavender blazer with shoulder pads that look frighteningly aerodynamic, paired with a bright pink polo whose popped collar practically screams 1986. Georgie has on one of her go-to kaftans, and this one actually has pastel eggs dotted on a fuchsia background. Both women look adorable enough to place in anyone's Easter basket if you ask me.

Georgie wags a finger at me. "Who do you think you are?" she starts in and it's only then I spot the odd-looking red helmet in her hand, but before I can ask about it, I suppose there are more pressing issues at hand.

"Who do I think I am?" I ask, holding back a laugh. "Bizzy Baker Wilder?" I say, already bracing myself for whatever direction this might be headed in. I'm betting it's not a good one.

"Try again," she huffs and that gray pouf sitting on her head gives a mean wobble. "You're the woman who sneaks off to five-star restaurants without inviting her partners in crime. I thought we had a deal—but it turns out you had a meal . You're a treasonous sneak who left two old broads in the dust and isn't even sorry about it."

“Oh, that .” I wince with an apology already creeping up my throat. “I am sorry. I should’ve known there would be serious consequences for unauthorized fine dining.”

The baby kicks, either agreeing with Georgie or protesting my neglect to order an extra side of truffle fries yesterday.

“Never mind that.” Mom waves off my culinary transgression like it’s a minor offense. “We were just coming to pick up something from Georgie’s refrigerator and I thought we’d stop in and say hello. We’re on our way to the Spring Fling Side Dish Swin g . It’s a competition we heard about and just had to enter. There’s a thousand-dollar prize at stake.”

“ Ooh , you had me at side dishes,” I say. “I love them.”

That you do, Fish purrs my way. And appetizers, and main dishes, and dessert, too, she teases.

It’s true. I love all of the above these days and I’ve never been so eager to have them all on a loop.

I lean in, genuinely intrigued. “What culinary masterpieces are you submitting?” My stomach growls just thinking about an entire bevy of scrumptious side dishes all lined up and ready to land on my plate—though that could just be the baby demanding their second breakfast.

Georgie leans in. “I’ve perfected my signature shake and shimmy, wiggle and a giggle Jell-O surprise casserole,” she announces, practically glowing with pride. “Seven layers, which include lime Jell-O, cottage cheese, crushed potato chips, and mini marshmallows for garnish.”

“Oh wow.” I try not to wince.

The baby does a somersault of protest, and honestly, same.

“And I’m entering my famous creamy dreamy broccoli salad,” Mom beams. “I can’t stop eating it.”

My appetite suddenly flatlines, and the baby gives a sharp kick, as if warning me to steer clean. It’s nice to know we’re on the same page so early on in our relationship. I pat my belly, silently promising we’ll avoid both entries at all costs.

Jellybean twitches her whiskers. Is it just me, or does that Jell-O thing sound like some sort of a daredevil dish?

Sherlock lifts his chin. I once ate a moth because I thought it was a flying raisin.

Fish nods. That sounds about right.

That red plastic dome in Georgie’s arms catches my eye again.

“What’s with the helmet?” I ask, although a part of me is already regretting it.

“It’s not a helmet,” Georgie says, hoisting it my way and it’s a red plastic hat with a clear glass shield in front, along with two red and yellow plastic daisies of some sort glued onto it. “It’s a hummingbird feeder,” she says rather proudly. “I figure if I’m going to be outdoors in this beautiful spring weather, I may as well call a few winged cutie pies over and spill some tea with them.”

Mom grunts. “Just try not to get your eyes gouged out by those winged cutie pies in the process.” She turns my way. “I tried telling her that inviting flying needles to your eyeballs was a recipe for ocular disaster, but some people have to learn the hard way.”

“Ooh.” I wince at the visual. “That’s so clever, but please be careful, Georgie,” I tell her. “So, where is this festival of fascinating side dishes happening?” I ask, trying not to picture Georgie’s Jell-O surprise in too much detail. She lost me at cottage cheese.

“At the Westoff Farms,” Mom says. “Blueberry and Chocolate Heaven is sponsoring the event. In fact, Matilda Westoff and her daughter are two of the judges.”

Georgie nods and that gray beach ball on her head wobbles precariously once again. “That TV show of Matilda’s is covering the event. We’re going to be rich and famous.”

The baby does another flip, and this time I’m pretty sure it’s from excitement. My unborn child is already a better detective than I am—they can spot a lead from a mile away.

“And you’ll have one very enthusiastic cheerleader by your side,” I say, already mentally preparing to corner Matilda between judging rounds. “My furry friends and I are coming with you.”

Oh joy. Fish sighs. More opportunities to witness culinary crimes against humanity.

I bet there will be samples! Sherlock wags his tail, hoping to score a few side dishes for himself.

Of course, that’s where your mind goes. Fish shakes her head.

None of that sounded too appetizing to me, Jellybean mewls. Though I admit, I’m curious about this Jell-O situation. I’ve never seen food wiggle before.

Mom and Georgie take off for Georgie’s cottage, already debating garnish strategies, and I pat my belly reassuringly.

“Don’t worry. We’ll pack backup snacks. And if things get desperate, there’s always chocolate.”

The baby kicks in agreement, assuring me we’re on the same page. After all, what’s a little culinary trauma when there’s a chance to get closer to solving a murder?

Here’s hoping I can get Matilda Westoff to hum like a hummingbird and spill the tea on why her ex may have tried to blackmail her—and whether or not it was grounds for murder.

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A wooden sign that could probably be seen from the space station reads Blueberry and Chocolate Heaven with a smaller, more modest sign underneath declaring Welcome to the Spring Fling Side Dish Swing!

The verdant grounds here at Westoff Farms hold the scent of rosemary roasted potatoes and fresh baked dinner rolls, not to mention that the place is decked out like a pastel dream from top to bottom.

Someone—most likely Matilda—has gone all out with the decorations. Pastel buntings flutter in the warm breeze like butterfly wings, and there is enough Easter décor scattered around the grounds to make the Easter Bunny himself file a trademark infringement suit.

The parking lot is packed with what looks like half of Cider Cove's population, all clutching covered dishes and recipe cards while racing to enter their dishes and win the thousand bucks on the line. I spot at least three different versions of potato salad being carried past us. At least two pasta salads, and one macaroni and cheese casserole that is begging me to follow it and give it a new home inside my stomach.

The never-ending rolling green lawns here glow with the dew of springtime, and the blueberry fields fade in the background, but the oversized red barn looms to our right like a beacon.

Both Mom and Georgie have promised not to go anywhere near the facility after I reminded them of their lifetime ban. Mom said she would rather die than go through the embarrassment of being kicked out on her keister once again. And Georgie said she'd rather dance naked in a vat of chocolate and said it would be worth two

consecutive lifetime bans to do it. And oddly, I still think she somehow got the point.

The side dish competition area sprawls across the grassy field like a potluck gone rogue. Elongated tables draped in pastel linens stretch as far as the eye can see, already groaning under the weight of what must be half of Cider Cove's kitchen output.

The scents of herbs, spices, and at least three different varieties of baked beans mingle in the air. And scattered all around are smaller round tables with elegant pink and blue tablecloths strewn over them.

A pastel flower arrangement is set in the center of each table, and standing on the gold chargers set out at each plate setting is a gold foil treat for everyone who shows up this afternoon. That is mighty generous of the Westoffs. Those ten-inch gold foil chocolate bunnies certainly aren't cheap.

I count seventeen hundred chocolate bunnies, Sherlock announces proudly. No, eighteen thousand! And is that bacon-wrapped asparagus I'm smelling?

Suffice it to say, math isn't Sherlock's strong suit, but bacon is.

You smell everything. Your nose is basically a food-seeking radar system. Fish sighs from her perch in my tote bag where she's nestled alongside Jellybean. Though I have to admit, some of these dishes actually look edible.

Dibs on anything that hits the ground! Sherlock's tail wags with half-starved anticipation. I can so relate.

You can have the Jell-O offerings, Jellybean generously offers. I prefer my food to stay still when I'm eating it.

“Ditto,” I say.

A small stage has been set up at one end of the field, complete with TV cameras and lights. That must be where Matilda’s cooking show will be filmed. Speaking of Matilda, I scan the growing crowd but don’t spot her signature silver-streaked locks anywhere.

Mom and Georgie waste no time rushing off to enter their culinary creations, leaving me to wonder if someone should warn the judges about what they’re in for.

The baby gives an emphatic kick, probably trying to remind me about our backup granola bars. But with all the chocolate floating around, who wants granola?

Ten dollars says your mother tries to bribe the judges, Fish meows as she watches them go.

Jellybean’s ear twitches. Twenty says Georgie’s Jell-O creation comes to life and eats every last one of us—just like in that movie with the giant green blob.

“Let’s hope not.”

In the distance I spot a small round dessert table and on it sits a three-tiered chocolate fountain. You can bet your britches I’ll be glugging down as much of that liquid heaven as I can fit in my body before I leave.

Georgie may have a sordid history with chocolate, but if my fantasies come true today, I’ll be putting her chocolate infamy to shame.

A woman carrying a bright blue Dutch oven walks by and the scent of something savory trails in her wake.

I smell bacon! Sherlock barks so loud you'd think it was starting to rain that heavenly breakfast food. I'd better make sure she doesn't drop anything.

He darts off and both cats waste no time in leaping out of my tote bag and charging after him.

Sorry, Bizzy, Fish calls out. But I have to make sure he doesn't hog all the crumbs for himself.

And I'll show them where to get the best of the crumbs, Jellybean yowls as she races to keep up.

"Wonderful," I mutter. "Well, at least they'll be fed by the time we get home." I give my belly a pat as I scan the festive grounds.

I'm plotting the best way to track down Matilda when I literally bump into Hammie Mae. She looks fresh-faced and adorable in a spring dress that makes her copper freckles pop, her strawberry blonde hair is pulled back into a ponytail looking as perky as can be, and her beach ball of a belly bumps into mine before any other part of us makes contact.

She's not Matilda, but you know what they say—one Westoff in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Here goes nothing.

“ B

izzy!” Hammie Mae Westoff brightens at the sight of me, right here on the grounds of Westoff Farms. “It’s so great to see you. Are you entering the competition?” She riffles through the wicker Easter basket in her hand, brimming with pink plastic grass before handing me a miniature gold foil bunny no bigger than my index finger.

“ Ooh , thank you. I’m in serious need of a fix,” I say, quickly unwrapping it. “I’m actually just here supporting Mom and Georgie,” I tell her. “And I promise to keep them far away from the barn. They’re still talking about their lifetime ban.”

Hammie Mae laughs, and a wheezing sound escapes her that makes her nose scrunch up. “I will never forget about the Great Chocolate Catastrophe. My staff is still finding sprinkles in their hair and on the ceiling.” She gives her belly a warm pat. “So how are you feeling?”

I gobble down the miniature chocolate bunny in three hasty bites and moan.

“Thank you, that was wonderful. And to answer your question, I guess you could say I’m feeling hungry,” I admit and we both laugh once again as she hands me another bunny. “Though I’m going to miss using pregnancy as an excuse for everything. Yesterday I told Jasper I couldn’t do dishes because the baby needed me to eat ice cream instead.”

True story. That tub of Rocky Road never stood a chance.

The baby gives a soft kick at the dreamy creamy memory.

“Ice cream for the win,” Hammie Mae says as if falling into a Rocky Road trance herself.

Despite everything that’s happened, I can’t help but feel a connection with her.

I really like Bizzy, she thinks to herself and it’s nice to know we’re on the same wavelength. We’re both about to become first-time mothers, both navigating this strange new territory of constantly being kicked from the inside. And soon we’ll be snuggling with our little ones on the outside—in this big scary world, no less.

“Speaking of bringing our little angels into the world”—she says as her eyes light up with far too much enthusiasm—“do you have a birthing plan?”

“A birthing plan? Um...” I falter. “Does packing a bag count?” I tease. I leave out the part where I beg for all the drugs they’re legally allowed to give me.

Hey? I guess I do have a plan—one that involves high levels of quasi-backstreet narcotics.

“Oh, Bizzy, you really need to get a proper plan in place.” She launches in with the intensity of someone who’s read every guide on childbirth ever published. And I have no doubt she has. “I’m having a home birth, of course. I’m sort of a germaphobe, and we all know what hospitals are known for. I’ve already imported organic bamboo sheets from Japan, and I’ve hired a trio of violinists to play Mozart while I’m in active labor—studies show it increases the baby’s intelligence.” She gives a knowing nod.

“Oh right,” I say, trying not to cringe. “I’ve heard the same.” I think.

Although there’s no way a trio of strangers is going to be front and center while I hyperventilate trying to bring new life into this world.

“Of course, my doula will be there,” she continues. “She’ll be spreading rose petals while my birthing coach leads meditation, and I’m having fresh herbs woven into crystal wreaths to enhance the spiritual energy in the room.”

“Of course,” I say with an eager nod as if I’m in the know when it comes to all things herbs and crystals.

Bamboo sheets? Classical music? Funny herbs and crystals? Should I be implementing these things at my birth? At a germ-infested hospital, no less?

The baby gives a swift kick in my ribs as if to knock me back to reality. Either that or they’re trying to escape before someone makes them listen to Mozart.

“And that’s not all,” Hammie Mae goes on, practically glowing with prenatal preparation pride. “I’m having a professional photographer and videographer document everything.” She leans in. “I’ve even hired an artist to paint the skyline at the exact moment of birth.”

“The skyline?” I say, more than a little amazed at the level of detail going into this event. And here I was hoping Jasper wouldn’t miss the big moment because he was off chasing down a killer—but sort of resigned that he might.

Who am I kidding? I’ll be lucky I don’t miss the birth because I’m chasing down a killer.

“Of course, I’ll be utilizing organic essential oils.” Hammie Mae averts her eyes as if it were a given. “I couldn’t have gotten through my first two trimesters without them.”

“For sure,” I say.

Does hot chili pepper oil count? I'm pretty certain I've had an infusion of it in all of the Chinese food Jasper and I have consumed as of late.

"And I've been practicing my birth mantras in Sanskrit."

"Sanskrit?" I squint over at her. What does that even mean?

I get the feeling Hammie Mae's birth plan comes with its own flow chart.

I clear my throat. "Well, that sounds..." I search for a diplomatic word that isn't in the neighborhood of terrifying—but ironically, terrifying is the only word I can come up with.

An airhorn pierces the silence between us and I'm thankful for the fact I just nearly had my eardrum forcibly removed.

Saved by the competition buzzer, which rings out across the field like a dinner bell for all of Cider Cove.

A cheer erupts as the crowd begins gravitating toward the tables brimming with savory treats.

"Looks like it's time for me to start judging." Hammie Mae grips her belly as if she has to carry it across the lawn in her own two hands. "You should definitely try some of the dishes. There's actually a People's Choice Award, so your vote counts, too. Though maybe stay away from entry number seven." She lowers her voice a notch. "I hear someone brought something that involves Jell-O and cottage cheese. Avoid at all costs."

I press my lips tight. "Sounds like a sensible plan."

Leave it to Georgie's contribution to challenge people's digestive systems.

Hammie Mae races off and I waddle behind her at a more accommodating pace.

The baby kicks again, and I pat my belly soothingly. "Don't worry. When the time comes, the only music you'll hear is the sound of my heavy breathing. Though I can't promise Georgie won't try to bring her karaoke machine."

Now that's a thought terrifying enough to send anyone into labor.

I scan the crowd again, this time spotting a familiar redhead with a silver streak in her hair standing near the judges' table.

Perfect.

It's time to see what Matilda Westoff knows about golden bunnies and her ex-husband's untimely demise.

But first, I might need to sample some of these delicious side dishes.

After all, what's a little murder investigation without a snack or two?

The baby gives a gentle knock over my belly.

At least someone agrees with my priorities.

I'm definitely eating for two detectives.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

The Spring Fling Side Dish Swing is in full... well, swing .

The competition field at Westoff Farms looks like a potluck flew in straight from a Martha Stewart magazine spread with pastel tablecloths fluttering in the breeze and enough food to outfit all of Cider Cove.

I'm making my way through the endless rows of dishes, trying to keep track of Matilda Westoff while overloading my plate with a little of everything and pretending I'm not actually heading straight for Mom's broccoli salad.

I'm not sure why, but I'm suddenly drawn to it and I can't seem to stop. It's as if it's cast its green, creamy spell on me.

Fish spots me from under the table and her mouth rounds out with surprise.

Is that plate all for you? she muses. It looks as if your dignity left the building about three servings ago. She observes as I pile another spoonful onto my plate.

I give a little laugh. "That would be an accurate assessment of my life overall."

Live and let eat, Sherlock barks as he tries to defend my culinary choices, and the quantity of said choices, too. Although I have to say, this pregnancy has given you some interesting cravings. Just last week I saw you eating pickles with peanut butter.

I give a quick nod his way. "A startlingly good combination."

At least I managed to abstain from adding anchovies to it—even though the pull to

add them was strong.

I pile on a scoop of Mom's broccoli salad and sneak a quick bite.

"Oh my word," I mumble through a mouthful. "Mmm, this really is delicious."

The baby gives a soft swirl and a kick as if begging for more.

I almost hate to admit it, but her creamy dreamy broccoli salad is actually living up to its name. Something about the combination of fresh broccoli, bacon, and whatever magic dressing she's concocted has me—and apparently, my unborn child—completely hooked.

Is no one going to mention the fact that Georgie's Jell-O surprise is actually pulsating? Jellybean asks as she carefully backs away from the table.

Sure enough, a mold of what I think is a lobster sits gleaming with green glibbery pride—with all sorts of odd-looking bits suspended in its verdant gelatinous matter like a wayward solar system just begging for a black hole to swallow it down.

But there's not a hole in my head willing to have anything to do with it.

I'm about to scoop up another helping of Mom's broccoli salad when I quite literally bump into a woman in a bright yellow sundress and it's none other than Matilda Westoff herself.

She narrowly misses christening me with whatever liquid is in that pink goblet in her hand. And I can't help but notice that she's dressed like a sophisticated human version of a baby chick with her silver-streaked hair swept up into an elegant bun.

Isn't this Ree's daughter? Her brows furrow a notch. Didn't I hear whispers that she's

the only true homicide detective in all of Maine? Or was it the Eastern Seaboard? Surely, she's not here to pin anything on me. Is she?

Stay calm. He's gone now. He certainly can't ruin anything else... She frowns with the thought. But then, I think both he and I know he's perfectly capable of that supernatural feat. It wouldn't surprise me one bit if Hamish ruined my life from the great beyond.

"Mrs. Westoff." I give a mournful laugh as I glance down at my plate. "Boy, am I glad this didn't end up all over the front of your dress."

"You and me both," she says as we share a laugh.

I sober up quickly. "I'm so sorry about what happened to your ex."

"Well, I'm sorry about what happened to you." She tips her head my way. "It happened on your property. I sure hope the inn doesn't see a decline in reservations because of it. I'm pretty sure having a dead body on the grounds is more or less a pox."

"One would think," I say under my breath.

Actually, it's turned out to be quite the opposite. People travel from all over the world to stay at the inn—mostly because they think it's haunted.

She sighs hard. "Honestly, I don't even know what he was doing there that day. He knew I would be there and we had an informal agreement to steer clear of one another in public. I had asked him to agree to it and up until that day he complied. He's embarrassed me enough for a lifetime after he took off with that tramp."

Hamish took off with That Tramp? Jellybean pokes her head out from under the

table. Why, I think she's talking about Verity.

Why, I think she's got it.

I give the little cat a secretive nod. Now she's catching on.

"I'm so sorry you had to go through that," I say with a heartfelt sigh, and I mean every word. "I can't image how hard that must have been. If my husband pulled a stunt like that, he'd most likely find himself in the morgue, too." I suck in a quick breath and bring my hand to my lips, nearly toppling my plate in the process. "I'm so sorry."

Matilda belts out a good-natured laugh. "Don't be. I felt the same—well, at least I did until he actually died." She closes her eyes for a moment too long.

"I can imagine it's been difficult," I say, choosing my words carefully this time. "You know, realizing there's not a place on this planet you can go to speak with him anymore. I mean, you did care about him once. And I'm sure he cared about you."

Cared about her? I practically balk at my own words. I should really look into a muzzle.

"Oh, please." Matilda waves a perfectly manicured hand at the thought. "Hamish stopped caring about what was difficult for me the day he threw away thirty years of marriage for his plastic overinflated, underqualified secretary." Her expression darkens and I have a feeling so will her thoughts. After everything I put into this place. All those years of hardly breaking even, and now she thinks she's getting half? I can't wait to laugh in her face and that of Hamish's divorce attorney as well.

Verity wants half? Or more like Hamish wanted half and now Matilda figures it will go to Verity? I can't imagine how painful that would be. That's the equivalent of me

giving half the inn to Jasper's mistress. There would definitely be a second homicide if anyone even tried to float that idea. Scratch that. It would have been a double homicide to begin with.

"Thirty years is a long time to just throw away," I say lower than a whisper.

"Oh, I agree," she says. "And the worst part?" She takes a sip from her pink goblet and her hand shakes slightly. "He acted like he was the innocent one. Like I was the problem. It was infuriating." As if I hadn't spent two decades trying to keep this place afloat while he played doctor with that blonde bimbo.

My sweet baby does another flip. Apparently, my child is as interested in hearing about the family drama as I am.

"That must have been quite a shock," I say. "I mean, the day you found out about Verity."

"Shock?" She lets out a laugh that sounds about as genuine as Georgie's Jell-O is appetizing. "The shock was him threatening to push me out of the farm completely." Those threats regarding the news he discovered. She shudders. It's all over now. Thankfully, Hamish took his threats and what he knew with him to the grave. The last thing I need is something like that getting out. I'm the victim here. And that's exactly what's going to drive the sales of my new book all the way up the charts.

What in the world did he know?

I bet whatever it is, that's what he was blackmailing her over.

"It sounds... complicated," I offer in an effort to keep her talking.

"Complicated?" Her smile tightens. "That's one word for it. You know what he told

me that afternoon before he bit the big one? He said had something to show me. He said Hammie Mae deserved to know what kind of mother she really had—as if I was the monster in that equation.” I probably was in Hamish’s eyes, but not one part of me believes he would have told Hammie Mae what he discovered. But then again, that has been my biggest fear all along. “Anyway, the man nearly ran this place into the ground. The best thing he did for the farm was leave it in my hands. I resurrected it from the beyond. We’re turning a decent profit for the first time in years. He ran this place into the ground just the same way he ran our marriage into it.”

“Well, I’m so glad you were able to turn things around. As a woman who runs her own business, I can appreciate the hard work you put into it,” I say.

A commotion over at another table catches my eye and there’s a small crowd gathered around Georgie while she demonstrates that hummingbird contraption that sits over her face. Hammie Mae is there chatting it up with my mother and she also happens to be pointing over at Georgie with amusement.

“How is Hammie Mae handling all of this?” I ask, mostly in an effort to keep the conversation alive. I can feel it petering out and I still haven’t gotten to the bottom of the blackmail yet.

“Oh, my poor daughter.” Matilda’s voice drips with maternal concern. “She has more than enough on her plate with the baby coming.” There was no way I was about to let Hamish douse her with any dark news regarding something I may have done. Another reason I needed to silence him. And thankfully, he’s silenced forever.

I suck in a quick breath. What did she do? How did she silence him?

But I have a feeling I’m well aware of the how—I just don’t know why.

Matilda sets her face to the wind. “Hammie Mae and Hamish might have had a

falling-out after he detonated our family, but deep down I know she will always be a daddy's girl with or without him here." And without him here, there's no way she or anyone else will ever find out what I've done—and what I've done to cover it up forever as well.

I'm about to push further when an entire cacophony of high-pitched screams pierces the air.

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Both Matilda and I look over to see Georgie running like mad with her arms stretched out in front of her and that storm cloud that sits on her head trailing just past her scalp as if it had a hard time keeping up.

“ BEEEEEEEEES! ” Georgie’s voice rises above the screams of the crowd. “ THEY’RE IN MY HAIRRR! ”

“Oh no,” I groan just as Fish, Sherlock, and Jellybean sprint after her. And for reasons unknown to me, the sight of that furry parade only makes the crowd scream that much louder.

What happens next seems to unfold in slow motion.

Georgie runs and howls in a large figure-eight pattern while moving like a windmill in a hurricane. She makes a hairpin turn and comes in this direction, sending the crowd running and their plates tossed high into the sky—mine included.

Matilda helps pull me to safety just as Georgie makes a beeline (pun intended) toward the food like the pastel kaftan tornado she is.

That funny hummingbird contraption on her head catapults in one direction while she cartwheels in another. As if in an effort to slow herself down, she latches on to the tablecloth that spans thirty feet long, and with her momentum and speed, she manages to cast every salad, casserole, and deviled egg straight into the air.

And just like that, Sherlock Bones has his most ardent wish come true.

It is indeed raining bacon at the moment—and well, everything else.

Duck and cover, Fish yowls as more serving dishes start to take flight.

Food incoming, Jellybean shouts.

Sherlock's tail wags with unholy glee. Dibs on everything!

Little does he know that no one here will fight him on it.

When all is said and done, plates are turned over, food is littered across the field like culinary confetti, and there's a gurgle of some sort coming from the chocolate fountain over on the dessert table.

I've got to hand it to her. Georgie's path of destruction is pretty impressive.

Georgie comes to a grinding halt but not before taking out an additional three potato salads, a quinoa surprise (though that might be a mercy killing), and what appears to be an entire table of more deviled eggs. The eggs go airborne like tiny white missiles raining down on the stunned crowd.

Mom's broccoli salad and Georgie's Jell-O surprise—they're both gone as well. I do a double take at the Jell-O surprise. Miraculously, that green lobster is still intact and?—

The crowd begins to scream once again.

“It's crawling,” someone shouts while pointing to the green monstrosity.

Within minutes the estate has all but cleared out.

Most women aren't big fans of small things that scuttle across the ground—Jell-O salad included.

“ My Jell-O ,” Georgie wails with all the drama she can afford. “My hummingbird hat! My dignity!”

“Oh, give it a rest,” Mom grunts, helping Georgie free from the tablecloth predicament she's wound up in. “Two out of three of those were questionable to begin with.”

A titter of laughter circles what's left of the crowd, and just like that, the competition is over.

I glance over at Matilda gathering up her waitstaff and instructing them on what to do while a beefy security officer makes his way over and kindly asks Georgie to leave the premises.

It looks as if the party is over, all right. And so is my time with my prime suspect.

Matilda Westoff had something to hide while Hamish was still with us, and I'm wondering if she has even more to hide now that he's gone, too.

Like perhaps the fact she's the killer.

Georgie and Mom amble this way with the pets in tow.

Georgie is about to say something when a buzzing sound emits from her pocket.

“Don't tell me that's another bee,” Mom groans.

“It's just my phone,” Georgie says, fishing it out and looking at the screen. “It's a

message from my bank. They want to know if I meant to have all of my money wired to an offshore account in the Maldives.”

“ What? ” my mother and I shout at once.

“Why in the world would you do that?” Mom asks, looking horrified at her friend.

“I didn’t.” Georgie’s face loses all color. “I’ve been robbed.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

The Seaview Sheriff's Department smells like coffee, donuts, and questionable life choices for those unfortunate enough to be booked.

As soon as we realized that poor Georgie was the victim of a virtual bank heist, we hightailed it to Seaview in hopes that my handsome hubby could right all the wrongs in this cruel world—or at least help track down Georgie's money.

What is this place? Jellybean asks from her perch in my mother's arms while Georgie holds Fish. Both women are a jumble of nerves and I suggested they snuggle with the cats to help calm them down. But judging by the fact both felines look as if they're being squeezed to death, I'd say the calming effect has yet to kick in.

The Seaview Sheriff's Department is a large boxy building filled with white walls, desks, and floors. It holds the strong scent of bleach and stale coffee and is a beehive of men and women in blue.

Fish wiggles her whiskers toward Jellybean. This, my friend, is the place where criminals' dreams go to die.

Jellybean's little nose twitches. That must be why I smell ulterior motives.

Fish nods as we approach Camila's desk. And cheap perfume.

I smell donuts! Sherlock's tail wags with hope.

You always smell donuts. Fish sighs. Though I have to admit, the perfume is a bit much. What is that, Desperate Ex No. 5?

Actually, Camila would be desperate ex number one, seeing that Jasper doesn't exactly have a long line of desperate exes.

Camila Ryder rises from her desk like Venus emerging from the sea—if Venus shopped exclusively at stores that think professional attire is something more along the line of a far too revealing cocktail dress. Camila's long chestnut hair has a body of its own, and her curves are doing things that probably violate several local ordinances. And her face, well, she's definitely supermodel material.

Have I mentioned she's my husband's ex-fiancée and current secretary? Because that's always fun.

She's about to head this way but stops short as her eyes do that broken elevator thing while inspecting my body—and not in a good way. Her perfectly glossed mouth drops open as she takes in my current state.

“Wow, Bizzy.” She gags on my name. “You're the size of the Chrysler Building.”

“Gee, thanks,” I grunt. “I was going for the Empire State Building, but pregnancy is so unpredictable.”

The baby kicks, either agreeing with my sass or protesting Camila's choice of structural analogies.

“I mean”—Camila continues, circling her desk like a shark in stilettos—“you're absolutely glowing. In an expanding universe kind of way.”

“Careful,” I warn as I pat my belly. “The universe can get rather violent while in expansion mode.”

I don't usually make it a practice to threaten Camila—that's typically her

territory—but that dig warranted it.

It looks as if you're not only growing a baby, you're growing a spine. She winks my way with the internal dig.

“Very funny,” I mutter.

Camila has long since realized that I can read minds. You see, Leo Granger actually bothered to steal this beast from under Jasper's nose, once upon a time. It ended their friendship for a while, but thankfully they're back on track and thankfully Leo dropped Camila.

But while they were together, he confessed to her about his gift—or his curse as it were. And well, I've echoed Camila's thoughts back to her one too many times in an effort to mess with her and she quickly did the mind-reading math. Although I've never admitted to being able to do as much, so there's that.

“Ladies”—Mom interrupts our verbal sparring—“as entertaining as this is, I'm sorry, but we need to see Jasper immediately.”

“He's in his office.” Camila swoons for a minute, and as if that's not bad enough, she somehow makes those words sound as if she were reading them straight out of a steamy romance novel. “Though he's very busy.” She takes a moment to glower at me. “Very, very busy.”

She says busy like it's a euphemism for something far more interesting, and inappropriate—and ironically nothing at all like my name.

“I'm sure he'll make time for his wife.” I smile sweetly. “You remember what those are, right? Wives? The person a husband is devoted to. I happen to be Jasper's in case you need reminding.”

The baby gives an enthusiastic kick. Even my unborn child appreciates a good zinger.

Ooh, claws out! Fish clearly approves, too.

Though Camila's claws are probably acrylic, Jellybean adds. Come to think of it, she reminds me a bit of Verity.

Me too, Jellybean. Me too.

Time to clue Jasper in on that very same thing.

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We hardly knock before entering Jasper's office, which looks exactly like what you'd expect from a homicide detective's workspace—case files stacked in organized chaos across his desk, a half-empty box of donuts, and enough coffee cups to suggest he's single-handedly keeping the local café in business.

These coffee cups weren't garnered from the coffee drip stationed in the lunch room either. I bet Camila has been doing some serious coffee runs in order to seduce him. After all, she learned long ago her womanly wiles weren't nearly enough.

Jasper jumps up so fast that he nearly knocks over one of those infamous coffee cups as he pulls me into his arms.

"What's happening?" he pants. "Is it the baby? Is everything okay? Is something wrong? Did you catch the killer?"

"Not yet," I tease as he quickly lands a kiss on my forehead. "And everything is fine." I pat my belly reassuringly. "Well, mostly fine."

"Mostly?" His brows hike with concern. "What does mostly mean?"

"It means someone cleaned out my bank account," Georgie wails, collapsing into a chair with enough drama to qualify for a Daytime Emmy. Heck, after what she's been through, she deserves it. This drama is real.

Here we go. Fish settles in for the show. Though I have to say, this might actually be worth missing my afternoon nap.

Jasper's expression shifts from concerned husband to that of a focused detective. "Tell me everything."

"Well"—Georgie plucks out her phone and hands it to him—"I got this text from the bank about suspicious activity, and when I checked my balance, everything was gone! Poof! Just like my dignity after that bee incident."

Mom ticks her head to the side. "I'm shocked the chocolate incident that preceded it didn't ding your dignity. Or the five thousand incidents that preceded that."

"Just you keep picking on me, Red," Georgie growls at my mother. "And I'll show you another good time yet."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Mom snorts.

Jasper works quickly and is already on the phone with the bank. His face grows increasingly serious as he listens.

"The money was transferred to MW Enterprises in the Maldives?" He scribbles something on a notepad before hanging up. "We'll need to get the FBI involved. Georgie, can you think of anything unusual that happened to you lately? Any strange emails or calls?"

"Let's see..." Georgie thinks hard, which involves a lot of ceiling-staring and lip-pursing. "There was that Nigerian prince who needed help with his inheritance..."

"Please tell me you didn't," Mom groans.

She, too, fell for something like that once, not that long ago.

"Of course not," Georgie says with a grin. "I told him to contact Bizzy since she

owns an inn. Much more room for money laundering.”

“So that’s why I got that email,” I muse.

“What about that yoga studio timeshare in Antarctica?” Mom suggests.

“Or the time you won the lottery ticket from that contest you never entered?” I add.

“Or the free cruise you won by being the millionth visitor to a website?” Jasper pinches the bridge of his nose.

Suffice it to say, Georgie has fallen victim to more than her fair share of internet scams. In fact, so much more that I’m starting to think they use her as training grounds for their nefarious troops.

“Those all sound wonderful,” Georgie brightens. “But no, nothing like that.”

Fish looks my way. Is anyone else surprised that she said wonderful instead of suspicious?

I shake my head at her. Georgie couldn’t surprise us if she tried.

Jasper rubs his temples as if a serious headache is en route. “Speaking of suspicious activities, how did things go at Westoff Farms?” He looks my way. “The video of the Great Side Dish Stampede is already trending on social media.”

My mouth falls open as he says it. “Wait, how did you know I was there?”

“You had your notifications on. And well, Georgie was live-streaming the entire thing on her Insta Pictures account.” He shrugs. “I follow her. And apparently, so do bees.”

“In my defense”—Georgie lifts a finger—“those bees were clearly working for my competition. Probably hired by that woman with the three- beean salad. I thought she looked shifty.”

Jasper checks his watch. “Well, ladies. It looks as if I’m done for the day.” He quickly gathers his things. “How about we head back to the inn before Georgie discovers any more international investment opportunities.”

Or before Camila finds another excuse to bring Jasper gourmet coffee, Jellybean observes and I nod her way. That sweet cat is surprisingly intuitive.

We pass the front desk where Camila somehow makes scrolling the internet look seductive.

“Have a great evening,” Camila calls after us like a threat. And Bizzy? Maternity wear is so cute these days. You know what they say—women in your state are in need of it long after the baby is born.

“Very funny,” I say. “And I hear they’re hiring at the Celebration Grill. You know what they say—it’s best to leave before you’re fired.” I hook arms with my handsome hubby and Jasper lifts a brow my way.

Don’t worry, he muses internally while landing a kiss to my cheek. I have no doubt she warranted it.

The baby gives an emphatic kick of approval. Like mother, like child—we both know how to deliver a parting shot.

“Well”—Jasper says as we head to the parking lot—“between Georgie’s bee attack going viral and her bank account being cleaned out, I’d say this qualifies as a questionable Friday.”

“Oh, it’s Good Friday,” I say, startled by the realization. “Although I guess it was a questionable Friday for Georgie. And if you think she has questions, just wait until you hear what Matilda had to say,” I tell him, kissing his lips before we split ways to get into our respective cars.

“Does dinner at the Country Cottage Café sound good?” he asks. “I’d like a meal with my full debriefing.”

“Dinner with you is always a good idea.”

We take off for Cider Cove, and all the way home the only thing I can think about is who killed Hamish Westoff right under my nose.

Okay, so I might be thinking about food, too.

But who can blame me? The Country Cottage Café has some of the best food around.

And I’m about to get me a heaping helping.

A heaping helping of justice would be nice, too.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

The view from the patio of the Country Cottage Café is showing off this evening as if it were about to be featured in a travel magazine.

From here, you get a front-row seat to the Atlantic's evening show, close enough to hear the waves but far enough that no one gets an unexpected saltwater shower.

String lights twinkle overhead as if they were trying to compete with the stars, and the scent of fresh-baked sourdough is doing battle with the ocean breeze. Down on the sand, families are scattered across the cove like confetti. Kids armed with buckets of seawater chase each other while their parents get lost in a good book.

Jasper and Leo have gone full beach mode, trading their badges for T-shirts and cargo shorts while tossing a football back and forth and participating in some serious male bonding.

I'm trying not to stare too hard at my husband, but this hormonal fire in me is real, and watching him catch a football with that tan body isn't helping matters.

Shameless peacocks, Fish muses from her prime viewing spot on the next seat over, though I notice she hasn't taken her eyes off their game either.

Less criticism, more running, Sherlock says as he bounds past us as if that was a flying piece of bacon instead of a football, although I suppose it's the same difference.

Fish and Jellybean dart on after him, as do Cinnamon and Gatsby, and soon all five of them are racing back and forth along the cove.

Meanwhile, Emmie and I are holding court at our favorite patio table, demolishing a plate of her homemade peanut butter chocolate eggs while swooning over the bouquet of pink peonies before us.

“You know, Emmie, these eggs are so good I’m considering writing them into my will,” I say, only half-teasing. The baby gives an enthusiastic kick of approval as I reach for another one. “These chocolate peanut butter eggs are a serious hit,” I tell her, already eyeing my next pastel victim. “I’ve already considered hoarding them in my purse like some sort of dessert squirrel—a very pregnant one at that.”

“No need to hoard.” Emmie laughs, fighting a losing battle with her wind-tossed hair before quickly securing it into a ponytail. “I made extra, don’t you worry. Now spill. What’s this I heard about a catastrophe of side dish proportions at Westoff Farms? Grady and Nessa mentioned you went there and I’ve been dying to know what happened for the last few hours.”

I groan as I lean back in my chair. “Where do I even start? My mother and Georgie both wanted a shot at that thousand-dollar prize. So my mother entered with a broccoli salad that was surprisingly to die for and Georgie entered what is now her infamous Jell-O surprise casserole into the competition.”

Emmie gasps. “You mean the one with lime Jell-O, cottage cheese, crushed potato chips, and marshmallows?”

“How did you know?” I lean back to better inspect my bestie.

“Are you kidding? Georgie makes it at least once a month in an effort to try to get me to put it on my menu. I swear, that green lobster crawled into the café on its own a few times, too.” She shudders hard. “The staff and I all agreed it was a war crime. I can’t believe she took it out in public.”

“Oh, she did,” I assure her. “And it’s just as terrifying as you remember. But the real catastrophe came when Georgie brought out that hummingbird feeder hat-like contraption. The one with the daisies and the glass shield?”

“Ooh, I’ve seen those all over the internet,” she says, seemingly genuinely interested. “Wait. Don’t tell me she donned that thing at the competition?”

“She did,” I confirm. “And apparently, bees are big fans of lime Jell-O and daisies. Chaos ensued. People screamed. Potato salads flew everywhere. Sherlock thinks it was the best day of his life. And it might have been. Oh, and I ran into Hammie Mae again while I was there,” I say with delight. “Honestly, she was the bright spot in the whole afternoon.” Although I wince a little as that conversation we had comes back to me. “You should hear the wild things she was saying about her birthing plan.”

“ Ooh , I do want to hear,” she says, snapping up another pastel egg. “My birthing plan consists of getting to the hospital before I actually give birth.”

“That sounds reasonable.” I nod. “But Hammie Mae’s birthing plan is less reasonable and more of a Broadway production,” I tell her. “The woman is importing bamboo sheets from Japan, hiring a trio of violinists to play Mozart, and has a doula who will apparently scatter rose petals like she’s officiating a royal wedding.”

Emmie’s mouth falls open at the thought. “You’re kidding.”

I shake my head. “And that’s not all. She’s having an artist paint the skyline at the exact moment of birth. Oh, and she’s convinced the baby’s intelligence will skyrocket thanks to the organic essential oils woven and crystal wreaths she’ll have present. Wait? Did I get that mixed up?” I shrug because I doubt it matters.

“ Wow .” Emmie inches her head back, stunned, because clearly, I’ve given her a lot to consider. “I can’t decide if I want to laugh or cry.”

“Both are valid reactions,” I assure her, just as Jasper and Leo jog up from the beach, looking as if they’ve been rolling in a sandbox—a delicious powdered sugar sandbox.

Why am I suddenly craving powdered donuts?

Jasper leans down to kiss my cheek, and I get a whiff of his spiced cologne mingling with the salty air, and my hormones begin to buzz twice as hard.

Would it be rude to zip him back to our cottage and have my way with him?

Leo laughs hard and I shoot him a look.

Now that was rude.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

“W

hat’s the hot topic?” Jasper asks as he lands a cool kiss to my lips.

Both he and Leo just finished up a workout session on the beach that involved a football, lots of sweating, and lots of well-defined muscles glinting in the sunset.

“Hammie Mae’s birth plan,” Emmie chimes as they both fall into a seat here on the patio of the Country Cottage Café. The furry among us are still chasing one another’s tails up and down the cove. “Bizzy just gave me the full rundown.” She pats Leo on the arm. “How fast do you think we could import bamboo sheets from Japan?”

“Don’t forget the violin trio,” I tell her, snagging another one of those chocolate peanut butter eggs.

“Geez,” Jasper muses, snapping up a chocolate egg of his own. “Did she mention having a chef on standby in case she gets hungry during labor?”

“There’s no eating allowed during labor,” I tell him with a tip of my head. “That was the first thing I looked into.” I shrug over at Emmie and Leo. “What can I say? I like snacks.” I take a bite out of the peanut butter chocolate egg as if to prove my point.

“The chef actually sounds sensible,” Leo says. “After all, I’ll be there and there’s nothing stopping me from eating.”

“Except for me,” Emmie says as she knocks her elbow into his. “Speaking of having a chef on standby, I hired a team of chefs to take over once I’m on maternity leave,”

she assures me. “And they are the best of the best.”

“Thank you,” I tell her. “And no rush to come back. I want you to spend as much time with your little one as you like.” I already made it clear to Emmie that she could take off indefinitely if she wanted. But as it stands, Emmie feels the need to cook for the masses as much as she needs to breathe. Sort of the way I feel about hunting down killers. I’d say her job was safer, but let’s face it, if I were in the kitchen, my life would be in twice the danger than it is around a killer.

The pets come back and promptly crash at our feet. And as if right on cue, the kitchen staff brings out bowls of fresh water for our furry entourage, along with treats that Sherlock inhales as if he’s preparing for hibernation.

Dinner arrives shortly after—seafood chowder and fresh sourdough for Jasper, a turkey club sandwich for Leo, a garden salad with shrimp for Emmie, and a burger the size of my head for me.

The baby does a happy dance as I take my first bite.

Oh, I’m going to miss Emmie at the helm in this kitchen. Her recipes are simply the best.

Jasper leans in. “Will anyone here lose their appetite if we talk suspects for a bit?” he asks before he shifts into detective mode.

“Oh hon”—Emmie gurgles a dark laugh—“I couldn’t lose my appetite if a parade of headless zombies marched out onto the sand.” She nods my way. “And Bizzy’s appetite only increases when criminals are mentioned.”

“You know me so well.” I blow her a kiss as a form of appreciation.

“Let’s see”—Jasper sighs—“I’ve got Matilda, Verity, and Hammie Mae on my list.” He looks my way. “Anyone else?”

“Nope,” I say. “Although Matilda is the only one with a strong motive so far.” I take another bite out of my big, juicy burger and try to keep the ketchup from decorating my blouse. “She’s hiding something big about herself, and Hamish was threatening to spill it.”

“I think Hammie Mae has a motive, too,” Emmie points out. “I mean, everyone knows she cut off her father after he had that affair. She was mortified because of it. And she’s so close to her mom. I bet her heart was broken for her poor mother, too.”

Leo nods. “Heartbreak is a stronger motive than you might think. But does she have it in her to kill? She seems more likely to kill you with a PowerPoint about organic baby food.”

“Touché.” I tip my glass of lemonade his way. “And then there’s Verity,” I say, watching my burger slowly lose its structural integrity. “She’s trying so hard to seem innocent, she might as well have the word suspicious tattooed on her forehead. Although I don’t have anything to back my claim. It’s just a hunch.”

“I trust your hunches,” Jasper says with a curve of his lips and sends my hormones spiking once again.

Was that an invitation?

I bite down on a smile.

Why, I have a hunch I know exactly what we’ll be doing later.

Leo clears his throat with a laugh.

“Would you stop listening in on my thoughts?” I tease. Only I’m not really teasing.

Jasper leans back. “Exactly what kinds of thoughts are you having?”

“I’ll clue you in later,” I say with a wink and we all share a dark laugh.

“As for the homicide—we need more evidence.” Jasper leans back and crosses his arms. “Something concrete.”

Jellybean lifts her tiny little head. What about the fact that Matilda was supposed to pay alimony to Hamish?

“I forgot about that,” I say as I quickly relay her thoughts to the non-mind readers among us.

“Now that’s another strong motive,” Jasper says.

Leo nods. “Two strikes against Matilda.”

“I don’t like the direction this is heading in,” I say with a sigh. “Matilda is such a great woman and she’s built back the farm after Hamish nearly destroyed it. I guess he and Verity weren’t the business dream team that they professed to be.”

Emmie nods. “That’s because they were too busy fooling around to tend to any actual business.”

“And that’s why I hate that all of the evidence is pointing to Matilda,” I say.

“I do, too,” Jasper says, giving my hand a squeeze. “I’ll do some more digging.”

“We’ll do some more digging,” I say, giving him a squeeze right back.

“Okay, but please try to relegate your investigative superpowers to a laptop,” he suggests. “The last thing I want is you and the baby in the line of danger. I’ll take it from there.”

“You bet,” I say.

Sherlock sniffs. Notice how she didn’t make any promises.

That’s because she knows she can’t keep them, Fish points out.

They’re both right.

I shoot a look to Leo that amounts to a threat if he says a single word, and he laughs and holds up his hands as if he were staying out of it.

Leo Granger is a very smart man. But then, I knew that when he married my bestie.

Gatsby stands abruptly from under the table, and every one of our dinners jumps in the air a good foot as if they suddenly animated to life.

Sherlock and Cinnamon bark. Fish and Jellybean scatter. And just before my burger is about to hit the ground, Sherlock opens his mouth and swallows what’s left of my dinner.

But it’s not the flying food that has my attention, it’s those bushy peonies that are flying through the air.

The flowers!

I gasp as I look over at Jasper.

“I know exactly how those scammers vacuumed out Georgie’s bank account.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

The fireplace in our cottage crackles with what might be the season's last hurrah. Spring nights in Maine are warming up, but tonight there's just enough chill in the air to justify one more cozy evening by the fire. Not that I'm complaining. Between the dancing flames, the woodsy scent of smoke, and Jasper's strong arms wrapped snugly around me, this might as well be heaven.

You hoomans and your obsession with fire, Fish meows from her perch on the mantel as her tail gives a lazy swish. I suppose it does make for a decent ambiance, but I much prefer the electric heater. Far less crackling and far more heat.

Agree. But it's the perfect napping temperature, Jellybean adds, her voice already heavy with sleep as she gives a luxurious stretch.

Everything is the perfect napping temperature for you two, Sherlock chimes in from his oversized bed near the hearth. Though I wouldn't mind some company on this prime real estate. Naps are best when you have someone to snuggle with.

To my surprise, both cats decide to take him up on the offer, curling up on either side of their furry canine friend and creating what has to be the most unlikely cuddle puddle in Cider Cove history.

I'll admit, the sight of Sherlock flanked by two snoozing felines is heartwarming.

The baby gives a sudden kick as if it were a nod of approval for the sudden burst of furry harmony.

I lean back into Jasper's chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat against my

back and my mind begins to race with the revelation I had earlier.

I shake my head as I watch the flames dance. “It didn’t occur to me until those flowers practically flew in my face that Georgie’s scammer might have come from that mystery delivery she got—on the day of the murder, no less.”

Jasper’s chin brushes the top of my head as he shifts. “Leo and I looked into it. Turns out, QR codes are a scammer’s golden ticket. One scan and they can basically set up a second home in your bank account. Or more to the point, buy one with the money they steal.”

“Okay, that’s terrifying.” I watch as he pulls up article after article about QR code scams on his phone. “So they just... what? Create a fake code that looks legitimate and suddenly they have access to your entire life?”

“Pretty much.” He scrolls through a particularly alarming report. “They can redirect to fake websites, install malware, even access your camera and microphone.”

My stomach twists, and not just because the baby has chosen this moment to somersault like they’re training for the nationals in gymnastics, they apparently share my digital privacy concerns.

“What kind of place is this?” I turn slightly to face him and can’t help feeling more than a little overwhelmed. “Jasper, we’re bringing a baby into this big, scary world where people steal your money through flower deliveries and murder people with chocolate bunnies.”

“Hey— whoa .” Jasper sets his laptop aside and pulls me closer as his hand rests on my belly. “Don’t go borrowing trouble.” He lands a kiss on the top of my head. “There’s still so much good in the world.”

I scoff at the thought. “Like what?”

“Like the beach.” He doesn’t miss a beat. “Like this cottage. Like the fact that Sherlock, Fish, and Jellybean have somehow formed a truce long enough to take a nap together.”

Temporary truce, Fish says as she gives Sherlock a gentle swish with her tail. Let’s not get carried away.

“My point stands,” Jasper says with a rumble of a laugh that trembles through his chest. “There’s still Christmas, Easter, chocolate eggs—especially the ones Emmie makes—and now this tiny human who already has better instincts than most adults I know.”

I laugh despite myself. “You’re good, you know that?”

“Not as good as you,” he counters, brushing a kiss against my temple. “You’ve got this way of making people—everyone, really—feel seen, feel important. It’s one of the many reasons you’re going to be an incredible mom.”

My heart squeezes tight as I look up at him. “You really think so?”

“I know so,” he says, landing a soft kiss on my lips. “You’re kind, you’re brave, and you never back down from a challenge. Plus, you’ve got this innate ability to find joy in the smallest things. Like solving a murder—or indulging in chocolate bunnies.”

“Jasper Wilder, are you flirting with me?” I tease as I give his ribs a gentle tweak.

“Always.” He gives my ribs a tweak right back and I jump with a laugh. “And I’ll tell you this much—you’re going to be the kind of mom who makes this kid feel like they can take on the world. Because you take on the world every single day, Bizzy. And

somehow, you still find time to make sure everyone around you feels loved.”

Tears sting my eyes, and I quickly blink them away. “You’re not so bad yourself, Detective Wilder. I mean, you already look at me as if I hung the moon, and I’m currently the size of it.”

“You’re beautiful,” he says, his tone perfectly serious. “The world is still a good place, Bizzy. I promise.”

“You’re right,” I sigh, relaxing against him. “Plus, this baby is going to have the world’s best dad.”

“And the world’s most amazing mom. Though possibly the most trouble-prone.”

“Hey ,” I protest with a laugh. “I prefer to think of myself as adventure-adjacent.”

“Is that what we’re calling it now?” He grins. “Because I’m pretty sure normal pregnant women don’t solve murders between birthing classes.”

“Normal is overrated,” I tell him. “Never mind that I haven’t started birthing classes. Besides, our kid is clearly a detective already. Did you notice how they always kick when we’re onto something?”

The baby obliges with a well-timed somersault.

“See?” I pat my belly.

He gives a little laugh. “They’ve got your instincts.”

“And my appetite,” I wince as I say it.

“I did see you eyeing my dinner.”

“I am eating for two.” I sink a little in his arms. “Although some days I’m not sure if it’s for two people or two football teams.”

“You can have my dinner any day of the week,” he says, pulling me close. “Besides, we’re working on building our own football team.” He stands and quickly scoops me into his arms as if I were as light as a marshmallow Peep. “Come on, Detective Baker Wilder. I think it’s time for bed.”

“But I’m not sleepy,” I say with a laugh.

“Who said anything about sleeping?”

“Jasper!” I yelp, laughing as I cling to his neck for dear life— two dear lives. “I’m perfectly capable of walking, you know.”

“Yeah, but this is more fun,” he says, trotting me toward the bedroom.

“How many people make up a football team, anyway?” I ask, amused at the thought of us building our own.

“About fifty-three.”

“What?” I laugh as I swat him. “You are crazy.”

“Crazy about you.”

Watch it, buddy, Fish calls after us. Just because you have a few muscles doesn’t mean you should carry around a pregnant woman like she’s a throw pillow. I abide by the adage that just because you can doesn’t mean you should.

Says the cat who once got stuck in an Easter basket, Sherlock is quick to remind her.

That was one time! Fish protests. And it was a deceptively spacious-looking basket.

The chatter among the three of them dissolves as Jasper carries me over the threshold of our bedroom.

The baby gives another quick kick, and it's a gentle reminder of the football team we're building—I mean, life we're building together—and I can't help but think that for all its madness and QR code scams, this world isn't so bad. Not when I have Jasper Wilder by my side.

However, I make a mental note to make sure there are no QR codes involved in my baby registry. You can never be too prepared.

Speaking of preparation, if I want to catch a killer before the Easter Bunny arrives, I had better hop to it.

Or else someone out there might just get away with murder.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

“ H

e is risen!” Mom and Georgie shout my way.

“He is risen indeed!” I shout back as I navigate the crowd right here on Main Street this warm, and might I add, perfect Easter morning.

The entire town has turned out in their Easter Sunday best for the Hip Hip Parade, transforming these cobbled streets into a sea of pastel, complete with elaborate hats that would make the Kentucky Derby jealous.

The crowds are thick, the air is perfectly balmy, and the sound of the high school band along with the roar of the crowd competes for my ears, while the scent of fresh baked hot-cross buns and popcorn compete for my appetite.

Jasper had a few leads he was following in the investigation of Georgie’s missing money and went to his office early this morning but assured me he’d be back before the parade ended.

Fish jockeys to stand tall in the tote bag slung over my shoulder. If one more float blasts “Here Comes Peter Cottontail,” I’m declaring this parade a bushy-tailed disaster zone.

At least you’re not being crushed by that bunny’s bushy tail. Sherlock gives a soft woof that sounds more like a laugh and I can already feel the zinger coming. But I’m pretty sure your tail takes up half that bag. Sorry about that, Jellybean.

“I’m afraid it’s my belly that’s taking up half that bag,” I say. “And yes, I just took a dig at my own size.” I laugh, adjusting the bag as best as I can.

“Oh, you look perfect,” Mom says as she and Georgie swoop in like a couple of pastel-colored hurricanes complete with Easter bonnets—who just so happen to have a fair amount of glittery beads hanging from their necks.

It’s sort of a Cider Cove tradition that no matter what the holiday, if there’s a parade, then parade beads get tossed out into the crowd. I’ve yet to catch any, but then, I don’t need another ounce to weigh me down. My feet are already killing me and it’s not even nine in the morning.

Mom adjusts her hat and I love every lavender inch of it with its fluffy white flowers that circle the brim.

Georgie’s hat is a red disc that sits on her head filled with red and yellow daisies. I try not to think too hard about what that might mean.

They both offer up a hearty happy Easter along with a quick embrace and I nearly knock Georgie’s hat right off in the process.

“Oh, sorry,” I say, helping her adjust it and it’s only then I notice it’s made entirely of—plastic?

“Watch it, sis,” Georgie says, securing a buckle under her chin. “This hat is chock-full of nectar. I’m on a mission to land me a hummingbird or twelve.”

“Not again,” I moan at the memory of what happened the last time she donned one of these contraptions. Albeit this one doesn’t come with a protective face mask and that has me worried.

“Oh, it’s happening again, all right.” Mom tosses up her hands at the thought. “I tried to stop her, but she’s too stubborn to listen to me.”

“I am not. There’s nothing to listen to.” Georgie turns my way. “I found out that the only reason I was attacked by a swarm of bees is because Westoff Farms is crawling with those cute little fuzzy stingers. We don’t have anything to worry about here in the open. Just promise me something. If you see those winged little divas hanging out with my hat—and I mean the ones that hum, not the ones that buzz—snap a few pictures, would you? I’m going to go viral with these babies. I just know it.”

She most likely will. Mom sniffs to herself. Just not for the reasons she thinks.

Here’s hoping my mother is wrong for once. And it would be just the once.

Georgie shields her eyes with her hand as she cranes her neck farther down the parade route. “I think I see a float covered with chocolate bunnies heading this way!”

Jellybean stretches her furry little neck in that direction as well. That would be the Westoff Farms’ float. Hamish participated in every parade this town held, every single year.

Sherlock jumps on his hind legs and stares that way in anticipation. I bet they have bacon! BACON! BACON! He barks those last two words out as if he were starting a bacon revolution.

“You listen up, Georgie.” Mom shoots her bestie the side-eye. “I don’t care how many chocolate bunnies they have on that float. I don’t want you going anywhere near it. Besides, I know for a fact the Easter Bunny left a giant basket brimming with Westoff chocolate bunnies right on your front porch this morning.” The Easter Bunny would be me, Mom muses that last bit to herself.

“ Aww ,” I coo audibly without meaning to.

“Yeah, yeah, I saw it,” Georgie grouses. “But after that mystery flower disaster, I thought it was best if I didn’t take any chances. I chucked that whole basket into the dumpster behind the inn.”

“You what?” Mom balks in horror. “I spent close to two hundred bucks on all those bunnies.” I figured it would be cheaper than bailing her out of jail when she took flight after every chocolate bunny that reared its milk-chocolate head during this morning’s parade .

Come to think of it, she’s probably right about that.

But before Georgie can answer, someone gives a sharp whistle and we look over to see Huxley making his way toward us, looking like a dapper ad for business suits come to life with his slicked back dark hair and bright blue eyes.

Baby Mack sits perches on his hip and looks every bit a miniature version of his daddy. He, too, looks dapper while gussied up in a tiny seersucker suit along with a bowtie that’s somehow staying perfectly straight despite all that toddler energy he’s exuding.

And, of course, there’s a ball of white fluff trying to keep up with them. That would be Cane, Huxley’s Samoyed, trotting beside them looking exactly like his canine soulmate, Candy—that would be Macy’s dog. They might be mistaken as twins, but in reality they are from completely different litters and actually have a rollicking romance brewing between the two of them.

Bizzy, nice to see you again! Cane gives a happy bark before sniffing and dancing a circle around Sherlock. Rumor has it, you’re up to your eyeballs in cats.

Fish snorts. You say it like it's a bad thing.

"There's my sweet grandbaby," Mom coos as she snatches up Mack before Hux can blink. Little Mack giggles, already reaching for the parade beads around Mom's neck and proceeds to strangle her with them.

Note to self: secure a death grip on my child at all times, especially seeing that some of these women can perform a baby heist before you ever notice your little one is gone.

Add that to the long list of things to worry about.

"Happy Easter," Hux says with a laugh before offering me a quick embrace. "Is that Fish?" he says, giving her head a little pat. "And a feline friend? Here, let me take the cats," he offers, taking the tote bag from me. "Your legs have enough living beings to carry as it is."

The baby gives a kick of agreement.

"Living beings and that triple helping of chocolate chip waffles I woofed down this morning," I tease. Only I'm not teasing.

Hux nods my way with a sudden look of concern. "Mom and Georgie called me up this morning and told me about that QR scam with the flowers."

"That's right," Mom says, bouncing baby Mack on her hip and he gives a giggle. "We called him at six this morning and told him everything."

"At six?" I balk.

"I didn't want Mackie to miss the big parade." My mother turns to Hux. "Bizzy

doesn't know the latest." She bounces Mack once more until they're both facing my direction again. "They not only vacuumed all the money from Georgie's bank account, but they ran up all of her credit cards, too."

"What?" I gasp as my heart sinks. "Oh, Georgie, I'm so sorry. But if it's any consolation, Jasper is already making progress in your case. He'll fix this. I promise."

I hope.

I press my lips tight with the thought.

"This is terrible," Hux says. "And it really steams me to hear about people being taken advantage of—especially old people."

"Who you calling old, you little squirt?" Georgie shoots back.

"Sorry." He winces. "But it's official," Hux says, somehow managing to look professional despite having two cats using him as a climbing post at the moment. "I'm starting a new website where people can submit and verify scams. And creating a database of known scams as well."

"That sounds wonderful," I tell him. "And so very much needed. Can you include scams regarding babies in there, too? You know, just in case someone wants to steal an infant or two?" I'm not usually this paranoid, but let's face it, the world is giving me reason to be.

Before he can answer, a cacophony of music, cheers, laughter, and wild shrill screams breaks out all around us.

Why do I have a very bad feeling about this?

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

My mother, Georgie, my brother, and I all turn our heads toward the street where the Easter parade is off and running. The crowds are thick, the sun is warm, and by the looks of it, the Westoff float is headed our way.

We turn to see what looks like a giant farm on that contraption on wheels, complete with a wild blueberry patch in the front and a chocolate factory with women hovering over a conveyor belt in the back. But it's the people dressed up in pink and blue gingham suits that are tossing out full size gold foil chocolate bunnies into the crowd that have garnered everyone's attention.

Georgie cups her hands around her mouth and shouts, "Alert! Alert!" Georgie turns toward the crowd. "That float has a CHOCOLATE FACTORY ON BOARD!"

The crowd oohs and ahhs just as it starts to rain gold foil bunnies, and soon enough, the float has passed us by with nary a yummy bunny landing in our direction.

"Drats," I say just as an elbow or a foot prods me from the inside. "Ooh." I laugh. "It looks as if the baby isn't pleased with the fact we came up empty-handed either."

"I'll take care of this," Georgie says, holding onto her hat with one hand. "Out of my way," she shouts as she charges into the crowd. "I've got a baby to feed."

"Wait," Mom calls out after her. "Bizzy never asked you to do any such thing." Georgie catches a gold foil bunny midair and keeps on chasing after the float for more. "Save some chocolate for the rest of us, would you?" Mom takes off after her, still carrying Mack who's squealing with delight at the impromptu chase.

Huxley grunts, “I’d better get my son before Mackenzie sees him surfing on a parade float. I’ll catch you at the inn if I don’t see you sooner.” He sighs hard before hurrying after them. Mackenzie will have my head if that kid ends up on a float. In fact, those were her last words to me this morning before she took off to officiate the event.

I watch him and Cane take off, thinking that Mackenzie would be justified for once in having my brother’s head. And well, she’ll probably demand to have my mother’s primal apex as well. And maybe mine.

A realization hits me and I gasp while looking down at Sherlock.

“Huxley has the cats,” I practically shriek. “I’ll have his head if they end up on a float.”

Although let’s face it, they’d probably fare better than little Mack.

Don’t worry, Bizzy. Sherlock jumps with a bark. I’ll make sure they keep out of danger. He darts off without notice.

“Watch the baby, too, would you?” I call after him. “And maybe keep an eye on Georgie as well!”

Come to think of it, my mother might need protection from Georgie and the chaos of the parade. The line of defense needed seems never-ending.

Speaking of protection, I’m about to scan the vicinity for my handsome hubby when the crowd parts like the Red Sea and Macy, her sweet dog Candy, and Jordy appear, with Camila trailing behind them like a glamorous vampire—because that’s essentially what she is.

Macy is rocking a spring dress that probably cost more than my monthly budget at the inn, while Jordy manages to make his handyman wardrobe work for him like only he can. Camila's fashion choice for the day is polished, prim, and proper, although her thoughts are screaming something else entirely—that's because it's laced with white noise.

White noise would be the universe's way of sparing me the naughty details. I have a feeling her thoughts would make a steamy romance novel blush.

She takes a moment to glower over at my sister. Why should Macy get the best man candy in Cider Cove? Those arms belong on a magazine cover—and they certainly belong around my naked waist.

She looks my way and her hand flies to her mouth as she catches my eye. I'm guessing she's suddenly remembered my little extraterrestrial talent. I point two fingers at my eyes, then at her, getting my message across: I'm watching you, sister.

We wish one another a quick happy Easter as Macy wraps her arms around Jordy while Candy sniffs and barks at the passing parade still going on full steam.

I smell Cane, Candy barks. Where is he, Bizzy? I haven't licked or sniffed him in close to a week.

I glance over my shoulder on the visual hunt for my handsome husband because I can sort of commiserate with how she's feeling.

"Cane is just up ahead," I tell her, and Candy begins tugging at Macy to take off in that direction. "If I were a mind reader, I'd think she missed licking and sniffing her canine boy toy."

Camila nods. Same, girl, same. She licks her lips while looking at Jordy—and

apparently with no fear of me listening in on her lusty musings.

Jordy laughs as he gives the white fluff ball a quick pat to the back. “Well, Bizzy, I’ve got some good news for you. The trees at the inn are all pruned and ready for spring,” he reports with a grin, completely oblivious to the fact he’s being mentally claimed by Camila Ryder. Either that or he’s picking up on it—and he’s totally enjoying it, too.

Jordy, much like my sister, craves the attention of every and any person of the opposite gender—even the emotional vampires among us.

“ Aww ,” Macy purrs and bats her lashes at him. “Now that you’ve trimmed my sister’s trees, why don’t you come to my place tonight and trim a few of mine?” She kisses up his face and all but suctions his ear right off his head. “And if you do a good job, I might even whip up my grandmother’s secret scone recipe for you.”

Ooh , my grandmother’s cranberry scones were impossibly delicious.

“I’ve got a killer scone recipe myself.” Camila offers a sultry smile to my sister’s shiny new boyfriend. And I’ll make sure I feed them to him personally. She shoots a side glance my way and gives a curt smile. There’s not a thing you can do to stop me, Bizzy. Not even your sister can stop me. She loves me. She might even love me more than she loves you.

I won’t have to stop her. Camila is wrong. Macy can very well stop her. My sister can hold her own when it comes to hoarding her men. I just hope there’s not another homicide in Cider Cove today. But then, if there was, I might bend the rules and help Macy hide the body.

Macy might love Camila more than she loves me, but she loves her spacious condo more than she does a six-by-five cell and I’d help her steer clear of it.

“Come on.” Macy links arms with both Jordy and Camila. “Let’s help Candy hunt down Cane.” I’m not the only Baker girl who’s looking to get some action today.

I would be the third, I muse to myself as I scan the crowd for Jasper once again.

The three of them take off to check out the parade floats—among other things while Camila’s thoughts flit to white noise once again.

I’m about to follow along when I spot a familiar silver-streaked head in the crowd.

Matilda Westoff stands alone, watching the marching band stride by with an expression that could curdle milk. He would have loved this parade, she muses to herself. If only he hadn’t threatened to expose everything, things could have ended differently between us.

The baby kicks sharply, and I straighten my spine.

It’s time to hop to it. This killer isn’t going to catch themselves.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

The crowd here at the Easter Hip Hip Parade parts just enough for me to spot Matilda Westoff, and I don't get two steps before Verity Westoff sidles up right next to her. Both women look polished to the nines, and both women happen to be holding a small cup of coffee from the local café.

This screams catfight more than it does cordial holiday greeting.

Speaking of cats, two of my favorite felines run up—sans the tote bag I left them in.

We escaped, Fish says, curling around my ankle.

The tiny hooman tried to take our heads off, Jellybean yowls.

“Sorry about that,” I say, wrinkling my nose down at the two of them. “Little Mack is used to pulling at Cane's fur.” I glance up at the two women. “I see some action up ahead. Want to join along?”

Fish rubs her head against my leg. We're not leaving your side, Bizzy.

We head over and Fish catches a glimpse of the women up ahead. Ten dollars says someone ends up wearing coffee on their blouse before this is over.

Twenty says it's intentional, Jellybean adds. Though, with those high heels, Verity might just trip and do the job to herself.

Matilda stands ramrod straight in her powder blue suit that looks elegant and well-tailored, while Verity is working the “secretary who married the boss” angle hard in a

hot pink blazer and pencil skirt that's less appropriate for any office and more Vegas showgirl. And her day-glow pink shoes with tiny gold triangles dotted on the front catch the spring sunlight like warning beacons.

The baby does a somersault that feels suspiciously like a fashion criticism.

Matilda's thoughts hit me before her perfume does. Once a tramp, always a tramp. She rakes her eyes up and down at her rival. And ten-thousand-dollar shoes? Ironically called Virtuosos, although there's very little virtue with the one who's donned them. She wore them in red the day of the festival and now in pink? I guess the rumor is true. She has them in every color. You know what they say, a fool and their money are soon parted.

"Matilda, so good to see you," Verity's voice drips with honey-coated arsenic. "That suit is divine. Vintage, isn't it?" As in old and tired, she muses to herself with a laugh. Just like Matilda herself.

"How kind of you to notice." Matilda's smile could freeze a vat of seawater. "I was just admiring your ensemble. So brave of you to wear something so shamefully youthful." Emphasis on the shame .

The baby kicks, apparently appreciating this master class in passive-aggressive warfare.

"Hello, ladies," I say as I come upon them with a wave. "Happy Easter." I give a little shrug, securing my spot right there in the proverbial wrestling ring next to them.

"So nice to see you, Bizzy," Matilda is quick with the kind words and appears every bit genuine despite the fact her lips hardly moved as she said it. I can tell she's tense.

"Hi, Bizzy." Verity winks my way as if it were a nervous twitch. "I was just going to

ask Matilda”—she turns to her nemesis—“how is that little book of yours going?” Verity’s smile reminds me of artificial sweetener—a touch too sweet and twice as toxic. “You do realize that tell-all tome of yours will come off as crass now that my poor husband has gone the way of the world.” Her expression hardens as if to prove her point.

“I don’t control the publishing process.” Matilda wrinkles her nose and looks as if she’s caught a whiff of sour milk. Oh fine, as much as I hate to admit it, she might be right. If it comes across as crass, it could hurt me in the end.

“I hear the advance was quite generous,” Verity continues, adjusting her blazer in a way that makes it clear she knows exactly how much that advance was. “Almost enough to cover a decent wardrobe.” She rides her gaze down Matilda’s suit. “I do hope you’ll take advantage of it.”

The baby kicks again. There’s nothing like a good fashion dig to really twist the knife.

Verity sniffs at Matilda. “I’ll be seeing you.” She turns my way. “I’m sure you’ll catch my husband’s killer soon enough. Your sister let me in on a little secret—you’re the best of the best when it comes to solving a homicide. I’m counting on you, Bizzy.” She winks again as she takes off into the crowd.

Verity clickety-clacks her way down Main Street in her ten-thousand-dollar shoes, probably off to buy them in another color, while Matilda’s thoughts churn like a storm at sea.

She thinks she’s so clever, Matilda seethes internally. I’ll take her down if it’s the last thing I do. Nobody trashes my life and gets away with it.

“I’m sorry, Bizzy.” Matilda blows out a breath as she looks past the thicket of bodies.

“The music, the screaming, it’s all a bit much for me right now. I think I need to find some solace.”

“You and me both,” I say. “You lead, I’ll follow. My sanity could use a break from all this madness.” And my craving to solve this crime could use a killer to catch.

She heads toward the clearing in town square, just shy of the gazebo that’s decked out like an Easter Bunny’s dream, complete with pastel bunting and enough artificial flowers to give any bee an identity crisis.

We stop shy of the gazebo and face the woods that skirt the vicinity. The air is cooler here, the sound of the marching band a little more muted, and the crowd is far enough where their collective voices culminate in a hushed roar.

Don’t do it, Bizzy, Jellybean mewls as she and Fish trot by my side. Don’t confront her out here away from people. If she is the killer, she might reprise her role as the Grim Reaper just to keep you quiet.

She might be away from people —Fish gives a sharp meow— but she’s got us!

“Matilda.” I wince a little as I say her name. “That day at the festival, you were walking around with a gold-foiled bunny. It was a bookend. A very heavy bookend.”

The woman blinks my way. “It was lovely, wasn’t it?” She sighs. “It’s one of our biggest sellers at the gift shop—outside of the chocolate bunnies themselves, of course. Were you interested in a few for the inn? I can have them delivered straight to you. They’re quite heavy. I’d hate to see you trying to carry them in your condition.”

“I wasn’t actually thinking about the inn.” I press my lips tight. “I was wondering—after we spoke that afternoon, where did you go? You still had that bookend in your arms when you left.” I’m hoping to jar a thought loose or a

confession.

I nod her way as if to prod her.

“Oh, that?” She squints over at me. “I ended up taking it back to the booth. It was far too heavy for even me to cart around.”

She’s not giving in.

I sigh hard. “Hamish tried to stop you from publishing that book, didn’t he?” I venture on, noting how her fingers are suddenly clenched around her purse strap. “He was afraid his reputation would be tarnished beyond repair.”

“That’s right, he did try to stop me.” She gives a little laugh that could frost spring flowers. “But he should have thought about his precious reputation before he landed that tramp horizontal. Before he threatened to expose—” She catches herself, but her thoughts race on. Everything we built, everything I tried so hard to hide.

Now you’ve got her. Jellybean leaps with the thought. She’s about to confess. I can feel it.

Fish nods. She’s given an inch. Let’s see if she gives a mile.

“He tried to blackmail you, didn’t he?” My voice softens as I ask the question, hoping to profit off that dream-like trance taking over her face.

But instead, Matilda’s eyes widen as she snaps her full attention my way, and just like that, the spell is broken.

Footsteps approach from behind. “I’m the one who did it,” a woman calls out to us. “I killed him.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

Hammie Mae Westoff appears here in the clearing just shy of the Hip Hip Parade taking place down on Main Street this sunny and warm Easter morning.

Hammie Mae is resplendent in a floral maternity dress that looks as if it belongs at a quintessential garden party. Her strawberry blonde locks are curled around her shoulders and her freckles give her that fresh-faced look that only seems to age her backwards.

The baby kicks and I warm my hand over my belly protectively.

After all, Hammie Mae Westoff just admitted to killing her father.

“What are you talking about?” Matilda snaps at her daughter. “You didn’t kill anyone.”

Hammie Mae closes her eyes for a moment too long and both Fish and Jellybean groan at the sight.

I’ll admit, Hammie Mae looks pretty guilty at the moment.

“I confronted Dad in the woods at the festival,” she blurts out with tears already streaming down her face. “I asked him why he destroyed our family, and all he could say was that Mom was bent on destroying him.” She growls in a fit of frustration. “That man never took responsibility for anything!”

Her hands cradle her baby bump protectively. “We argued. He was upset. Just before I left, a tree branch hit the ground right next to us. He said it could have killed us or

hurt the baby.” Her voice cracks. “And I—I said I wished it had killed him.”

I gasp at the thought. Those darn eucalyptus trees! It sounds as if they picked a fine time to self-prune.

Oh my goodness. It could have killed both of them—the three of them—and it would have been all my fault.

Matilda reaches for her daughter as fresh tears begin to fall.

“I didn’t mean it,” Hammie Mae cries out. “But I left and he stood there in the woods. The only reason he stayed behind was because I had upset him! Don’t you see? Another branch must have fallen and it did indeed kill him.”

The baby gives a sharp kick as if trying to help me find the right words.

“Hammie Mae”—I say gently—“you didn’t kill your father, not even in the way that you think. He wasn’t killed by a falling branch.” Thank heavens. “The detective, my husband, found the murder weapon. I’m not at liberty to say what it was, but you need to understand—you had nothing to do with your father’s death.”

I shoot a quick look at Matilda once again in hopes of a confession and she straightens as if she’s just been electrocuted.

Fish gives a little jump. I think she’s going to confess!

We’ve got a killer on our hands, Jellybean yowls.

Matilda shakes her head as if she heard. “That leaves Verity. She had that exorbitant life insurance policy out on him—everyone knew about it—and she needed every last dime.”

“She did?” I blink in surprise. I didn’t know about it. “But I thought she was doing well. I mean, she mentioned making a fortune with that fancy drink machine of hers.”

“The Bartender’s Dream?” Matilda laughs as if it was a joke. “More like the Bartender’s Nightmare. The devices have spontaneously combusted so many times there’s a class-action lawsuit against her. She went cheap on the construction of them. The woman is as money-hungry as they come.”

My mouth falls open. How did I not know that? I must be slipping up. I blame the constant fatigue and brain fog. The old me would have researched the machine long before I was standing here.

“She’ll skip town,” Hammie Mae predicts while wiping her eyes. “She killed my father and now she thinks she’s going to get away with it.”

“I don’t think she’s going anywhere.” I shake my head. “She mentioned buying another home, a smaller one right here in town. She said she couldn’t bear to live in that big old house she shared with your dad. It’s too painful.” Wait, did Verity say it was in Cider Cove? I think she may have inferred it. I blame my pregnant brain for not committing the details to memory. “Nonetheless, she has the Celebration Grill to run. She’ll be local regardless.”

Matilda snorts a laugh. “Please. She’s not buying a smaller home. She bought one twice the size. I had lunch with her real estate agent two days ago, who happens to be my friend. She just sold Verity an estate in the Maldives.”

The baby kicks so hard that I gasp. “The Maldives? Why does that sound familiar?”

Hammie Mae shrugs as she holds her belly. “I’m sorry, Bizzy, but I’ve got to get some food in me. I only ate two of the four breakfasts my little one seems to require. I’m starved.” She links arms with her mother. “Come on, Mom. They have cornbread

muffins at the bakery and I'm craving one slathered with honey butter."

"Ooh," I say, suddenly craving one myself. I can't help it. I'm a sucker for honey butter.

I watch them go, wondering if I just let the killer walk away.

What do you think, Bizzy? Fish mewls. Or more to the point, what did they think? Did they do it?

"Matilda still hasn't admitted to guilt," I say. "But she's still my prime sus—" The word gets cut off in my throat as something catches my eye. "These footprints," I say, pointing at the slanted cutouts in the soft spring earth below. "Oh my goodness, I just remembered there were footprints at the scene of the crime, two of them." I glance up and see the slanted footprints match up with Hammie Mae's boots. "I guess that confirms what she said. She was at the scene of the crime." I gasp. "Wait a minute... There was another set of footprints there that day."

I pull out my phone and check the photos I took of the crime scene that day.

"I was right," I pant. "There were two sets of footprints around the body and leading away from it, too."

The baby does a complete somersault as I zoom in on the image of that second set of footprints and suck in a quick breath.

If I'm right about these footprints, I know exactly who the killer is.

Looks like someone is about to have a very unhappy Easter—and it's not the bunny.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

My search for Virtuoso high heels brings up more than just their eye-popping price tag.

It turns out, those ten-thousand-dollar status symbols leave a distinctive V-pattern in their wake—a not-so-subtle homage to their name. I zoom back in on the crime scene photo, and there it is—a larger faint V impression followed by a sharp, tiny V from the heel. And here I wondered if a rat could have left them. I suppose in a way they did. A murderous rat.

“Oh wow.” I shake my head at the sight.

The baby kicks so hard I nearly drop my phone. Either they’re trying to help with the investigation or objecting to the shoe prices. Most likely both.

A flash of hot pink catches my eye. It’s Verity herself power-walking toward the dirt parking lot as if she’s trying to outpace her conscience.

She’s leaving, Fish says with a sharp meow.

You don’t think Verity did this, do you? Jellybean sounds more alarmed than I’ve ever heard her. I mean, she’s awful, but is she a killer?

“I don’t know,” I pant, already waddling in pursuit. “But I’m about to find out.”

I’m about to set in that direction when Sherlock Bones bounds our way.

Where are you headed? Sherlock asks with his tail wagging. The floats are still

coming! Mayor Woods says the grand finale will have everyone talking for days!

“I don’t doubt that,” I say, still moving toward my hot pink target.

We’re off to catch a killer, Fish yowls after him. You go and enjoy your float. We’re doing just fine on our own.

Don’t go, Sherlock, Jellybean meows. We might need protection. Hamish always said Verity was a loose cannon and couldn’t be trusted.

The baby gives another kick as I pick up speed—which, let’s be honest, is more of a determined waddle at this point.

“Going somewhere?” I call out and Verity freezes mid-stride.

She turns my way and a tense smile curves her lips. “Oh, Bizzy, it’s just you.” She gives a little laugh. “I’m afraid I’ve seen enough for the day. But you might want to find a seat. You look awfully winded.”

“I’m fine,” I reassure her as I finally catch up, sounding as winded as can be. “I love your shoes.” I frown at the lie. I can’t love footwear that costs more than my car. “Funny thing about those Virtuoso heels,” I say, as she kicks one up to inspect it, “they leave quite an impression. Especially in soft dirt... like in the woods where Hamish died.”

Verity inches back.

You didn’t even warm her up! Fish leaps with glee. Way to go for the jugular, Bizzy. You’ve got this.

Sherlock growls. She doesn’t have this. And she certainly doesn’t have a weapon to

defend herself with.

That's where we come in, Jellybean counters.

I like the way she thinks.

The smile on Verity's face doesn't waver. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she says, but too bad because I'm on a roll.

Not only that, but I'm craving one, too. Oh, all right, I'm craving a warm, fresh-baked cornbread muffin slathered with honey butter. I blame Hammie Mae for that.

"The farm was doing terribly under your management," I continue. "Hamish didn't have any money. He was trying to shake Matilda down for alimony. You said so yourself."

Verity gasps and inches back once more.

"Yet somehow you can afford shoes that cost more than most cars," I point out. Okay, so maybe just my car. "You had been stealing from the farm, hadn't you? And I bet you've been dipping into the funds at the restaurant, too."

Her lips wiggle for a moment as if they don't have a clue whether to smile or frown.

"Bizzy, what's gotten into you?" she says with her tone suddenly as sugar-sweet as her perfume. "Are you feeling well? I thought I had told you all about my success with the Bartender's Dream."

"I didn't forget. But I did hear a rumor that it was more like a nightmare." And had Verity not appeared so quickly, I would have researched that rumor, too.

The baby kicks in rhythm with my accusations.

Verity belts out a growl. “Oh, that ridiculous lawsuit? Bizzy, those were just a few units that caught fire. I’m going to counter-sue. I’m sure it was faulty electrical in their own homes that caused the infernos and had nothing to do with my units.” She glowers at the sky. I should never have brought that up to her. Leave it to those stupid machines to turn my life into a nightmare.

I glance down at her pricey shoes.

“I bet if I do a little digging, I’ll find out those machines never made any money. You found another way to make some extra cash. Hamish found out you were cooking the books, didn’t he? That’s why the business at the farm was tanking. Hamish wasn’t running it into the ground, you were. After all, those designer clothes weren’t going to pay for themselves.”

Her hot pink lips round out in horror. “You can’t prove anything,” she says, glaring my way. Besides, she muses to herself, I’ll be out of the country before this woman can waddle her way to her thirst trap of a husband and rat me out.

Knew it. I’m also well aware that my husband is a thirst trap.

I nod to the furry among us as if to say we’ve got her.

Verity tries to step around me, but being the owner of a bulging belly has its advantages—namely, being able to block an entire path with minimal effort.

“Running off to the Maldives?” I ask sweetly and watch as her face grows pale. Wait just a minute...” I whisper to myself. “The Maldives ,” I shout so loud you’d think I had been searching for this answer for days. And in a way I have. “You have an offshore account there, don’t you? The name...MH Enterprises—you were trying to

frame Matilda!”

Wait—Verity sent the flowers? She suctioned the money from Georgie’s account and maxed out all of her credit cards?

Of course, she did. It was the perfect diversion.

A dark laugh strums from the woman. “Come on, Bizzy. You know Matilda is guilty. Didn’t you see her with that stupid bookend that day at the festival? Do I have to spell it out for you? It was left at the crime scene, for Pete’s sake. Certainly, you can put two and two together. Your sister came into the restaurant a couple of weeks ago and said you’re the best of the best.”

“A couple of weeks ago?” Now it’s my turn to inch back. Hamish hasn’t been dead for a week.

She nods. “She and that hottie she’s dating came in. We got to chatting and I asked them where they were from. Once she said Cider Cove, I laughed and countered with the murder capital of Maine. And that’s when she sang your praises. She insisted you were just as prolific at catching the killers as the killers were at delivering the bodies.”

She knew about you in advance, Fish muses as we both contemplate this.

Verity lifts her chin. As soon as Macy said those words, I knew I needed to divert this wall of hormones away from me. My hacking skills came in handy. Those flowers have been funding my account for months. Send them to someone at the inn and presto—Bizzy is too busy to focus.

“So that’s how it went,” I say, watching her squirm. “You discovered Hamish was onto your embezzling, so you killed him. Then you hacked Georgie’s account to

create a distraction in an effort to keep me busy .” A visual of her that day at the festival comes to mind. “You had an oversized purse with you.” A groan escapes me. “You picked up one of those iron bookends because you saw Matilda carting it around. And that’s what you killed Hamish with. Little did you know, the sheriff’s department never released to the public what the murder weapon was. But you knew because you used it. You saw Matilda with a bookend and you grabbed one, too. You thought it was the perfect crime.”

“Yes.” She sighs, dropping her head a moment. “I killed Hamish. I tried my best to frame Matilda, too. I had a knife with me that day, but once I saw Matilda hauling around that ridiculous bookend, I knew what I had to do. I did everything you’ve accused me of. I guess I should have stolen the money from your bank account instead. Then I could have diverted your attention and that of your husband’s. I guess you are as good as they say.” Her smile turns sharp. “But not good enough to stop me. I’ll be in the Mal?—”

“NOT THE BEES AGAIN!” someone cuts her off with a scream and I turn to find Georgie running this way with her hands doing their best to bat a swarm of those tiny yellow and black creatures away, but it’s no use. Judging by that dark storm cloud following her, she’s managed to summon every bee in the Western Hemisphere.

“ Bees! ” Verity lets out a yelp herself. “I’m allergic!”

She runs toward the woods, only to be intercepted by Georgie and that cast of thousands, with each one bearing its own little stinger. Verity screams and runs in a circle while Georgie seemingly chases her, and on their heels run Sherlock, Fish, and Jellybean.

Georgie inadvertently chases Verity right in the direction of the parade.

“Oh no,” I shout as they dart right through the crowd, into the street, and onto a

float—and what a float it is!

The massive house on wheels is decorated to look like the Easter Bunny's vacation home complete with a hot tub filled with plastic eggs. Verity tries to avoid the egg-laden oversized bath, but Georgie's momentum knocks the woman right into the colorful hot tub, headfirst.

Verity's legs are left poking up out of the sea of eggs and, well, her skirt has drifted and we're all treated to a display of a pair of white granny panties.

And Georgie gets pinned against what appears to be the Easter Bunny's mailbox.

The crowd goes from screams to laughter in one fell swoop.

I shake my head at the sight. It could have been worse. I wouldn't have pegged Verity for even looking at a pair of oversized granny panties, but then, I suppose she did care about comfort where it counts. And for that I'm grateful.

"Bizzy?" Jasper runs my way. "Thank goodness, you're safe." He locks me in a tight embrace before dusting my face with kisses.

"That's her," I tell him, pointing to the pink pricey shoes trying to stave off the angry bees. "Verity Westoff confessed to everything. She killed Hamish and sent Georgie those flowers, too."

He ticks his head to the side as he frowns in Verity's direction.

"That's why I love you, Bizzy. Only you could solve a murder and catch a hacker at an Easter parade."

Jasper jumps onto the float and in no time plucks Verity out of her plastic

confinement and cuffs her with the real deal.

The baby gives one final kick of triumph and I give my belly a pat.

I guess some people's Easter eggs are filled with chocolate, and others are filled with justice.

Now to hunt down one more thing—a cornbread muffin slathered with honey butter.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

E aster Sunday at the Country Cottage Inn is a feast for the senses.

The rolling green lawn sparkles with morning dew along with hundreds of pastel-colored eggs, while the spring breeze carries the scent of fresh-cut grass and, of course, chocolate.

It's as if all of Cider Cove—scratch that—all of Maine has shown up to run wild on the lawns at the inn. The marching band showed up, too, and they're playing a cheerful ditty to keep the kids and adults alike moving and grooving while trying to load their baskets to the hilt.

After this morning's rather infamous parade, which the locals are already calling "The Great Easter Bee-trayal," this egg hunt feels downright peaceful. And that's an irony in and of itself considering a cast of thousands has shown up.

The egg hunt is well underway, and I can't get enough of all the adorable toddlers waddling around in their Sunday best. Miniature suits with shorts for the boys and an entire palette of pastel dresses for the beautiful little girls. Each of them is armed with a basket and a parent on their heels recording the entire event for posterity.

Emmie and I have claimed prime viewing spots just shy of the lawn as we cuddle with two cute furry babies. She's holding Fish while I hold Jellybean. I figure it's good practice for when our far less furrier babies arrive.

A toddler races past us and nearly misses taking off Sherlock's head with their basket.

The indignity, Fish mewls. This goes to show what lengths hoomans will go through to procure some chocolate.

“It is free chocolate,” I’m quick to point out before relaying the conversation to Emmie. “And quality chocolate at that. Matilda Westoff provided all of the sweet treats for the Women’s League to stuff the plastic eggs with.”

“Free is my favorite word,” Emmie says with a sigh. “Especially when chocolate is involved. Or jellybeans.”

Jellybean snickers. Like I say, ’tis the season.

I relay it to Emmie and we have a good chuckle.

Jasper and Leo are down at the Seaview Sheriff’s Department helping book Verity Westoff for the murder of her husband. And ten bucks says they’re probably doing their best to ignore her complaints about the jumpsuit she’s just been outfitted with. Sadly, for her, there aren’t any designer duds in prison. In fact, the entire stay is rather a dud.

“I still can’t believe she was the killer,” I tell Emmie, watching a particularly determined five-year-old tackle an egg hidden under a dogwood bush. “To think, a slipup here or a slipup there on my part and she might have gotten away with murder.”

Emmie lets out a wild cackle that makes Fish’s ears flatten.

“What’s so funny?” I ask, stepping back to observe her better in the event she’s having some sort of a hormone-induced meltdown. She is ready to pop. Maybe this is her version of labor? Instead of contractions, Emmie has a laughing fit. Wouldn’t that be great? I much prefer laughter to pain.

“The fact you keep forgetting that Jasper was the one assigned to the case,” she says, wiping the tears from her eyes as she continues to chuckle. “You do realize he, too, would have caught the killer—eventually.”

I bite my lip. “I do have faith he would have—eventually. But Verity was about to leave the country. If we rely on anything to happen eventually, we might end up with a cold case on our hands.” I cringe at how cold that sounds indeed. “Maybe we don’t tell Jasper that.”

Emmie crosses her heart and blows me a kiss. “You’re still the best homicide detective I know, Bizzy Baker Wilder.” Now it’s her turn to cringe. “Maybe we don’t tell Jasper that either.”

Fish chitters with a laugh. You’re both lucky Jasper can’t understand a thing Sherlock has to say. He’d rat you out in a New York minute. Or even better—a Maine minute, considering how quickly these kids are snapping up those eggs.

Sherlock gives a soft woof. I happen to agree with Emmie. Jasper would have solved the case—eventually. He lifts his head and surveys the crowd. Now if you ladies don’t mind, I’m going to join Cinnamon, Gatsby, Candy, and Cane on the great egg chase.

He takes off like a bullet toward what appears to be a canine tornado forming near the woods.

“Remember, no chocolate,” I call after him.

No worries, he barks back. Georgie said that the Easter Bunny planted bacon in the bushes for the four-footed among us! Some bunny loves us!

Some bunny loves them indeed.

Speaking of Georgie, I squint into the sea of bodies running to and fro out on the lawn.

Quickly enough, I spot Mom and Georgie helping little Mack hunt for eggs, since Mayor Woods wouldn't be caught dead jaunting around with a bunch of toddlers.

Mackenzie isn't exactly maternal in that way, or any way, come to think about it. She's about as maternal as a cactus. And well, Hux is far more content documenting his son's every move. He's paternal that way and in every way.

Emmie elbows me. "Ooh, check this out." She nods toward the front of the inn where a golden throne has been set up for photos with the Easter Bunny (currently experiencing a lull since all the kids are too busy creating chaos in pursuit of plastic eggs). Sure enough, there aren't any kids in line, but a handful of adults all wait their turn with the overgrown bunny. And as fate would have it, I recognize the trio currently up at bat.

It's Macy, Jordy, and Camila all fighting for space next to the big bunny.

Macy and Jordy are attempting to take a romantic Easter photo while Camila tries her best to simultaneously sit on both the Easter Bunny's lap and Jordy's.

Macy either hasn't noticed Camila's current man-hunting expedition or she's enjoying watching Camila sweat while she indulges in Jordy's kisses. I'd like to think it's the latter. In fact, I'm one hundred percent sure it is.

Macy is no fool. She can spot a man-eater a mile away. After all, it takes one to know one.

The baby gives an amused kick just as Matilda and Hammie Mae approach, still wearing their parade finest.

“Bizzy, we wanted to thank you”—Hammie Mae says with a tiny grimace—“for catching the killer.”

“It was my pleasure,” I say as I wince. “I mean—well, you know what I mean. Anyway, I hope you have peace now.”

“I do.” She gives a pained smile before nodding to Emmie as well. “I hope you both have easy pregnancies from here on out, too. I wish you both well in that respect. Oh, and remember to ask permission before giving birth!” She gives her belly a quick pat. “Like this: may I give birth to you now?” She winks our way. “Of course, I wouldn’t dare say those words unless you actually wanted to go into labor.” She pats her belly once again. “You hear that? I didn’t mean it. You just keep baking as long as it takes!”

We share a quick laugh, but Hammie Mae’s expression quickly grows sober as she spots Jellybean.

How I wish I had something to remember my father by, she thinks to herself with a sigh. And no matter what, that man will always be my father.

Matilda pats her daughter’s arm as if she knows exactly what she’s thinking and she’s trying to comfort her.

Well, it’s done, Matilda takes a breath as she muses to herself. Hamish may have held the dirt over my head for a good while now, but I went ahead and told Hammie Mae the truth after Verity was arrested.

I gasp at the thought and tip my ear her way as if that might somehow help me catch more of her internal musings.

I still can’t believe I did it, Matilda continues. Hamish and I had split up for just a few

months and then there was that cad I latched myself onto. And well, Hammie Mae was the result. But by the time I knew I was with child, Hamish and I had made up and were already walking down the aisle. Of course, I made the mistake of telling him after he dumped me for Verity. I wanted to hurt him as bad as he hurt me. But I only ended up wounding myself in the end. The way that man held it over my head—and took pleasure in it, no less. A part of me thinks he would have never told Hammie Mae the truth. She was his whole heart. But he sure knew how to make me sweat. However, in the end, I told her the news and she took it in stride like a champ.

So that's what he held over her!

Hamish found out that he wasn't Hammie Mae's father. I bet that stung—almost as much as it stung Matilda to find out Hamish was two-timing her. Two wrongs never make a right. Everything about what transpired with the Westoffs was sad all around.

“Would you mind if I held Jellybean?” Hammie Mae asks as her eyes glisten with tears.

“Not at all,” I say as I hand her the furry cutie. A thought hits me. “In fact, would you like to keep her? You know, in memory of your father?”

Hammie Mae's face lights up as if Hamish himself just reappeared. “Yes! Oh yes!” She quickly snuggles with the cute kitty and dusts her furry face with kisses.

We say our goodbyes to Jellybean and both ladies wish us a happy Easter before taking off, chattering a mile a minute about their impending shopping spree at the pet store.

“Something tells me that Jellybean is going to be one spoiled kitten,” I say. “And I mean that in the very best way. She certainly deserves it.”

“I guess all’s well that ends well,” Emmie says. “Speaking of ending well...” She gives her enormous belly a pat. “You’ve been baking for nine solid months, going on ten,” she teases. “May I please give birth to you eventually?”

A laugh jumps up my throat, but before it can fully initiate, a distinct splat hits the lawn beneath Emmie’s feet.

“ Oh my goodness .” Emmie gasps as she looks down at the sparkling puddle.

“Don’t you dare be embarrassed.” I’m quick to wave it off. “I tinkled on myself while laughing last week, and while sneezing, and while sleeping. It happens to the best of us.” Albeit I wasn’t as prolific as she managed to be. And in one fell swoop at that.

“ Bizzy ”—Emmie’s eyes widen with horror—“I didn’t tinkle. My water just broke.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

The maternity ward at Cider Cove General Hospital is covered with pictures of baby bunnies along with baskets brimming with eggs.

In a whirlwind of events that included me screaming, Emmie screaming, and about six thousand sugar-hyped children joining the screaming chorus—well, Jordy eventually came to our rescue.

He managed to break several speed records getting Emmie and me to the hospital, then helped race us up to the maternity ward, where we huffed and puffed our little hearts out—less to do with labor breathing and more from the impromptu cardio session we just partook in.

I called Jasper and Leo on the way over and they arrived right after us, looking more than a little frazzled. Poor Jordy is more than a little frazzled himself. Turns out, watching your sister go into labor can do that to a guy.

My sweet baby gives a sympathetic kick. At least someone managed to stay calm.

Four hours, a bucket of ice chips, and a few creative curse words that were not in Sanskrit later, Emmie and Leo's baby entered this world at a perfect seven pounds and seven ounces.

A healthy, perfect, bouncing baby boy.

Leo's parents are here, along with Emmie's folks, and, of course, Mom and Georgie made the mad dash over as well.

We're all crowded around the bed, smiling lovingly at the tiny babe swaddled up like a burrito, and his doting parents can't seem to take their eyes off of him.

Emmie is propped up on pillows looking exhausted but radiant, while Leo perches beside her wearing an expression that suggests he just witnessed an actual miracle up close and personal—which, to be fair, he did. And so did I. The rest of the party waited patiently outside until after the big event happened.

I sniff hard. "Your sweet son is quite possibly the most perfect baby I've ever seen," I say and everyone in the room quickly agrees.

The little prince contentedly looks around at all of the curious faces. He's a cutie pie with a shock of dark hair that clearly came from both sides of the family, bright curious eyes—straight from his mother—and cheeks that would make a cherub jealous.

I was one of the first that got to hold him and he weighs about as much as a feather and smells like heaven.

If I wasn't already knocked up myself, I'd be craving to have my own baby posthaste. Nature has a way of doing that to people.

"So what are you going to name him?" Jasper asks, voicing what everyone else in the room is thinking.

"Well?" Leo's mother practically bounces with anticipation. "Don't keep us in suspense!"

Emmie and Leo exchange one of those looks that lets me know they can read each other's minds in the way that couples do.

Emmie clears her throat. “Well, we thought about naming him Leo after his daddy.”

“But I thought there were enough Leos roaring around one house,” Leo says and we all give a little laugh. “We thought about naming him Emmet, a play on his mother’s name.”

“But I didn’t want that,” Emmie says. “So, we settled on something that played off of both of our names—or at least had a few of the same letters.” She holds the baby up a notch.

“Introducing Elliot Alexander Granger,” they announce in perfect unison.

The entire room erupts in coos and applause while the baby— Elliot —falls asleep through his first standing ovation.

Eventually, the crowd thins out, and soon it’s just Jasper and me in the room with the happy little family.

Emmie is busy snapping a few selfies with her sleeping son when she suddenly perks up.

“Oh, look,” she says as she pulls her phone close. “I just got a notification from that ancestry test we all took last week. They just sent the results. Now I get to learn all about my roots and the roots of my sweet new baby boy.” She clicks away while the rest of us pull out our phones as well.

“Nothing new here,” Leo says as he scrolls through his results. “Though I am more British than I realized.”

“No big surprises on my end either,” Jasper reports. “Lots of Eastern European, which we knew, and apparently, half of Maine is my distant cousin.”

“Ooh, good for you, Jasper,” Emmie coos, somehow managing to scroll one-handed while holding sweet little Elliot close to her chest. “It looks like we’re both expanding our families today. How about you, Bizzy? What’s yours say?”

My mouth opens and closes, but not a single word comes out. The baby gives a sharp kick as if trying to help me process what I’m seeing.

“Well?” Emmie prods. “Are you secretly British royalty? Do I need to brush up on my curtsy?”

“No,” I manage to squeak out.

“Finding a bunch of new cousins?” Jasper leans over, trying to peek at my screen.

“Not exactly.” I blow out a breath, still staring at the results that seem to have turned my entire world sideways. “But I did find one new relative.” I look up at their expectant faces. “It turns out, I don’t just have one sister—I have two.”

Thank you for reading! Be sure to pick up the next book in the series when Bizzy has her baby!

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From the Country Cottage Café

Emmie's Famous Chocolate Peanut Butter Eggs

Hey there! Hoppy Easter! Lucky for us, Emmie was more than eager to share her no-bake recipe with us! There is a bit of fancy footwork around the stove, but I promise it's easy! This is a holiday take on a buckeye but shaped like eggs! Emmie says you can either dip them in pastel-colored white chocolate or roll them in powdered sugar for a simple twist!

Happy no-baking!

Ingredients:

1 cup creamy peanut butter (not natural, as it can be too oily)

4 tablespoons unsalted butter (softened)

2 cups powdered sugar (plus extra for rolling, if not dipping)

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

2 cups chocolate chips (semi-sweet or milk chocolate)

1 tablespoon vegetable oil (optional, for smoother dipping)

Optional : 1 cup pastel-colored white chocolate melts

Directions:

Make the Filling:

In a large mixing bowl, combine the peanut butter, softened butter, vanilla extract, and powdered sugar.

Mix until smooth and dough-like. If it's too sticky, add a bit more powdered sugar. (Yum!)

2. Shape the Eggs:

Scoop out about 1 tablespoon of the mixture and roll it into an egg shape using your hands.

Place the eggs on a parchment-lined baking sheet.

Refrigerate or freeze for about 30 minutes, until firm.

3. Melt the Chocolate:

In a microwave-safe bowl, melt the chocolate chips in 30-second intervals, stirring after each interval until smooth. Add the vegetable oil if you want a shinier coating. (Emmie says you can use a double boiler if you like.)

If using pastel-colored white chocolate melts, melt them separately in another bowl.

4. Dip the Eggs:

Using a fork or toothpick, dip each peanut butter egg into the melted chocolate, letting the excess drip off. Place back onto the parchment paper.

If desired, drizzle pastel-colored white chocolate over the dark chocolate coating for decoration. Alternatively, roll the eggs in powdered sugar instead of dipping in chocolate.

Set and Store:

Let the eggs set at room temperature or refrigerate until the chocolate hardens (about 10-15 minutes).

Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

Enjoy your sweet and easy-to-make chocolate peanut butter eggs! They're perfect for Easter or any time you need a fun treat.

Happy Easter!

He is RISEN!

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:58 am

From the Country Cottage Café

Mom's Delicious Broccoli Salad

Here's an easy and delicious recipe for my mother's broccoli salad that's sure to be a hit. It's quick to make and uses simple ingredients you might already have on hand.

I know, I know, it's broccoli we're talking about. Okay, hear me out. Once I tried my mother's broccoli salad, I became a fan for life. In fact, it's so delicious that I actually crave this in the night. And I've eaten giant mixing bowls of the stuff ever since that fated day at Westoff Farms. You **MUST** try this! I hope you love it as much as I do.

Happy no-baking!

Ingredients:

4 cups fresh broccoli florets (about 2 medium heads, cut into bite-sized pieces. And I mean cut really, really small.)

1/2 cup red onion (finely chopped)

1/2 cup shredded cheddar cheese

1/3 cup dried cranberries or raisins

1/4 cup sunflower seeds or chopped almonds (optional, for crunch)

4-5 slices of cooked bacon (crumbled, optional but recommended)

Dressing:

1/2 cup mayonnaise (or Greek yogurt for a lighter option)

2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar (or white vinegar)

1-2 tablespoons sugar (or honey for a natural sweetener)

Salt and pepper to taste

Directions:

Prepare the Salad:

In a large mixing bowl, combine the broccoli, red onion, cheddar cheese, dried cranberries (or raisins), sunflower seeds (or almonds), and crumbled bacon.

Make the Dressing:

In a small bowl, whisk together the mayonnaise, vinegar, sugar (or honey), salt, and pepper until smooth.

Mix Everything Together:

Pour the dressing over the broccoli mixture and toss well to coat evenly.

Let the salad chill in the refrigerator for at least 30 minutes to allow the flavors to meld.

Serve:

Give the salad a quick toss before serving. Garnish with extra sunflower seeds, bacon, or cranberries if you like. (Yippee!)

This broccoli salad is easy to switch up. Feel free to leave out the bacon for a vegetarian version or swap in your favorite nuts and dried fruits. It's a crowd-pleaser for potlucks, holidays, or weeknight dinners! Or just to eat by the bowlful while watching TV. I'm weird like that.