



Christmas Party Murder (Country Cottage Mysteries #28)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: A laugh out loud standalone cozy mystery by New York Times, USA TODAY, Wall Street Journal bestseller Addison Moore.

Cosmopolitan Magazine calls Addisons books, easy, frothy fun!

Country Cottage Mysteries is a USA TODAY bestselling series!

It's Christmas in Cider Cove! Love talking pets and cozy country inns? Then welcome to the Country Cottage Inn. Santa is on his way and so is a killer.

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

Includes RECIPE! Newly reimaged!

The holidays are here and the Cider Cove Cookie Company is hosting its annual Christmas party at the inn. Not only do I have to dress like an elf for the debacle, but I have to watch as they wreck the ballroom with an out-of-control conga line. Things go from bad to deadly when a killer shows up, and I'm determined to bring justice to our small town before Santa shows up on Christmas Eve.

The presents are wrapped, the clock is ticking, and a killer is looking to strike again.

My only Christmas wish this season is that I'm not next on their hit list.

Cider Cove, Maine is the premier destination for fun and relaxation. But when a body turns up, it's the premier destination for murder.

An innkeeper who reads minds. An ornery detective. And a trail of bodies. Cider Cove is the premier destination for murder.

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CHAPTER 1

“Come on, Bizzy,” Georgie shouts from the back of an out-of-control conga line. “Don’t be an elf on the shelf! Be an elf on the dance floor!”

“Don’t do it, Bizzy,” Mom calls out next as Georgie holds her hostage in that dancing, prancing line of people all wearing their very best ugly Christmas sweaters—and with all the flashing lights and glitter, it’s more like obnoxious Christmas sweaters. “I’ve already thrown my back out in three places,” she shouts. “At least one of us should be able-bodied to cook Christmas dinner. Besides, you have the baby to think about!”

They sail off toward the other end of the ballroom with about forty people in tow and I make a face at the entire lot of them.

My mother knows I’m a disaster in the kitchen. She must be desperate if she’s relegating Christmas dinner to me. And if it was relegated to me, we’d be forced to start a new Chinese takeout tradition. Not a bad idea, now that I think about it.

Speaking of thinking about things... There is one thing that I can’t seem to get off my mind.

The baby.

I place my hand instinctively over my nearly flat belly. I just found out the good news a couple of weeks ago and I’m still floating above the ground just thinking about it. Although at the rate I’ve been using this as an excuse to eat any and everything, I’ll

be anchored to earth soon enough—and the size of the inn to boot.

I can't help it. I've always been a foodie, and what better time to enjoy a meal or two than when you're eating for two . Okay, so my meal portions have been more apt to feed twenty-two , but I'm new at this.

It's about a week before the big day and the Cider Cove Cookie Company is hosting its annual office Christmas party right here in the ballroom of the Country Cottage Inn.

I've been the manager of the inn for almost ten years now—and the owner for about half that time. This isn't the first Christmas office party we've hosted, but I'll admit, this is the first time ever that my staff and I have been asked to dress up like elves.

Yes. Elves—as in a pointed hat, pointed ears, and a ridiculously short green dress paired with lime green tights. All of the above are happening, and I'm not proud of a single one. The pointed ears happen to be gifted to me by nature, but it's times like these that I'm glad I can make them work.

“Jingle Bells” blares over the speakers as a giant Christmas tree sits at the front of the room, bejeweled with shiny red ornaments and red bows to match. That glorious evergreen is strung with about a million white twinkle lights, making it look like a giant star bursting to life, and underneath it are dozens of presents just waiting to be opened.

The owners of the cookie company had the gifts delivered for their employees, and each one is wrapped in red paper with a shiny silver bow. Next to the tree sits an ornate red velvet, gold-trimmed throne where the jolliest elf of them all will preside at some point this evening. But at the moment, good old St. Nick is leading that infamous conga line and grabbing every woman in his line of vision to play along with his holiday shenanigans.

An older woman—blonde, plain but pretty—stands nearby, no ugly knitwear for her. She's opted for a green and white fair isle sweater with a matching forest green skirt. She's standing next to the elongated dessert table that I had my staff line with a pressed red tablecloth and bushels of fresh poinsettias.

In hindsight, there's not a lot of contrast in my decorating. And I think I may have gone overboard with the sanguine hue.

Is there such a thing as too much red at Christmas? Not to mention how easy it will be to parlay those tablecloths into my Valentine's Day décor. I may not be big on saving calories these days, but I can still pinch a penny with the best of them.

Regardless, there are dozens of shiny red tins filled with yummy cookies from the Cider Cove Cookie Company spread all along the dessert buffet. And the banner on the wall above bears their logo, Merry Christmas from the Cider Cove Cookie Company! Made in Maine with cookie pride!

When I was growing up, it was all the rage to have a membership to the cookie-of-the-month club. On the first Monday of every month, another shiny red tin would magically appear on your doorstep. And it's still all the rage to this day. To say they're doing well would be an understatement. Word on the street is, they distribute more packages during the holiday season than Santa himself.

The older blonde sips her eggnog while taking a moment to glower at the growing boisterous line of holiday cheer that seems to have absorbed half the room.

Look at him. She shakes her head. Not only doesn't he have any common sense, but he doesn't have any shame. But I already knew that.

I tip my head her way. I don't make it a point to pry into people's gray matter, but then again, I can't seem to find the shut-off valve either.

Bizzy! My sweet cat, Fish, traipses over and jumps right in front of me. Fish is a long-haired black and white tabby that I've had for years. She's not only sweet as Christmas fudge, but she's sharp as an icicle. There's another pooch on the loose. Isn't it bad enough we've got Sherlock to contend with? Do something about this, Bizzy, or mark my meow, Christmas will be ruined .

Sherlock Bones would be my husband's sweet pup, a red and white freckled mutt who stole my heart long before his daddy did.

My name is Bizzy Baker Wilder, and I can read minds—not every mind, not every time, but it happens, and believe me, it's not all it's cracked up to be. And yes, I can read the minds of animals, too. And almost always they have far better things to say than most people.

Sherlock bounds this way, and on his heels is a furry dog with long reddish-brown hair and dark button eyes. He looks like a purebred Havanese, one of the most adorable breeds known to man.

I made a friend, Bizzy. Sherlock jumps and barks with excitement. His name is Jingle, and you'll never guess who he belongs to!

Fish swats a paw his way. He belongs to Santa. And I think it's high time they both hitch a ride on a herd of reindeer and fly back to the North Pole.

“Judging by the size of this crowd, I don't think anyone is flying anywhere any time soon.”

I'm not sure how it works, but the animals always seem to know what one another is saying.

I glance over at the conga line as it grows ten times more boisterous, with the man

dressed as head elf howling and stomping like mad. The entire room is shaking with their less-than-rhythmic gyrations and I have half a mind to switch the music to something less jovial—like a Gregorian chant—before the walls collapse around us. Although I have a feeling they’d find a way to get their groove on to it. There’s clearly no stopping this sugar-fueled good time.

A pair of arms wrap themselves around me from behind before I can ruin anyone’s good mood or good time, and I turn to see the most handsome man in the room, Detective Jasper Wilder, the man who not only stole my heart, but locked it up in his own beating heart and threw away the key.

Jasper is tall, dark, and classically handsome with black hair and light gray eyes, and he happens to be wearing a red pointed hat with a jingle bell attached, which only adds to his sharp good looks.

“Here’s the Santa I’m interested in,” I say, spinning in his arms. “How about we sneak a kiss under the mistletoe before my husband gets back? He’s a detective with the Seaview Sheriff’s Department and he happens to be packing some serious heat.”

Jasper waggles his brows. “I say we work quickly. If Mrs. Claus finds out, it will be a frosty night for both of us.”

“Very funny,” I say as he lands a kiss on my lips.

A sudden wave of queasiness rolls through me, and I pull back, trying to keep my stomach in check. Thankfully, I haven’t had too much of a battle with nausea, but it turns out, that whole morning sickness thing is a total lie from the pit of the hot place. Come to find out, “morning sickness” can strike at any time—and often does just that.

“Love the costume,” he says, pulling back to get a look at me in full elf regalia.

“Keep that on when you head back to the cottage later. I think I can work with this.”

“Careful what you wish for, Detective. I’ve been known to be a naughty elf.”

“Don’t worry. I know just what to do with those on my naughty list.”

“Don’t write checks you can’t cash,” I tease and we share a dark laugh.

Sherlock gives another bark and we look down as that hairy cutie, Jingle, sits by his side.

“Aren’t you the sweetest thing around,” I say, quickly giving the cute pup a pat between the ears. “My name is Bizzy, and this is my husband Jasper.”

Sherlock gives a soft bark at the pooch. Bizzy can hear our thoughts. She can hear almost everybody’s thoughts. But it’s our little secret. Only a few people know, like Jasper, Georgie, and Emmie and Leo—those are Bizzy and Jasper’s besties. How about we head over to the cookie table? I bet if we moan and whimper they’ll toss us the good stuff.

They take off with tails a wagging.

“No chocolate,” I call out after them.

Fish groans. I’ll keep an eye on them. I’ve already eaten two snowball cookies. I don’t see why I shouldn’t go for three.

I make a face. Snowball cookies aren’t exactly a part of her regular diet.

They’re not a part of mine either, but that hasn’t stopped me from polishing off ten—or fifteen. I can’t help it, the Cider Cove Cookie Company knows what they’re

doing in the kitchen. Those cookies should come with an addiction warning label.

Speaking of my newfound addiction, I'll have to secure myself a stash that can last all nine months. I'd hate to run out and have to break into the factory. Although I'm not above petty theft when it comes to meeting the needs of my child.

See that? I'm already a gold-star mother.

"What's on your mind?" Jasper asks as we begin to sway to the cheery holiday music.

"Cookies," I say, just as a craving for a peppermint bark brownie hits me like a freight train.

"I'll steal a tin. You bring the costume." A sly smile glides up his cheek. Our cottage is a quick walk and I can land us in front of the fireplace within three minutes.

"I'd ask what was on your mind, but I already know," I say with a laugh trapped in my throat. I'm about to agree to his terms when I pick up on an errant internal voice nearby.

Laugh all you want. You won't be laughing when I'm through with you. Santa might be here now, but another guest will be here soon enough—the Grim Reaper.

CHAPTER 2

The Grim Reaper?

I scan the crowd as if looking for a lost child, but as it stands, I might be looking for a killer as the Christmas party rages all around us.

Unless the person whose thoughts I'm reading are standing relatively close to me, their internal voice can sound a little androgynous, so I can't tell if I should be on the lookout for a man or a woman. And I certainly can't give Jasper the heads-up on who to arrest for premeditated murder.

Although it was just a thought. I know better than to give too much credence to it. Heaven knows I've wanted to summon the Grim Reaper a time or two myself. And heaven knows if I don't get my fill of these scrumptious cookies, I might just mow down the entire North Pole.

I sigh at the thought just as the conga line disbands and Georgie and my mother head this way looking slightly worse for wear.

Georgie Conner is a robust eighty-something-year-old woman who lives here on the grounds, and she just so happens to be one of the only people who knows about my supernatural quirk. Since her daughter was once married to my father, I like to joke that I got Georgie in the divorce.

Georgie has a penchant for kaftans no matter what time of year it is, thus the red kaftan she's wearing printed with white reindeer. Her hair sits on her head like a gray

storm cloud and her sparkling blue eyes are laced with more than their fair share of mischief.

My mother is the opposite of Georgie in almost every way. Ree Baker is petite, has red feathered hair, and both her clothes and cherry mane are still stuck in her favorite decade, the eighties. She's donned a red sweater with a tree knitted on the front and has a white crisp shirt underneath with the collar popped up around her ears. She's paired the look with dark slacks and gold ballet slippers and looks like the most put-together person in the room.

My mother has been the most put-together person in every room for as long as I can remember.

"Do not try that at home," Mom grunts, holding her back with one hand.

"Quit your complaining," Georgie grouses. "We had more action on that dance floor in the last ten minutes than we've had in the last ten months."

Mom gives a weak chuckle. "Try ten years ."

"When it comes to you, try twenty," Georgie says before winking my way. Don't worry about me, Bizzy. I've given my number to six different men. Let's just say I've got high hopes of getting my stocking filled before midnight.

I can't help but frown at her. I'll station extra security around Georgie's cottage in an effort to deflect any potential perpetrators—even if she would rather call them guests.

Mom chuckles and nudges Georgie. "Now, Georgie, be careful. Bizzy's got enough to worry about with a baby on the way. She doesn't need to be stressing over your holiday hijinks. And speaking of which, could you please manage to keep your clothes on this time? Not only was last year's spectacle a nude eyesore, but you

almost froze solid from the waist down.”

Georgie rolls her eyes. “You’re just jealous that the hot hunks from the fire department were taking their time to warm me up, one inch at a time. How about you get me one of those tins of cookies and I’ll let you in on the fun.”

“No thanks,” Mom says flatly. “I don’t need a bunch of hot hunks to keep things heated. I’ve got your little brother to do it for me.”

It’s true. My mother has been seeing Benedict Arnold, aka Ben, for a while now and they’re not just some fly-by-night couple. They’re the real deal.

Ben is pretty much the opposite of Georgie in every way. She’s a happy-go-lucky hippie and he’s a happy-go-lucky retired businessman who prefers suits to sweats. And the best part is that he treats my mother like gold, which is more than I can say for my father—even though I love him dearly.

And terrifyingly enough, my father has managed to hitch himself to Jasper’s mother. Suffice it to say, things had better not go south for them, because that, in turn, might cause things to go south for Jasper and me. Not that I believe for a second they would. I’ve already decided that I’d forgive Jasper if he felt the need to fire a bullet in my father’s direction. Granted, if he does, I’m rooting for him to miss—or graze lightly. Either or.

Georgie gives my stomach a soft pat. “Don’t worry, kiddo. Your granny might be a dud, but your bonus granny here is a handful of fun just waiting to happen.”

Mom grunts, “More like a handful of arrest warrants.” She glances to her left and straightens. “Virginia?” she cries out with a touch of glee at a couple of women about to pass us by. “It’s me, Ree Baker.”

The older blonde, the one in the fair isle sweater whose thoughts I was inadvertently picking up on earlier, gasps at my mother.

“Oh, my dear friend,” she says as they exchange a quick embrace. “What a surprise to see you here!”

“My daughter owns the inn,” Mom says, holding a hand my way. “Virginia, this is my younger daughter, Bizzy. This is my good friend, Georgie Conner, and this is Bizzy’s husband, Detective Jasper Wilder.”

Both Virginia and the redhead next to her inch back with a mixture of surprise and delight on their faces.

“So nice to meet you all,” Virginia says. “This is my old stepdaughter, Noel Brighton.” She wraps an arm around the redhead by her side. She’s younger, about my age, late twenties, has clear green eyes, a button nose, and thin frosted pink lips. She’s donned the requisite ugly sweater, and it just so happens to have reindeer with a blinking red nose. “We own and run the Cider Cove Cookie Company together.”

“Wow, that’s so nice,” I say to them both.

I had no idea Mom knew the owner, but then again, apparently, Mom wasn’t aware of that either.

“And what a delicious business to get your grubby little cookie-loving hands on,” Georgie says, rubbing her belly.

The redhead laughs. Not as delicious as this detective. She takes a moment to sigh. Why are all the good ones taken?

She’s not wrong on either of those accounts.

I've long since determined not to hold anyone's thoughts against them. It's not their fault I'm listening in. And most people think things that they would never dare say out loud. Although the people with no filter almost always do.

"A detective, huh?" Virginia lifts a brow. "Let's hope we won't be needing your services tonight."

A light scream goes off near the front as the Christmas tree almost gets knocked over by a crowd reveling a little too close to the stately evergreen, and Santa himself just so happens to be a part of that crowd.

Speaking of Santa, women are climbing all over him in an effort to take a picture with the man as the crowd grows that much more rambunctious.

"I don't think you'll be needing my services." Jasper grimaces. "I think Santa has tonight under control." Not that I believe it for a minute. The guy has obviously been hitting the eggnog a little too hard. Here's hoping he has a ride home. Having a deputy escort wouldn't be a good look for him.

I nod his way without meaning to because I so agree.

"The night is young yet," Virginia says, shaking her head at the debauchery taking place. "It's nice meeting you all."

Noel nods our way. "Careful under the mistletoe." She looks right at Jasper. "You never know whose lips you might meet there." If I'm lucky, they'll be mine.

I growl as they take off. That's one thought that I can't let slide.

"The night is young yet, indeed," I parrot. Another errant scream goes off followed by an explosion of laughter. "Let's just hope this night doesn't end in murder."

CHAPTER 3

“H o, ho, ho! My name is Santa and I want to welcome you all to the North Pole! Where there’s nothing like a little holiday magic!” the man in the red suit says while standing on the golden throne in an attempt to bring the room to attention.

“Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer” blares through the speakers before turning down a notch or two as Santa himself belts out another hearty ho, ho, ho from his precarious perch.

Jasper leans my way. “Do you think that chair is strong enough to hold him?”

I shake my head. “I sincerely doubt it. I rented it from the drama department at the local high school. The good news is, I have it on loan until the new year. The bad news is, come January first, I just might be the new owner.”

The Christmas office party for the Cider Cove Cookie Company is still underway. And if it was crowded in the ballroom before, it’s twice as congested now. Everyone who works for the company, or perhaps has ever worked for the company, has shown up. Apparently, the owners are notoriously generous. Not only do they give each employee a cash bonus, but they each get a gift for their families.

Santa jumps down from the throne with a thump and I breathe a sigh of relief that both he and the chair lived to tell about it.

I can’t help but note that his suit is plush red velvet, a top-notch costume if ever there was one. His white beard and matching long coiled tresses look fake but gorgeous,

nonetheless. The man playing the part certainly has that mischievous yet enchanting twinkle in his eye that seems to be a requirement for jolly old St. Nick—and I'll admit, he has a sparkling personality to go along with it.

“Whoever he is”—I say, pressing close to Jasper—“he's perfect for the part.”

Santa heads behind the Christmas tree and comes back wielding an overstuffed red velvet sack.

“Okay, which one of you has been a good boy or girl?” he calls out as a delightful gasp fills the room. “Where's my Mr. Jingle? You're up first,” he says, craning his neck in the crowd as Jingle trots forward, his fluffy chestnut fur wafting in his wake. And on his sweet heels are both Sherlock and Fish. “Well, how do you like this? It looks as if Jingle has made a few furry friends,” Santa says, giving all three of the furry among us a quick scratch behind their ears. “I'm lucky I brought a few extra treats.”

He reaches into his bag and tosses both Jingle and Sherlock a bright green bone, no bigger than the palm of my hand, and a tiny pink stuffed mouse to Fish. All three of them grab the treats with their mouths and quickly nestle near the tree as they begin to enjoy them.

The crowd breaks out into coos at the sight and I happen to be cooing the loudest.

“For those of you wondering”—Santa calls out while cupping his white gloves around his mouth—“those bones are dental chews. Just because the holidays are here, doesn't mean you neglect your chompers.”

A raucous laugh circles the room and I can feel Jasper's chest rumble with delight as well.

“I never could get Sherlock to let me brush his teeth,” he says.

“Now I’m wishing he gave one to Fish as well.”

Santa wiggles his hands in the air before digging his arms into his sack, elbows deep.

“As you all know, Four C has once again generously provided gifts for each of your families.”

I give a knowing nod to Jasper. “Four C is shorthand for Cider Cove Cookie Company.”

“Good to know.”

Santa holds up a finger. “But since I’ve got you all here, I thought I’d hand out a few presents that I took the time to pick out myself. Who would like an extra gift?”

Just about every hand in the room spikes into the air and I notice a few elves—aka my employees—have their hands up, too.

I bite down on a smile.

They don’t have to worry. The owner of the inn has gifted me a generous spending budget this year for gifts—aka me. I’ve got all of them covered.

“Here we go,” Santa calls out and begins to toss small white bundles with big red bows to the masses and soon they’re unfurled to reveal T-shirts with the cookie company logo.

“I got one,” Georgie howls, and both Jasper and I offer her an impromptu applause.

“Now”—Santa gives a dark chuckle as he looks out at the eager crowd—“I’ve got a few hand-selected gifts that I’ve brought down all the way from the North Pole.” He digs his arm into the bag and comes up with a small box with forest green wrapping paper and a gold bow. It looks luxurious already and the crowd gives a collective ooh upon spotting it. “Who could this be for?” He hikes a fuzzy white brow at the crowd before reading the tag. “Ms. Ember Jewel.”

The crowd breaks out into cheers as a pretty brunette with delicate features, dressed in a black sweater with Christmas lights blinking on and off all over it, heads his way.

Santa lifts a hand at the rumbling of voices, muting them a notch. “For those of you who don’t know, Ember is our distribution manager. If it wasn’t for Ember, our cookies would still be sitting in a warehouse somewhere—or more to the point, Virginia Brighton’s backyard.”

A riotous applause breaks out, and I glance to Virginia who looks stony-faced at the comment.

I wonder if that was a barb of some kind? It seemed harmless enough.

“Go on and open it for all to see,” Santa encourages the woman.

The brunette, Ember, quickly works the package open and dips a hand into the box.

She cocks her head as she pulls out a snow globe with a silver base.

“There’s a Christmas village inside of it,” she says, giving it a shake.

“That’s right, Ember,” Santa says. “You can make it snow all you want. When things in this world start to spin out into chaos, you go back to that little crystal ball and remember the snow in that globe is the only thing you can control.”

A light applause breaks out as Ember steps back into the crowd.

“Who’s next?” Santa calls out as he digs another impeccably wrapped gift out of his sack. This one is covered with navy wrapping paper and has a gold bow on top. It, too, looks super lux as he pretends to struggle to read the tag. “If it isn’t our own ho, ho, ho —Noel Brighton!” The room explodes in raucous laughter, and Jasper and I exchange a glance.

“That wasn’t very nice of him,” I say as the laughter continues around us. “I think you’re right about the eggnog.”

Only I know for a fact the eggnog we’re serving isn’t spiked. Or at least I hope not.

Jasper gives a quick nod. “Something tells me he’s going to regret that eggnog in the morning.”

The redhead we met earlier strides up, that red-nosed reindeer on her sweater lighting up intermittently as if he, too, were eager to see what lies in wait.

“Thank you.” She gives the man a hearty wink and the crowd laughs that much harder. She quickly works her gift open and pulls out something about the shape and size of a fishing reel. It looks as if it’s made of brass, expensive and heavy, and if I’m not mistaken, there are all sorts of little numbers and letters on it. “What is it?” she asks the question everyone in the room is wondering.

“An encrypted puzzle,” Santa tells her. “Inside, you’ll find the gift you’ve always wanted. Don’t say I never gave you anything.” He winks back at her and a light round of laughter circles the room.

She steps aside just as Santa pulls out another gift, dark green with a gold bow.

“Chris Winter,” he calls out. “Chris works as our production manager at our plant here in Cider Cove. If Chris drops dead, he’s taking the entire company with him.”

Another round of laughter breaks out, this one less enthused.

“Drops dead?” I shoot Jasper a look and he shakes his head.

I’m not touching that one, Jasper thinks to himself. I’ve got a bad feeling about tonight and I can’t seem to shake it. That quasi-death threat isn’t exactly helping.

I bite down on my lip. I hate to say it, but I’ve had the exact same bad feeling all day—and here I thought it was because I was destined to don green tights for the night. Or maybe it’s just that I’m already overprotective because of this little one brewing in my belly.

My hand instinctively covers my abdomen as if to exemplify the point.

An older, heavy-set man with a head full of gray curls steps up. He’s donned a red sweater and dark green pants. He has a friendly demeanor and a boy-next-door charm about him despite his age. There’s a natural twinkle in his eye, and I can’t help but think he would have made a great Santa as well.

“Thank you very much,” Chris says, taking the package from him and opening it quickly. He pulls out something slender and silver and at the touch of a button a giant blade jets out of it.

The entire room gasps at the sight of it.

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CHAPTER 4

“A switchblade?” I muse.

It must be at least ten inches long in its entirety as an entire room full of people keep their eyes on Santa.

“You’d be surprised how many guys actually want a switchblade for Christmas,” Jasper says.

“Are you hinting?” I tease.

He sheds a smile my way. “Spending time with you is the only gift I need. That, and a little more quiet time before the baby arrives. But I’m already counting down the days until he or she gets here.” And I mean it.

I bite down on a smile and nod because I’m counting down the days myself. This sweet babe in my belly can’t come soon enough.

“Next up is”—Santa does his own little drumroll—“our fearless leader, Virginia Brighton herself.”

The room belts out a riotous cheer once again and Virginia heads up, pinning the man with a serious look.

“I think she’s afraid of what he might give her,” I say with a slight laugh buried in my chest.

“It’s all in good fun,” Jasper says. I hope.

I hope so, too.

Virginia opens her gift, same lux paper and gilded bow, and pulls an ornate handheld mirror out. It’s dark silver and looks like it could be an antique.

“I hope you enjoy it, Virginia,” Santa says with marked sincerity. “Not only are you blessed with something beautiful to look at, but it’s good for us each to hold the mirror up to ourselves now and again.”

A thick silence envelops the room.

That can’t be good.

The woman clears her throat. “Why, thank you, Santa.” She offers a short-lived smile before turning to the crowd. “And how about a hearty round of applause for our own Nick Bell for playing the part of Santa tonight. He’s a true mischievous elf if ever there was one.”

A lively applause breaks out upon her command.

“All right, everybody,” Santa wails. “Let’s load up on cookies, refuel with eggnog, and lose our cool on the dance floor. I’ll be ready to pose for pictures in about twenty minutes. If you’ve been waiting all year long to sit on my lap, now’s your chance.” He touches his finger to the side of his nose and the room lights up with laughter again.

The music turns up several notches. “Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)” thunders over the speakers, and instantly the room is in an uber-jovial mood once again. Bodies are gyrating, the dessert table looks as if it’s under attack—and speaking of

the dessert table...

“Oh, great,” I say. “I don’t see Sherlock or Fish anywhere.” I sigh as I crane my neck every which way. “I can’t help but worry that they’ve gotten themselves in a pickle.”

“More like a Christmas cookie,” Jasper says. “They made a new friend. They’re probably just showing him around. I’ll go look for them. Hang tight, I’ll be right back. Maybe start a conga line.”

“Not on your life.” I laugh as he takes off.

I turn back around and spot Ember, the brunette with the snow globe, speaking to Santa near the back side of that bejeweled evergreen. I bet she’s thanking him for that gift.

Her hands slap over his chest and he stumbles backward, nearly knocking the entire tree down.

So much for being thankful.

She takes off running and he laughs it off with a ho, ho, ho .

That was strange.

Virginia and Noel step over to him and Virginia seems to be saying something to the man.

Now I bet she’s probably thanking him.

She digs a finger in his chest while saying something that looks more than a little aggressive before stalking off.

Huh. That's interesting, too.

Noel, the redhead with the Rudolph sweater, says something to the man and he gives a solemn nod her way before they part ways.

At least that looked amicable.

Another conga line starts up, and just my luck, they're headed right in my direction.

I'd better help Jasper find our pets before I'm conscripted to prance around the room and forced to pretend to like it.

It's not easy being an elf.

I quickly look in every nook and cranny the ballroom has to offer but no such luck finding my little four-footed cuties.

It feels as if an hour has drifted by as I do another thorough sweep of the area. There's no sign of Jasper, Sherlock Bones, Fish, or Jingle.

Clearly, the time has come to broaden my search. I note the side exit just behind the tree is slightly ajar and breathe a sigh of relief.

Now that's probably where I'll find them, out in the courtyard. Although it does butt up to the woods behind the inn, and even though Fish and Sherlock know better than to dive into the labyrinth of evergreens at this time of night, Jingle doesn't. I bet there's a good chance he took off in the woods and they went after him.

Good grief.

No wonder I had a bad feeling about this night.

I step outside and immediately the frozen air envelops me. Snow is coming down, and the sky is striated in shades of lavender and navy as every star in the sky makes its presence known.

I give a quick visual sweep of the area. The snow is falling so fast, if there were any footprints—or pawprints—they’ve long since been dusted over.

“Fish?” I call out as I head toward the woods.

No sooner do I get five feet out than I nearly trip over something short and black sticking straight up in the air.

“Ugh,” I grunt, struggling to right myself.

Doing the faceplant of the century wasn’t on my holiday bingo card tonight, and thankfully for the baby, I’ve managed to avoid it.

“Oh my word,” I say, kicking the log that almost made me eat a mouthful of snow. But the thing refuses to move.

I give it another jab before dusting the snow off the tip, only to discover it’s not a log at all—it’s a big black boot.

To my horror, that boot just so happens to be attached to a man in a red velvet suit, and if I’m not mistaken, there’s a knife sticking right out of his chest.

A gasp escapes me. I recognize the suit and the man in it.

Jolly old St. Nick won’t be giving out any more gifts tonight or ever again.

Nick Bell is dead.

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CHAPTER 5

The moonlight casts a blue glow over the courtyard and makes the silver blade sticking out of that poor man's chest glow cobalt like the hottest kind of flame.

Crimson liquid pools around the man's midsection, saturating the snow in the same lethal hue.

It's Santa.

He's dead .

A shrill scream escapes me at the sight and the earth vibrates around me as three furry creatures bolt my way.

What is it, Bizzy? Sherlock Bones barks as he descends from the woods.

"It's—it's—" I can hardly get the words out as I point down at the body.

It's my Nick, Jingle says as he gives a sharp bark. Who did this ? His barking grows increasingly wild. Who hurt my Nick? A heartbreaking howl emits from him as Fish runs up on the scene.

What's happening? my sweet cat yowls as she stops just shy of the body. Oh, Bizzy. Not again.

I shoot her a look for even going there. Sure, it may not be my first rodeo when it

comes to discovering the dead, but I'd like to think I'm not running a morgue on the side either.

You'd better call for help. Fish rubs her head along Jingle's front paw. Sherlock, let's take Jingle inside. He doesn't need to see this.

Don't you worry, Sherlock tells him as he and Fish lead Jingle along. My Bizzy and Jasper are going to take care of this.

Fish belts out a sharp meow. And they'll take care of whoever did this, too.

No sooner are they out of sight than another short-lived scream evicts from me, and this time it's Jasper who runs up, along with another man on his heels.

"Bizzy?" Jasper calls out, and in seconds I'm in his arms. "What happened? Are you all right? Is it the baby?"

"I'm fine." I give a shaky nod. "The baby is fine, too." My hand finds my stomach as I glance past him at the man closing the distance on us and I recognize that red sweater, his gray curls—it's the man who was given the switchblade from Santa himself. I think his name is Chris.

"I was, I was looking for Sherlock and Fish—and you." I blink up at Jasper. "And I tripped over something. I thought maybe it was a log or who knows what, but as it turns out, it was a shoe."

"Geez ." The man next to us gasps. "Is he dead?"

Jasper quickly falls to Santa's side and checks for a pulse before shaking his head at both Chris and me.

“He’s gone.” Jasper sighs. “I’m calling this in.” He makes a quick call, and soon I’m back in his arms as he presses his nose to mine. “We need to get you inside. I don’t want you out here in the cold too long. What else did you see, Bizzy?”

“Nothing. That’s it. Oh, and the pets showed up. Sherlock and Fish just took Jingle inside. He was pretty upset.”

“I’ll say,” Chris pants. His face glows like a second moon in this dim light, but he doesn’t take his eyes off of the deceased. “Jingle had a real affection for the guy.” Not that anyone else did.

I blink back at his unkind comment.

The man is dead, but obviously, Chris can’t control his true feelings. And as I’ve learned one too many times before, thoughts tend to run rampant in all sorts of crazy directions when there’s a corpse involved.

The sound of sirens heads in this direction, sawing through the night as both Jasper and Chris step over to the body.

“Don’t move any closer,” Jasper tells the man. “We can’t afford to compromise the crime scene any more than we already have.”

But Chris does move closer, by way of leaning toward his old friend.

“Jasper?” he says as his voice hikes an octave. “I think I recognize that knife. I think it’s the switchblade he just gave me.”

“What?” I say, traipsing in their direction as well.

Sure enough, it is a switchblade, and just seeing it sends a shiver up my spine.

“Why isn’t this knife in your possession?” Jasper bites the words out sharply.

It comes out laced with accusation, and for good reason.

“I set it down on the dessert table.” Chris raises his hands as if it were a stickup. “It was still in the box. I grabbed a few cookies, watched as Virginia opened her gift, had some eggnog, and then went out for some fresh air. That’s when I bumped into you.”

Jasper nods my way. “It’s true, we’ve been out in front of the inn talking about weaponry.” He pats the gun hidden beneath his suit jacket just as what looks like the entire Seaview Sheriff’s Department swarms the area.

Soon, Jasper and Chris are busy speaking with the deputies as a handful of bodies begin to spill this way from the ballroom.

“Bizzy,” someone calls my name and I turn to see Georgie headed over with my mother in tow. “What’s happening? Is it the baby? Or did you lose one of Santa’s reindeer again?”

I make a face.

“I’ve never lost anyone’s reindeer,” I tell her as both women crane their necks to see what all the fuss is about. “And the baby is fine.” Although most likely questioning fate, seeing that it’s been given a certified corpse finder as a mother.

But before I can tell them about the latest corpse I found, a shrill scream escapes from my mother.

It looks like I won’t have to explain anything.

CHAPTER 6

“O h my goodness.” My mother staggers on her feet for a moment as she eyes the poor man lying on the ground. “Bizzy, you killed Santa! And in your condition no less!” I hate to say it, but it’s a lump of coal for my poor grandkid from here on out once word gets back to the North Pole.

“What?” I squawk. “Why would you come to that conclusion? You, of all people, should know I’m not a killer.”

Georgie winks my way. “Or are you? After all, you’re loaded up with all sorts of runaway hormones now. Pregnant women can be full of surprises—especially the deadly kind. I’d tell Jasper to watch his back if I were you.”

“Oh, stop,” Mom snips her way. “I’m sorry, Bizzy. I should never have accused you. The words just flew right out of my mouth. But in my defense, you do have an awfully good track record of finding bodies.” And with no hope of that deadly hobby letting up anytime soon.

I make a face at her. “Okay, fine. I’ll admit, I did find him. But that’s about as far as my involvement goes.”

“So you say,” Georgie growls. “How could you go after Santa? You’re a bad elf, Bizzy Baker Wilder, and because of you, the entire town is going to get a lump of coal in their stocking.” She sniffs. “I was sort of hoping for a hunky side of beef with a six-pack in mine.”

“You would,” Mom snips.

“You wouldn’t,” Georgie snips back. “But Bizzy would. If it’s one thing I miss from my days as a human incubator, it’s all the man candy I craved. And that was one craving I wasn’t about to deny myself.”

“And you haven’t denied yourself since,” Mom quips. “Bizzy, are you sure you’re all right? Maybe you should go inside and sit down. Stress isn’t good for you—or the baby.”

“I’m fine, Mom,” I assure her, although the concern in her eyes makes me wish I was back in the warmth of the inn, enjoying one of those pecan melt-aways or two or twelve. I am getting hungry. Scratch that, I’m getting famished. Good to know that not even the Grim Reaper has the power to take down my appetite. Something tells me it’s going to be a long nine months—or eight as it were.

Georgie sighs. “I hate to say it, but maybe your mama is right. As much as I’d hate to see you retire from a career you’re so good at, maybe it’s time to let someone else take over the corpse-finding business.”

“Believe me,” I moan. “I’d gladly pass the deadly baton if I could.”

Mom glances over at the body once again and a horrific moan emits from her at the sight. How is it possible that I have a child who keeps finding corpses? Is she really my child? Maybe someone switched her at birth? Oh, never mind. It’s just my luck, my kid has turned into a corpse magnet. I think I’m going to be sick.

“Georgie, why don’t you take her inside?” I say, gently turning my mother around toward the ballroom. “Mom, I think you could use a seat and maybe some coffee.”

“She’s right, Preppy,” Georgie says, leading my mother back in the direction they

came from. Preppy would be the nickname Georgie has gifted my mother, mostly because my mother is a die-hard preppy at heart, as evidenced by her staunch affection for an eighties-based wardrobe. “Now that the masses are distracted, we can nosh on all the cookies we want. You should join us, Bizzy. An all-you-can-eat cookie buffet is practically doctor’s orders for preggos like you.”

“Agree,” I tell her. “And you don’t have to ask me twice. I’ll be in as soon as I can.”

“We could have eaten all the cookies we wanted earlier, too,” Mom points out to Georgie.

“Yeah,” her gray-headed bestie says. “But now we don’t have to pretend we would never eat more than two. I hereby challenge you to a cookie-eating contest. Winner buys the loser a cookie.”

“You mean loser buys the winner a cookie,” Mom counters. “And who in their right mind is going to want another cookie after inhaling all the cookies they can eat?”

“Me , that’s who,” Georgie grouses as they disappear into the building, and in their wake, my sister, Macy, heads this way with Noel Brighton by her side.

I waste no time speeding over.

“Bizzy, what’s happening?” my sister hisses.

Macy is a year older than me and miles more mischievous—she would say fun . Georgie would probably agree. She wears her short blonde hair in a bob and has more than a naughty gleam in her pretty blue eyes. She’s a self-proclaimed maneater and it’s the trait she’s most proud of. “You didn’t kill another one, did you?” she asks in horror. “And please tell me you’re not playing detective in your condition.”

“Not again,” I mutter. “And before you ask, both the baby and I are fine.”

Although now that I think of it, Macy probably wasn’t going to ask.

“What’s this?” the redhead by her side muses as the nose of that reindeer on her sweater blinks on and off. “You’re not a killer, are you?” she asks with a laugh buried in her throat.

“Absolutely not,” I tell her.

Macy rolls her eyes at my denial. “Noel, this is my sister, Bizzy. Let’s just say she’s no stranger to the dead.”

Noel blinks back, startled by the claim—as any rational person would before offering a somewhat worried smile my way. “We actually met earlier this evening,” she says. No stranger to the dead? She shakes her head my way. Is that some sick inside joke? I wonder what that’s supposed to mean?

I don’t blame her for having her curiosity piqued, but I’m not in the mood to spill all the grisly details either.

I tip my head as I inspect the two of them. “How do you two know each other?”

Macy lifts a gloved finger. “Noel and I took classes together in community college way back when. What’s the deal out here? Who bit the big one this time?”

I make a face at my sister for a moment. “Noel, I’m sorry to break the news to you, but the man dressed as Santa seems to have had an unfortunate accident.”

And an even more unfortunate run-in with a killer.

“Nick?” Her eyes widen in the direction of the poor man.

I nod. “We should probably tell Virginia,” I suggest. “I’m sure she’ll want to address the rest of the company.”

Noel frowns my way.

Why does everyone assume Virginia is the only one at the helm down at Four C?

“Virginia left,” she says with a sigh. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to pay my respects.”

She takes off for the crowd forming around the bright caution tape being set out around the crime scene.

“Virginia left?” I say under my breath as I spot Ember and Chris Winter migrating toward the body as well.

Macy and I make our way over as a solemn hush falls over the courtyard.

There he is, an errant voice calls from the crowd.

It’s hard to tell if it’s coming from a man or a woman.

If anyone deserves to be lying in the snow with a knife in the chest, it’s Nick Bell, another voice chimes.

My adrenaline picks up as I scour the crowd for a flicker of suspicion on anyone’s face, but they’re all stone-cold and somber.

He’s dead and I’m not sorry, another says. In fact, nobody here should be sorry about it. He had to go. And thankfully, he’s gone and will never come back.

It's over, someone muses. It's all over now.

An icy breeze whistles by as I scan the crowd once again.

It's not over by a long shot.

And I'll make sure it's not over until justice has been served—even if I have to serve it myself.

But not before I eat another cookie.

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CHAPTER 7

The Country Cottage Inn is a jewel set against the backdrop of the Atlantic any time of the year, but I'll admit, it shines a little brighter during the holidays.

It's the next day after the horrible tragedy that took place in the courtyard, and surprisingly the guests of the inn don't seem any worse for wear.

Of course, they're busy getting in their last-minute holiday shopping and being zipped off by nearby relatives to do all of the touristy things while here in Maine.

It probably helps that I didn't exactly clue my guests in on the murderous dilemma either. I've found that when this type of thing happens, it's best for the inn to lay low and avoid the homicidal radar.

Come on, Jingle. Sherlock Bones gives a happy bark as he leads him from behind the reception counter. Let's go sit under the Christmas tree and welcome the guests. I'm not the inn's employee of the month for nothing.

Hey, Fish mewls as she jumps down from her perch on the creamy marble counter. I'm the employee of the month. In fact, I'm the employee of the month— every month, she says with a touch of pride as she takes off after them.

They would both be right. And who could blame me for selecting the cutest employees of the bunch for the monthly honor? But they're not just a couple of pretty faces, they pull their weight when it comes to greeting guests.

I peer in the direction of the enormous evergreen taking up residence just shy of the bay window. It's festooned from top to bottom with colorful twinkle lights. And just last week, the employees and I decorated it with colorful ornaments to match. The entire inn is decorated with enough garland wrapped with twinkle lights that we could rope them around the world twice.

Giant evergreen wreaths are hooked onto the double doors, adding an extra festive flair to the entry, each with a cherry red bow.

The inn has its share of old-world charm, with its distressed gray wooden floors, a wrought iron staircase that leads up to the second level, and blue shutters outside of every window. The exterior is painted white, but you'd never know it with all the ivy taking over. There are over seventy rooms to let, in addition to over thirty cottages we lease out on the property. Jasper and I happen to live in one of those cottages, as do our best friends, Emmie and Leo Granger, and Georgie lives on the premises, too.

"Bizzy!"

Speaking of which, I turn to see my best friend, Emmie Grainger, headed this way.

Emmie and I have been best buds since preschool. We happen to share the same medium-length dark hair, denim blue eyes, and the same proper moniker, Elizabeth. Although to avoid confusion, we've gone through life with the nicknames our families have given us.

And there's one more thing we happen to have in common these days—the fact we're both expecting. Emmie and her husband Leo are due this spring, and I couldn't be more excited if it were my own. Just the fact our babies will be friends for life, like we are, thrills me to pieces.

Emmie works for me right here at the inn, at the Country Cottage Café located off the

back. The café is one of my favorite features of the inn since it butts up to the sandy cove. However, my most favorite feature is the pet daycare facility we have on site. As soon as I took the managerial position, I obliterated the no-pet policy.

In fact, the Country Cottage Inn has been voted the most pet-friendly inn in all of Maine for several years running.

Emmie lands a bright red Cider Cove Cookie Company tin onto the counter and rips the lid off.

“Dig in with me,” she pants. “Everyone knows calories don’t count if you partake with friends—especially if your friend just so happens to be knocked up like you are. It’s a basic rule you can find in any one of those What to Expect While You’re Expecting pregnancy lifestyle manuals.”

“Well, if I’m going to save you some calories, you’ve twisted my arm,” I say, reaching in and grabbing a snowball cookie for myself. “Of course, I’ll need twice this much if I’m expected to eat for two.”

“Of course.” She laughs before wrinkling her nose at my selection. “Those are good, but the brookie is the cookie to beat.” She pats her tiny round baby bump. “Both the baby and I agree.”

“What?” I laugh. “But it’s impossible to beat the brookie,” I tell her. “Because its brownie superpowers are far too strong. Baby Wilder gives it two thumbs-up.”

She makes a face. “It’s true,” she says. “The brookie doesn’t play fair because it’s essentially two desserts in one—a brownie and a chocolate chip cookie. But for the holidays, they switched out the chocolate chips for butterscotch—and lucky for me, because I’ve been craving butterscotch like crazy. It’s like the baby knows exactly what I want and it makes me crave it even more.”

“ Ooh , I like how intuitive Baby Granger is,” I say, quickly snatching one up. I can’t help it, I’m an unashamed cookie addict. “Butterscotch is my favorite, too. But then, I am sort of in love with the peppermint pinwheels they’ve included this year as well. They’re so refreshing, and oddly enough, they seem to be just the cure whenever I get a hint of nausea.”

“Good tip,” she says, reaching for a pinwheel to call her own. “I’ve been craving those myself. And weirdly enough, I’ve been craving lemons lately, too. I’m talking lemon everything. Lemon bars, lemon cookies, lemon in my water. I think this baby is going to come out loving lemonade.”

“ Aww ,” I coo. “And it’ll have a great attitude in life because of it, too. It’ll know exactly what to do when life hands it lemons.”

We share a quick laugh as a crowd bustles through the reception area.

“I just hope the baby doesn’t end up as zesty as a lemon at two in the morning when it’s time for a diaper change.” Emmie’s hands sit over her belly as she gives it a quick pat. “And speaking of babies, have you thought up any names yet? Leo and I are still trying to narrow down our list.”

“Our list is just getting started,” I tell her. “We’ve got a few in mind, but it’s so hard to choose. Every time I think I’ve got the perfect name, another one pops into my head that I like even more.”

“Same here.” She takes another bite of her cookie, a far more aggressive one as she stares out at the tree. “And listen to this, each time I think I’ve found the perfect name, the baby gives me a kick as if it wants a vote in the matter, too. I swear, it’s like this baby already has opinions about everything.”

“It clearly takes after its parents.” I pick up another brookie and make quick work of

it. “Hey, is it weird that I think this would go great with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich? With maybe a few hot and spicy pickles on the side?”

Emmie belts out a good old-fashioned belly laugh, the kind that bonded us tighter than sisters as we shared them plentifully and often while growing up.

“Bizzy, I think these cookies are a lot more appetizing than peanut butter and pickles.”

“Well, at least I’m not craving anything weird like dirt, or chalk,” I say in defense of spicy pickles everywhere.

“True,” she says with a sigh as she reaches for another pinwheel. “I guess we should count our Christmas blessings. And thankfully, we have the Cider Cove Cookie Company to keep us stocked with scrumptious, far more traditional sweet treats.”

“Amen to that.” And I grab another cookie to show my thanks. “We’re lucky, all right. Pregnant and pampered by the best cookies in all of Maine.”

“Couldn’t ask for anything better,” she says through a mouthful. “Except maybe a nap after the sugar rush dies down.”

“Naps are my best friend these days—no offense to you,” I say with a wink. “I think I could sleep through a thunderstorm.”

“So could I,” she groans through another bite. “Sleep has become a sacred ritual. But I don’t think Leo fully understands why I’m in bed by eight.”

“Both he and Jasper will learn soon enough. Once those sleepless nights hit, we’ll all be scrambling to catch a nap where we can.”

The doors to the inn whoosh open and in strides our town's fearless leader—and my self-proclaimed nemesis. And suddenly, I have a craving to scramble away from the inn as fast as I can.

CHAPTER 8

“M ayor Woods,” I say, forcing a tight smile to my face because heaven knows I’m not scrambling anywhere at the moment.

Mayor Mackenzie Woods is exactly the same age as Emmie and me—we’re all in our late twenties.

And fun fact? The three of us used to be inseparable growing up. But things took a turn after Mackenzie tried her best to drown me in a barrel filled with water back when we were in junior high.

Four things came from that almost tragic experience: my irrational fear of large bodies of water, my phobia of confined spaces, my complete distrust of Mackenzie Woods—oh, sure, she had her excuses, but that whole my hand slipped thing has never held water with me.

And the fourth thing that came from the event was my sudden ability to pry into other people’s gray matter. I’m not exactly sure why I have this supernatural quirk, and at this point I’m content not knowing. Although I can surmise something went terribly wrong that day, starting from the moment I said hello to Mackenzie.

“What can I help you with?” I ask, sliding the cookie tin her way. She also happens to be my sister-in-law and the mother of my favorite and only nephew, whom she named after herself, little Mack.

However, Mackenzie, as in the female version before me, is a stunner with her long

chestnut-colored hair, high-cut cheekbones, and dark eyes that emulate the dark intent in her heart. She also has a no-nonsense dress code, as evidenced by the cranberry power suit she's donned.

I'm not all that surprised that my brother Hux was drawn to her. But I am a little shocked they've made it work for so long. They couldn't be more different if they tried. I know opposites attract, I'm just hoping they don't implode, for little Mack's sake.

"I heard there was another murder here last night." She takes a moment to glower my way. "The Cider Cove town Christmas party will be held here on Christmas Eve and it had better be corpse-free, Bizzy. I mean it. You've hit your quota on bodies this year. We have six different news stations begging to cover the event, so don't you dare drag the Grim Reaper into this."

"Yes, ma'am," I say, teasing. Although to her credit, this isn't my first rodeo when it comes to stumbling upon bodies. I can't help it. I'm a bit of a magnet when it comes to corpses. "I'll let the Grim Reaper know he can have the night off to be with his family."

Her eyes widen as Emmie tries her best to stifle a laugh.

What is wrong with this girl? Mackenzie scoffs. If I didn't know better, I'd think the homicide detective she's snagged has given her a license to kill. I always knew Bizzy was one gift short of wrapping paper, but I'm starting to see it's official.

She snaps up a peppermint pinwheel and takes a bite in haste while shooting me with her ire.

"Look at the two of you." She takes a moment to shake her head at the both of us as if she just got a whiff of something scandalous. "Glowing like a couple of Christmas

lights. Congratulations to you both again—for getting knocked up in tandem. Aren't you just the bestiest besties that have ever did bestie .” She sticks a finger down her throat and pretends to gag. “How perfectly adorable. What's next? Are we planning matching nurseries?”

“Maybe,” Emmie says with an air of defiance in her voice. “I mean—” She gags on the river of words trying to work their way out of her throat for a proper comeback.

“Save it,” Mackenzie snips. “Pregnancy brain is a real thing. You two better enjoy that glow while it lasts because soon enough, it's swollen feet, sleepless nights, and cravings for things that should never be put into the same sandwich.”

“Like pickles and peanut butter?” Emmie bats her lashes while she says it and I try my best to stifle a laugh—and my appetite.

Mackenzie lifts her chin. “I hope your hubbies are ready for midnight runs for pickles and peanut butter. And let's not forget the joy of outgrowing all your clothes before you can even blink. Goodbye, waistline. Hello, tent dresses.”

Emmie ticks her head to the side. “Sounds like someone is still bitter about the nine months of hard time they had to do.”

“Oh, honey”—Mackenzie's voice dips into its lower register—“bitter doesn't even begin to cover it. Try furious.” She balls her fists and lands them over the countertop in a show of mock force. “Hux was out buying me tubs of cookie dough like it was the cure for everything. The sleepless nights, the back pain—and don't even get me started on the hormone-induced crying fits. One minute you're happy, the next you're sobbing over a laundry detergent commercial. It's a delightful rollercoaster that I never want to take a ride on again.” She crosses her arms as a wicked smile plays on her lips. “You're going to love it.” She snaps up another cookie before giving us both a little wave and dashing right back into the portal to hell where she came from.

Okay, fine, she saunters back out into the snowy afternoon like the ice queen she is.

“Hux is so lucky,” Emmie flatlines, but we’re too stunned to laugh. Or cry.

The doors whoosh open once again and I’m grateful to whomever it might be. I don’t care if it’s the Grim Reaper himself, I’ll be greeting him with a smile.

I turn that way only to see it’s not the Grim Reaper—but it might be close.

CHAPTER 9

Virginia and Noel step into the lobby of the Country Cottage Inn, tugging their winter coats tight around their waists as snowflakes pepper their hair and shoulders.

Virginia's blonde locks are pulled back into a chignon, and she's clad in black and carrying a small potted poinsettia. It looks so festive and lively, that I suddenly have a craving to festoon the inn with the perky little plant.

Note to self: buy poinsettias in bulk—and maybe buy a red dress to match. It's safe to say I'm still traumatized from my stint dressed as an elf.

Noel looks cozy in a dark wool coat, and peeking from underneath is essentially the same power suit Mackenzie has on, save for the fact it's navy, and her red tresses are neatly curled under, hugging her neck.

"Hello, ladies," I say, placing my hand over my stomach out of habit, a brand-new habit that I don't plan on breaking until sometime next summer. "What can I do for you today?"

Emmie excuses herself to the kitchen where she says she has a pan of cinnamon rolls ready to be iced.

And you can bet your britches I'll be sampling those before the day is done.

Virginia steps up and nods. "We were just on our way back from the sheriff's station and we wanted you to know that we're fully cooperating with the homicide detective.

Your husband.” She nods again.

“That’s good to hear,” I tell her. “I’m so very sorry for your loss.”

“We are, too,” Noel says. “But we also wanted to extend our apologies for any trouble we might have caused the inn.”

“Please, no need to apologize,” I say. “In fact, if there’s anything at all we can do, we want to help.”

The door to the inn opens with a start and in strides my saucy sister, clad in red, her signature color in and out of season.

Noel turns around. “Macy?”

My sister’s mouth rounds out with surprise. “Perfect timing,” she says. “I was about to grab coffee in the café. You should come with. We have so much to discuss before tomorrow.”

Noel glances at Virginia. “I’ll be right back,” she says, following Macy in the hot pursuit of hot java.

Perfect. Now that I have Virginia all to myself, I can get to the nitty-gritty. And who knows? I might even get her opinion on a few baby names. I have a feeling I’m going to work my newest quest into just about every conversation—even if that conversation happens to involve murder.

“Virginia,” I practically hiss the woman’s name without meaning to. “What do you think happened last night? Was there anyone at the party who Nick Bell had a disagreement with?”

“Disagreement?” She averts her eyes for a moment. “Try at least half the company. Nick wasn’t exactly the easiest person to get along with.”

“That’s too bad.” I bite down on my lip as Fish jumps up onto the counter.

Ask her why she left the party early, she mewls. Guilty people always flee the scene of the crime. And then be done with it, Bizzy. You shouldn’t have to burden yourself with the stress of a homicide on top of every other thing on your holiday list. Let the oaf you married do his job for once. Stress isn’t good for the baby. I heard Grandma say those exact words.

She’s not wrong and neither is my mother.

I may have briefed Fish, Sherlock, and Jingle on everything I knew once we got back to the cottage last night.

Since there was no one able to take Jingle, I took him home myself, and he’ll stay with me until we get his living situation sorted out. Although he’s so adorable I wouldn’t mind sorting out his living situation right there in my cottage. Jasper and I are already smitten with him.

Fish might pretend to dislike the canines among us, but she gets along with Sherlock just fine.

Mostly.

“Virginia,” I whisper this time. “I didn’t see you after the incident. Was there something wrong that you had to leave so quickly?”

She blinks back. Get right to the point, why don’t you.

She takes a moment to glower at me. “My stomach was off all night. I had just eaten here at the café. Perhaps the pizza was bad.”

Both Fish and I gasp at the slight.

“Now if you’ll excuse me”—Virginia hugs the poinsettia in her arms—“I think I’ll go set this out in the courtyard as a memorial to my friend.”

She stalks off just as Macy and Noel return, a touch too jovial, each with a coffee cup in hand.

So much for catching a killer before breakfast.

CHAPTER 10

“O h, Bizzy.” Noel Brighton flashes a warm smile my way as both she and Macy step over to the counter. “You’re so lucky to have a sister like Macy. She actually managed to make me laugh more than once. And I certainly did not see that coming. She’s got a real talent.”

“I’m so glad my sister could brighten your mood. She has a way of doing that,” I say to Noel and mean every word. Macy has been trying to cheer me up ever since Jasper and I announced our big news as if something devastating was headed our way. I tried explaining to her that we’re both over the moon about the baby, but it’s as if I was speaking another language—one that Macy doesn’t want anything to do with, let alone understand.

A white ball of fluff bounces into the inn and jets right past us as she catches up with the rest of the furry crew.

That fluffy white marshmallow would be Candy, Macy’s Samoyed, aka her baby girl. Funny enough, Hux happens to have a look-alike ball of fluff, a male named Cane.

And yes, Candy and Cane are quite the doggie power couple.

“Yeah, yeah.” Macy frowns while taking a sip of her coffee. “Brightening moods is what I’m known for.” She averts her eyes at the thought. “It’s right up there with being the world’s best aunt.” She turns to the woman. “My brother’s son, little Mack, just loves me to pieces.” Her eyes flit back my way. “Speaking of the little dirt devil. The kid doesn’t sleep, Bizzy. Just wait until your little one keeps you up all night.

And don't get me started on all of the social events you'll be missing out on. Boy, you really didn't think this one through, did you? I seriously doubt you're ready for the life of inconvenience that's coming up dead ahead."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I tell her with a curt look that says so much more. "I'm sure you'll love every minute of being the aunt that swoops in with a new, shiny, albeit loud toy, then swoops back out before the diaper duty starts." I nod to the woman by her side. "Ask me how I know."

Noel's eyes grow twice their size as she takes in my sister in this new, anti-infant light.

"Anyway, I'm glad my sister is able to share her special sense of humor with you," I say to the woman and ignore the fact Macy is momentarily gagging on a river of words.

Poor Noel. Grieving in general is hard, but during the holidays it must make everything impossible.

The woman nods. "Yes, well, Macy's special sense of humor always manages to brighten my mood," Noel says with a look that suggests she's not all that sure about Macy or the moods she's capable of inflicting right about now. "We were actually talking about the white elephant gift exchange our book club is having tomorrow. You should come. We're meeting at the bakery on Main Street. We'll be decorating gingerbread houses and exchanging quasi-tacky gifts." She gives a little laugh. "Our book club is always open to new members. Feel free to bring friends. We'd love to have you."

"No, we wouldn't," Macy is quick to correct as she scoops Fish up and gives her a quick scratch on the back. "Unless you're offering to babysit for this one." She hitches a thumb my way. "Because I'm telling you both now, this baby is going to be

a handful. Colic runs in our family. Just think of all the screaming and crying that's about to enter our lives. Aren't we all lucky?" She blows a stray hair from her eyes. And what's with Bizzy scoring an invite to yet another event? Macy growls my way with the thought. Clearly, Noel doesn't realize that inviting my sister to a public shindig is as good as inviting a serial killer. Death follows her everywhere, and it's really starting to impede on my social life.

I take a moment to frown at her before nodding to Noel.

"I'll be there with bells on. And I'll bring a couple of friends as well." There's no point in missing out on another opportunity to quiz someone who was at that party last night. "And don't forget, we're meeting right back here in a few days for the town Christmas Eve party." I shoot Macy a look, cutting her off at the pass. "Before you say a word, I'm sure it will go off without a hitch."

At least I sincerely hope so—for the sake of the inn and my sanity. And, of course, the baby, too.

Macy frowns. "We'll see."

My sister drops Fish back to the counter and takes off.

No sooner is she out of earshot than I lean in a notch.

"Noel? Do you know if Virginia and Nick were close?"

"Oh, they were." She gives a furtive nod. "But I think they were having some trouble as of late."

"What kind of trouble?"

“I really don’t know,” she says just as Virginia breezes our way once again.

“We can leave now.” Virginia’s tone is somber, and understandably so.

Noel casts a glance my way. “You can ask Chris Winter,” she says. “Chris knows everybody’s secrets.”

“Ask Chris about what?” Virginia gives a few innocent blinks, but I’d swear there’s a hint of irritation behind them.

Noel pats her lips with her fingers. “Bizzy was just asking if Nick had any fallouts with anyone at the company.”

Not in so many words, but she’s not wrong.

Virginia’s eyes sharpen over mine. She’s a nosy one, isn’t she? I don’t like this. I don’t like this one bit.

“Have a good day, Bizzy,” Virginia says, practically spinning Noel toward the door.

“See you at the bakery tomorrow,” Noel calls out. “Two in the afternoon. Bring something for the exchange. We’ll have a blast. Oh, and just FYI, Chris works the Sugar Plum Tree Lot in the evenings. He’s their resident Santa.”

“Thank you,” I shout as they disappear into the snowy afternoon.

Fish belts out a yowl, and both Sherlock Bones and Jingle run this way.

Get ready, boys, she mewls their way. It looks as if we’re going tree shopping this evening.

“That’s right,” I tell them. “We’re going to hunt down a Christmas tree, and perhaps a killer.”

But not before I have another cookie or two—or a couple of tins with a little eggnog to wash it all down.

Sometimes justice has to wait. But I can promise you one thing, it won’t wait for long. I want my holidays back. And there’s not a killer on the planet that I’ll let stand in the way.

Although I suddenly have an all-new craving bubbling to the surface. I think it’s time to catch up on some of my Christmas shopping. Here’s hoping I don’t inadvertently murder my savings account.

CHAPTER 11

Only two things have the power to drag me away from the inn this time of year—the lure of freshly baked goodies and the ability to cross people’s names off my Christmas list. Lucky for me, my current locale allows me to do both.

Main Street is as charming as ever this time of year, with wreaths hung on every lamppost and twinkle lights strewn along the cobbled street, making the snow glow as it falls to the ground in soft, fat flakes.

All of Cider Cove looks like a postcard come to life—adorable, festive, and begging me to spend way too much on Christmas treats I don’t need but can’t resist.

Fish sits snug in my tote bag, resting against my side with her head poking out from the top. You should really consider adding more wreaths to the inn. They really are festive. Although I think even these can use a few more baubles like those cherry red balls that Sherlock likes to eat. And I think you should string some twinkle lights through them as well. It’s a classic combination you can’t go wrong with. Without the lights, the wreaths look a bit bare for my taste, she muses, glancing up at one with a critical eye.

A laugh bubbles from me. “You have no idea how happy it makes me that you share my affinity for mass quantities of Christmas décor—which leads me to my philosophy about Christmas décor, the more the better. Especially the more red ornaments and twinkle lights. I so agree, you can never go wrong with that classic combo because—” I stop short and give a quick sniff to something warm and sweet that’s tantalizing my senses. “Is that cinnamon?”

Sherlock gives a quick sniff of the frosty air, along with a soft woof of excitement. I smell cinnamon. There's cinnamon! Do you smell cinnamon? Can we please follow the cinnamon?

Jingle prances by his side, his little paws crunching in the snow. Cinnamon rolls! I smell cinnamon rolls! I live for cinnamon rolls!

“Ooh, so do I,” I muse as I do my best to sniff those cinnamon rolls right into my stomach. “Oh wow, they really do smell divine.”

The air is so thick with the heavenly scent it's managed to hypnotize the masses as every person on the street makes a beeline for the bakery—and I happen to be one of them.

If I had any willpower against baked goods before I found myself in the family way, I'm powerless against it now.

Who am I kidding? I was powerless to it before, too.

Both dogs begin to bark and prance because clearly they're pretty powerless in that arena as well.

Another laugh bubbles from me as I take in their enthusiasm. “And the two of you have no idea how happy it makes me that you share my affinity for mass quantities of cinnamon rolls—which leads me to my philosophy about cinnamon rolls, the more the better. Especially cinnamon rolls with coffee. And that's another classic combo you can never go wrong with.”

At this point in my life, I prefer the cinnamon rolls to the Christmas décor.

All three furry cuties share a laugh at that one as a blast of icy wind bears down on

us. I pull my coat tighter around me. The scent of freshly baked cinnamon rolls is wafting out from the Cider Cove Bake Shop, demanding my immediate attention.

Fish gives a dramatic sigh. Cinnamon rolls, Bizzy? Really? What's Emmie going to think if she finds out you're traipsing around town enjoying someone else's cinnamon rolls. She works very hard to make only the best quality desserts for the inn. You're practically cheating on your bestie for a cinnamon roll.

"Technically"—I hold up a finger—"it's a cinnamon roll and a gingerbread latte I'll be having, so it's essentially a double betrayal."

Fish yowls with a laugh as Sherlock and Jingle dance and prance as I steer us toward the bakery.

The warm, cozy glow from the window pulls me in like a moth to a flame—or like a cinnamon roll to frosting—and in seconds, we're standing inside as the heat instantly thaws my cheeks.

The butter-yellow walls offer up a hug all their own, but it's the thick sweet scent of freshly baked goodies that has half the town clamoring for the shop to take their money.

I order a half dozen rolls without hesitation, and a gingerbread latte to go along with them—may Emmie forgive me—and feel a twinge of guilt as I watch an employee dressed as Mrs. Claus expertly drizzles frosting over the rolls.

I can't wait to sink my teeth into one, and from the way Sherlock is sitting so obediently, tail wagging in perfect rhythm, I'd say he's hoping for a taste, too. I quickly wolf one down as if I were competing in the Olympic speed-eating finals, going for the gold with a cinnamon roll in record time. Of course, I split another among Fish, Sherlock, and Jingle. I'm not a monster.

We step back out into the crisp, snowy air, my bag of goodies tucked securely in my arm, and head down the street to the shop my mother and Georgie own, Two Old Broads. My sister came up with the name and it sort of stuck.

The storefront window is adorned with a strand of thick bushy green garland interwoven with twinkle lights and a quaint wooden sign advertising “Holiday Specials Galore!”

I crane my neck past the holiday specials to peer inside, and I can already see it’s packed with last-minute shoppers, bustling about in search of that perfect gift. And in less than two seconds, I’m going to be one of them.

“Let’s do this,” I say, steering my furry crew through the door.

Inside, the scent of pine and cider hits me like a wave—fresh, clean, and festive. Shelves are stacked with homemade knits, quirky trinkets, and wonky quilts in every imaginable holiday print.

The wonky quilt is sort of what started the party as far as the two of them opening a shop. Georgie came up with the idea to put together quilts with strips of fabric cut in any and every angle and in every and any pattern, too. The quilts themselves are so soft and luxurious, not to mention adorable in a quirky, crazy grandmother sort of a way, that they just fly off the shelves. And with each new holiday and season, the patterns are switched up to match, which just makes them that much more irresistible.

Christmas carols blast from the speakers, only to compete with the chatter from the legions of shoppers. I can hardly move around the thicket of bodies crowded into this space, let alone focus on what I should buy and for whom.

I give a quick glance around. “No sign of either my mother or Georgie,” I say.

I see Junie up ahead, Fish mewls as she all but stands straight up in my tote bag as if she didn't want to miss out on any of the action. And with this many women in a confined space, there's bound to be something to see.

Sure enough, there she is. Georgie's daughter, Juniper Moonbeam—aka Junie—looks to be running the show today. In fact, she's so swamped she hardly has time to acknowledge me with a wave.

Junie is buried under a mountain of wrapping paper and bags, and that line of shoppers at the counter stretches to the door. Poor thing.

Sherlock nudges his poochy counterpart. Come on, Jingle. I know where they keep the treats. Follow me.

Treats? Jingle prances right alongside of Sherlock. I love this place! I knew I smelled turkey!

"Turkey?" I mutter under my breath as my stomach grows hot at the thought of it. "Come on, Fish," I say, inhaling the sweet peppermint-scented air to stave off any nausea trying to ruin my day. "Let's grab a few things and get out before poor Junie has a meltdown."

I'm in, she mewls as I begin to pick and pluck at everything I see. I try on a faux-fur scarf and catch a glimpse of myself with it on in the mirror. Now, that's more like it, Fish mewls once again. Do you think they have it in my size? I'm not opposed to a little fur on fur when it comes to fashion.

I stifle a laugh. "In that case, I'll grab one so we can share it." I snap up a few cute ornaments as well that I definitely don't need but simply can't resist, ante up at the counter, and soon all four of us are back out into the festive streets of Cider Cove.

CHAPTER 12

Next stop on my last-minute shop-till-I-drop spending spree is Lather and Light, my sister Macy's soap and candle shop.

My menagerie of cuteness and I head across the street and take a moment to peer at the window display. Everything about it is impossibly charming, from the twinkle lights making the place glow like a dream to the tiny gold bottles of luxurious soaps, and, of course, the candles in all shapes and sizes. There's a sign that reads, "Christmas Special—Buy 2, Get 1 Free on Everything in Stock!" and I already know I'll be stocking up for sure.

You'd think because I have an in with the owner, I'd get a massive discount or the occasional freebie. But this is my sister we're talking about. I'm lucky she doesn't charge me double just to warm her sooted little soul.

I'm not sure why, but she seems to take pleasure in poking and prodding me at every turn. It's all in fun. I think.

I push the door open and we step inside, ready for a little more holiday magic.

The moment we step into Lather and Light, it's like being wrapped in a warm, fragrant hug. The air is filled with the scent of peppermint and spiced cider—I'm sensing a theme, and yet something else entirely—and I swear it smells like gingerbread cookies.

I give a quick glance around at the cute dimly lit shop with wooden tables scattered

around, each one brimming with soap or candle displays, with products stacked on acrylic shelves at least two feet high. Personally, I'm shocked she has any inventory at all with the huge sale she's got going on.

There are brightly colored bars of soap wrapped in thick red ribbons, candles in every shape and size—the three-wicks are my kryptonite—and jars of bath salts glittering like Christmas ornaments. And don't get me started on the entire back wall that's home to bath bombs of every variety.

I haven't always been a bath girl—hence my fear of large bodies of water—but once Macy introduced me to those balls of fizzy fun that have the power to make the entire house smell like heaven, I've been stocking up on bath bombs as if I needed the ammo for an upcoming war.

The war being waged right now is against my free time, which is quickly dwindling as Christmas Eve approaches. And I suspect it will be non-existent once the baby arrives. In that case, I'd better buy the bath bombs by the pallet. I've got some serious me-time to soak in before my due date arrives.

Fish gasps from her perch in my bag. Do I smell sugar cookies? This place might be more dangerous than I thought. She sniffs the air again and pretends to faint. Quick, Bizzy! I need to be revived via something sweet, stat!

“Someone has been watching too many medical dramas.”

I can't help it, she counters. And you have to admit, those cookies smell McDreamy.

“You're not wrong,” I say. “Except I have a feeling those are just candles that are making our stomachs growl. But don't worry. We still have four cinnamon rolls left.”

Sherlock trots over to a display of three-wick candles sitting in a basket on the floor,

an overflow from the bigger display taking over the table like Godzilla about to crush Manhattan.

Those aren't sugar cookies, he says with a woof. It's... a Santa's Kitchen candle! He reads the label aloud with a bark of delight. And it smells just like holiday baking! But not your baking, Bizzy. I'm pretty sure they don't have a candle for that.

Fish chitters out a laugh. But if they did, I bet they'd call it Burnt Toast and Regret.

"You're both hilarious," I say flatly while picking up a candle and manage to grin as I browse through the quirky names attached to these three-wick cuties.

Sure enough, there's a Santa's Kitchen candle, which smells exactly like a fresh batch of cookies, and next to it, a candle labeled Naughty Nog, which somehow manages to capture the essence of spiked eggnog in wax form. There's also Sleigh My Name with a piney, woodsy scent that makes me think of Jasper in unholy ways, O Christmas Treat, which smells like candy canes, and then my personal favorite, Frosty's Flannel, a cozy mix of cedar, vanilla, and just a hint of cinnamon. It sort of reminds me of Jasper in a far more wholesome sense.

Jingle prances up to a display of soap shaped like tiny Christmas trees. Check these out, Bizzy. These smell like the forest! He looks over to Sherlock with wide eyes. Do you think we can bring the forest home with us?

Before I can respond, a familiar voice rings out behind me.

"Well, well, well, look who we have here, sneaking around and buying overpriced goodies supposedly marked down to give the impression of a discount," Mom teases and I turn around to see Georgie stepping up beside her. And they both look far too pleased with themselves.

“I’d laugh if I didn’t know that was true,” I say, pulling them into a group hug as best as I can. “Let me guess. You ladies are whittling down your Christmas list, too?”

Georgie waves off the thought. “More like making a wish list. I plan on emailing a copy to everyone on my friend list. Expect to get it by morning. I do my best work at midnight.”

“Is it too late to ask you to lose my email address?” Mom spots Sherlock and Jingle and coos as she gives them each a quick scratch behind the ears while dressed in one of her signature fur-trimmed coats. It’s red and white and she has that whole Mrs. Claus thing down pat. She straightens and spots Fish as well. “Oh, come here, you furry little princess,” Mom coos once again as she steals Fish from my bag, and Fish promptly snuggles up like a pro in her grandmother’s arms.

Grandma hugs are just as good as sugar cookies, she purrs.

Yeah, but I still like sugar cookies, Sherlock insists.

“Don’t worry, kids,” Georgie says to the furry among us. “I know what you’re really after and I’ve got you covered.” She plucks a handful of bacon from her coat pocket and neither my mother nor I am surprised.

Georgie has made a habit out of toting salted meat around with her for years. And to my surprise, my mother swipes a strip of bacon out of Georgie’s hand and takes a bite out of it herself.

“Don’t judge,” she says to me. “I’ve been shopping for hours and I’m about to drop in a hole at the cemetery because of it. Georgie’s salty stash is the only thing that’s kept me going.”

“You’re welcome,” Georgie says, quickly giving each furry cutie a few strips as well

and she hands one my way, too.

“Thank you,” I say, taking it from her a touch too aggressively. “I’m half-starved. Heck, I’m half-starved all the time now.” I don’t dare confess that I wolfed down a cinnamon roll the size of my head less than twenty minutes ago. Come to think of it, my appetite has been renewing itself at about twenty-minute intervals so that sounds about right.

Once I’m through, I grab a handheld basket and load up on a few candles as we move along—Naughty Nog and Frosty’s Flannel for myself and Reindeer Romance for Jasper.

“Ooh, this one smells like Jasper in a bottle.” I hold it out their way for the two of them to sniff. “It has a woodsy, masculine scent with just a hint of spice.”

And just like that, I have a rather spicy craving for my husband.

Darn hormones.

They always seem to kick in when Jasper is nowhere to be found.

Here’s hoping I can reprise the effort later tonight.

“That does hold his scent.” Mom nods approvingly at the candle. “You know, the two of you have something very special. In fact, Jasper is as crazy about you as he is about these fur babies of yours. The entire lot of you has got him wrapped around your little finger—and paws, apparently.”

Georgie leans my way. “Speaking of men, how’s he handling all the Christmas chaos, Biz? And I’m not just talking about the decorating—how’s Mr. Hotshot Detective dealing with the baby news?”

“Surprisingly well,” I admit with a laugh. “He’s even offered to go crib shopping together, twice already. I think he’s more excited about getting all the baby gear in the house than I am. And I’m pretty darn excited.”

Mom laughs just hearing it. “Of course, he is! Men always act tough, but the second you mention a baby, they turn into marshmallows.”

“Speaking of marshmallows,” Georgie chuckles. “How’s Hux holding up with Mackenzie? Still pretending he’s in charge of anything?”

Mom rolls her eyes. “Please. They’re like fire and ice—which is perfect for the holidays. And strangely enough, perfect for each other.”

“I agree,” I say. “Hux will do whatever Mackenzie says. We all know who holds the diaper bag in that family.” I bite down on a smile. “Though I think Jasper might beat him in the caring for the baby department. He’s been a saint through all of this.”

Georgie grunts, “Watch out, Bizzy. Men are great when you need them to knock you up, but once those late-night cravings hit, they’ll be sending you out for pickles and ice cream yourself.”

“Maybe your ex did,” Mom chuffs to her bestie. “But Bizzy is right. My son-in-law is a saint.”

“You mean one of my many exes,” Georgie grunts again. “None of them catered to any of my cravings. And that’s exactly why they’re exes. Bizzy, I didn’t hesitate cutting anyone loose who so much as denied me a latte.” She points my way with a single wick candle. “Take note.”

Mom shakes her head at the two of us. “Don’t you dare scare her, Georgie. Jasper will be just fine. Though I wouldn’t mind seeing him running around at three AM for

gingerbread lattes.”

Fish gives an indignant flick of her tail. If he does, do you think he could bring me back a dozen or so donuts while he’s at it?

I offer a covert nod her way because I know for a fact he would. And, ooh , a glazed donut with a raspberry jelly filling sounds amazing right about now.

The three of us keep our heads down and get back to work, collecting candles, bottles of foaming soaps, and bath bombs alike.

Mom looks over the stock I’ve accumulated in my arms. “You’d better save one of those candles for yourself, Bizzy. You’ll need something cozy to light when you finally get five minutes alone.” Not that she’ll ever get five minutes alone again, Mom cringes as she thinks to herself. At least not in a few short months, but I won’t be the one to point that out.

Little does she know, she already has—and that she didn’t have to. I figured that part out on my own.

“Gingerbread Dreamcandle,” I say, holding up one as evidence. “I’ve got it covered. It’s perfect for after the Christmas chaos dies down.”

Georgie snaps one up for herself. “Well, if anyone can handle the madness, it’s you, Bizzy. Let’s hope the rest of the holiday is body-free.”

Mom grunts hard. “Let’s not drag the dead into this.”

I’m about to agree when suddenly a voice booms from behind.

“STOP, THIEVES!”

CHAPTER 13

Every living being in the establishment freezes solid, and my heart skips a beat as the entire shop falls into stunned silence.

I slowly turn around, only to find someone dressed head to toe in a plush Santa suit barreling toward us, shaking a giant, gloved fist in the air. Their fake beard hardly stays in place as they stomp forward with their eyes fixed on Mom, Georgie, and me.

“I said STOP, THIEVES!” they riot again.

Sherlock and Jingle start to bark in confusion, while Fish glares at the festive intruder as if she’s ready to pounce.

“Excuse me?” I manage, utterly bewildered as the shop begins to buzz with murmurs, and an entire sea of phones pop up to record the horror.

Santa points an accusing finger right at the three of us. “Caught you red-handed, didn’t I? Stuffing those purses with all the merch you can get your chubby little mitts on. You three think you can steal Christmas? Well, not on my watch!”

I blink in disbelief. “What—? We didn’t steal anything!”

I cast a quick glance at Georgie and my mother.

We didn’t, did we?

The entire shop erupts into boos and hisses with people snapping pictures our way like they've stumbled into some extravagant Christmas heist.

The once-cozy shop is now filled with jeers, and I can't even hear myself think over the chaos, let alone hear what anyone else might be thinking.

"We are not thieves," Georgie shouts, tossing up her hands defensively. "Well, maybe she is." Georgie wastes no time in pointing at my mother.

Great.

Just what we need. Nothing gets more likes or shares on social media than a mutiny among rebels. Not that we're rebels—or thieves .

I spear my mother with a look that says we're not thieves, are we?

Mom's mouth falls open. "Are you out of your mind?" She starts the question my way but finishes it off while glaring at the angry St. Nick. "Who steals soap and candles? Believe me, if I wanted to risk my freedom, I'd go bigger." And the jeweler down the street would never see me coming.

I suddenly admire her a little more for it.

What am I saying? I shake my head as I turn to the irate person in the Santa suit.

"We would never even think to steal." I place my hand protectively over my belly. "Stealing is wrong, and we follow the rules." I may have been speaking to my unborn child just then. It's never too early to instill good values.

" They caught the thieves ," someone shouts from the back, and the crowd starts cheering and jeering our way even louder.

A laugh tries to bubble out of me as I realize how ridiculous this is, but I know I need to say something to stop the madness. “Listen, Santa?—”

But Santa isn’t having it. “Oh no, you don’t,” they shout my way with their husky voice. “I’ve got you all on my security cameras. You’re going on my naughty list for life!” They belt out a hearty ho, ho, ho and trail off with a hearty laugh—and their deep, husky tone vanishes, replaced by a snort-laced cackle that I’d recognize anywhere.

“Wait a minute...” I narrow my eyes and grip the edge of their fluffy white beard before yanking it down in one swift motion.

“Macy,” I shout as my sister grins like a loon while dressed in that ridiculous Santa suit. “What the?—?”

The crowd falls silent in disbelief as Macy stands there, laughing so hard that she nearly topples over.

“Gotcha!” she manages while gasping for air.

“You —” Mom steps forward, shaking her head with a grin of disbelief. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“I can,” Georgie mutters before getting back to her shopping. “Macy, you scared half the shop to death. Expect a big tip from me on the way out. I’ve been trying to scare the pants off these old biddies for years. I, for one, appreciated it.”

“Well, I didn’t.” Mom holds Fish close to her chest. “I nearly had a heart attack, You’re lucky I didn’t throw a candle at you.”

“You loved it and you know it,” Macy counters as she steals Fish. “Besides, you’re

the one always saying this town needs more excitement.”

Mom is back to rolling her eyes. “I prefer my excitement without the threat of public humiliation, thank you very much.”

I gag at the sight of my saucy sister. “You’re lucky that angry mob you incited didn’t run us out of the shop with pitchforks and torches,” I tell her. “Next time think of something that doesn’t involve screaming and a potential police intervention.”

Macy winks. “Consider it an early Christmas gift.” I’ll have to try harder next time. Seeing them chased out with pitchforks and torches would have been an early gift to myself. But then again, Bizzy is housing my future niece or nephew. I can’t risk her hurting herself. I’ll have to pull out the big guns once she pops the kid out.

It’s nice to know she cares about someone.

Mom steals Fish and places her back in my bag. “Expect a stocking full of coal, Macy. You might be impressed with your little stunt, but the real Santa won’t be.” I wonder if it’s too late to return those spiked red-bottomed heels I bought her.

“Ooh,” I muse out loud without meaning to.

Here’s hoping I find a pair of red-bottomed heels under the tree this year, too.

“Please, Mom.” Macy laughs it off. “You can’t scare me. When life gives me coal, I turn it into diamonds.” She waves a hand around at the place. And why aren’t I a billionaire by now? “So who’s up for some spiked eggnog?”

I glance at my watch. “Not me, I’ve got a tree lot to visit before dinner.”

I ante up at the counter, ignore the tip jar Macy thrusts my way, collect my

menagerie, and make tracks for the home of those happy little evergreens.

I've got another Santa I need to speak to.

And deep down, I wonder if this one will require a potential police intervention as well.

CHAPTER 14

As soon as evening arrives, I pile Fish, Sherlock, and Jingle into my car and trek over to where the evergreens are verdant, fluffy, and for sale .

The Sugar Plum Tree Lot is a tradition for just about everyone in Cider Cove. In fact, some of my very best holiday memories have taken place right here at this pine-riddled piece of real estate.

Sherlock and Jingle run up ahead of Fish and me as we enter through the arched sign advertising the best trees for the lowest prices.

The ground is covered with a fresh dusting of snow and twinkle lights are strung up above going every which way for what looks like miles.

Cheery Christmas music blares from unseen speakers, throngs of people have shown up in hopes of finding the perfect tree for their home, and the cookie and cocoa stand is bustling.

Just about every employee here is dressed as an elf—clad in green tights and green wool coats—and somehow they’ve managed to make their ears look half a foot tall. I’m thankful that little ear foible wasn’t a requirement last night. My staff and I had already suffered enough trying to conform to elf culture.

Large red and white tents house trees of every size, and if you include the flocked trees, every color , too. Under the tent to the right, there’s a large velvet throne, much like the one that was at the inn last night, and my mark for the evening is seated in

that exact oversized chair as people of all ages and stages of life pose for a picture with Santa.

Fish mewls in my arms, How do you plan on getting him alone, Bizzy?

“I have no idea. I guess I didn’t think about that.”

Don’t worry, Biz. Sherlock barks. The fifth person in line is holding a cup of hot cocoa. If they’re not done with their drink by the time they get to the front, I’ll make sure there’s nothing to finish once they see Santa.

“Ooh, I like where you’re headed with that,” I tell him.

Jingle barks. Once I see you speaking with him, I’ll come and find you. Chris has always liked me and I like him.

“Sounds like a plan,” I say as Sherlock takes off with Jingle in an effort to give him a tour.

“Bizzy Baker Wilder, is that you?” an all too familiar voice chirps from behind and I turn to see both Georgie and my mother.

“Oh, good grief,” I groan. “What are you ladies doing here? Mom, I thought you had a tree already? And Georgie, I know you have a no-kill policy when it comes to our evergreen friends.”

Fish mewls, You think you know a person. Next, she’ll be telling me she doesn’t believe in Santa.

That will be the day.

“I do have a tree,” Mom says. “We’re here picking one up for the senior center. It’s my treat for all of my friends down there.”

“And I’m here to stop her,” Georgie says, slinging an arm over my mother’s shoulder.

“You mean distract me.” Mom chuckles. “I may have made the mistake of mentioning where I was headed.”

“And I asked if there would be elves,” Georgie says.

Mom rolls her eyes. “And I foolishly said yes.”

Georgie shrugs. “I’m still holding out for a hunky side of beef with a six-pack.”

I shrug right back at her. “We all have our Christmas wishes.”

“What are you doing here, Bizzy?” Mom asks as she promptly steals Fish from me. “Let me guess, you’re on the hunt for another Santa because the last one bit the big one?” She arches a brow my way.

Fish snickers. She knows you well, Bizzy.

I make a face because it’s true.

“Actually”—I place a hand over my stomach—“I’m here to pick out a Christmas tree. Jasper and I figure it’s not too early to start our holiday traditions, especially with a little gift of our own on the way. There’s so much fun decorating to do.”

“Hear that, Red?” Georgie squints at my mother. “She’s going all domestic goddess on us. The next thing you know, she’ll be knitting booties and baking casseroles.”

A laugh bumps from me. “You and I both know I won’t be attempting to burn down anyone’s kitchen anytime soon—especially not mine. I’ve got enough expenses at the inn to deal with. The list keeps growing, sort of like Santa’s naughty list.”

Mom nods my way. “Kitchen fire aside, that all sounds good. I think it’s a great idea for you to start on some new holiday traditions. I just can’t wait for the baby’s first Christmas. And in a lot of ways, it already feels like it’s here.”

Georgie grunts, “Just make sure you’re not climbing any ladders. You leave the star that sits on top of the tree to Jasper. That’s his job from here on out. Got it?”

“Loud and clear,” I say with a laugh and my breath crystalizes in a plume of white before me. “No ladder climbing for me—or us.” I pat my belly as if to prove my point.

“Wait just an eggnog lovin’ minute... You’re no domestic goddess.” Georgie lifts a finger and gasps. “You’ve started your investigation without us, haven’t you?”

“No, no,” I say, trying to calm Georgie down before she gets worked up. Georgie is just as passionate about justice as I am. Plus, she likes the perks my investigations have provided, like the odd visit to local bars and table dancing.

The latter of which only happened once.

So far.

“I’m just here to—” I glance around as I rack my brain for an excuse. “Oh, all right, I’m here to see Santa.” I frown his way as if he were guilty of making me look guilty.

But then again, if he truly is guilty, all the guilt is worth it.

Sherlock and Jingle bark and yip, and I spot them jumping up and down just as the woman gearing up to sit on Santa's lap sloshes hot cocoa all over him.

“ Ooh , that's my cue,” I say, snatching Fish back. “I'd better go.”

We split ways just as Chris Winter spikes out of his throne.

I run over to the cocoa booth and grab a handful of napkins before heading back toward my very first suspect.

The elves on hand quickly close the booth down, and soon I'm following Chris behind the tent as he mutters to himself.

Here's hoping Santa has a bag full of clues.

CHAPTER 15

“O h, I’m so sorry,” I say, patting the man dressed as Santa down with the wad of napkins in my hand, right here at the Sugar Plum Tree Lot. “That was my dog who caused all the ruckus.”

Fish mewls, You should ditch the detective and the mutt or you’ll be apologizing for that bacon-loving oaf for the rest of his life.

She’s probably not wrong, but I’m a bit addicted to the detective. I can’t help it.

Jasper is like fine wine, gourmet chocolate, and a good book all rolled into one—I couldn’t give him up if I tried.

Both Sherlock and Jingle have trotted off to the cookie booth to gobble up a spill—this time of the cookie variety.

“Not a problem.” Chris sheds a good-natured laugh as he takes the napkins from me and dabs at his chest. “This suit is a rental anyway.”

“Well, that’s good,” I tell him. “I’m Bizzy Baker Wilder. I don’t believe we’ve formally met, but you were at the inn last night. I was there when you came up on the scene with Jasper.”

He lifts his head my way. “That you were.” Now, where is this going to lead? “Small world.”

“Small town,” I add. “I’m sorry for your loss. I know that must have been hard to witness.”

“You’re telling me.” He chucks the napkins into a bin behind him. “And to think someone tried to set me up like that.”

“You think someone tried to set you up?” I ask, surprised.

“Oh, yeah. Someone intentionally went into that box of mine, fishing for that switchblade. I know a setup when I see it.”

“Well, I hope that’s not the case,” I say.

It is, Fish counters.

“Chris, mind if I ask what you know about Virginia Brighton?”

A soft chuckle strums from him. “I know plenty. Virginia is my ex. Not wife, we stopped shy of the altar.” Thank goodness for small matrimonial mercies.

“Oh wow, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m not.” He gives a wistful tick of the head. “Let’s just say we didn’t exactly have an amicable parting.”

“Oh? Can I ask why that was?”

He winces out at the crowd. “Actually, I’d rather not rehash it at the moment. I’m supposed to be making people smile tonight. And I won’t make anyone do that if I can’t smile myself.” In fact, I’d be downright boiling mad.

Foiled again, Fish yowls.

Foiled again, indeed.

And boiling mad?

“I can certainly understand,” I say. “Chris, do you know who could have had a motive to kill Nick like that?”

He nods as he pins his gaze to mine. “I thought about it last night, and I think I know exactly who did that to him.” He glances over his shoulder. “Let me run to the dressing room for a moment.” He nods to a tent marked private just past the pop-up restrooms. “I’m going to throw a dry shirt on underneath this before I catch my death, and then I’ll tell you everything I know.”

“Perfect,” I say with a little too much enthusiasm.

He takes off and I practically purr into Fish’s ear.

“Did you hear that?” I say, spinning around as I head under a tent laden with trees. “He’s going to tell us everything he knows.”

A shadow darkens my path.

“Who’s going to tell you everything they know?” a deep voice booms and I’m half-afraid to look because I happen to recognize that deep voice.

I wince as I look up at my handsome husband.

“Santa?” I say with a laugh trapped in my throat.

Technically, it's the truth.

"Bizzy." His brows flex. "Please tell me you're not investigating this case. Whoever killed Nick Bell is a very violent individual. And if they think you're onto them, you, too, could meet a violent end. And that wouldn't be good for either of you." He places a warm hand over my belly for emphasis.

Fish sighs. I hate it when he makes a good point.

"I'm not investigating," I tell him. "That's your job. I was simply going to ask the man a few questions." I bite down on a smile. "I suppose you were here to do the same thing."

"No, actually. I'm here to surprise my wife with a Christmas tree." He sheds a short-lived smile. "Every time I ask her to come to the lot, she's been too bogged down at work to pull it off."

My mouth rounds out with surprise. "Jasper! Aww, I love that." I lift a brow his way. "But seeing that your wife is too busy for you, how about you swing by my place and we make a hot date out of decorating it? I won't tell your wife if you don't tell my husband," I tease.

"That's one hot date I wouldn't miss," he says, giving me a quick peck on the lips. And I might be getting the better end of the deal.

Here we go, Fish groans. The man is forever fishing for an excuse to get you alone—pardon the pun with my name. And believe me, it's a shame I had to drag my good name into that one, but then again, I'm along for the ride regardless.

I laugh as I give my sweet cat's paw a little tug.

“Let’s pick out our tree,” I say as we hunt and peck for just the right tree to make our living room feel like Christmas.

We pick out a gem, Jasper pays for it, and he even straps it to the roof of my car.

“I’ll get it right into the cottage once we get back to the inn,” he says. “How about dinner first?”

“You are smooth , Detective—but you already know that, don’t you?”

That empty throne behind him catches my eye.

“I almost forgot I’m supposed to meet with Chris,” I say, taking off in the direction we last met.

“Chris Winter?” Jasper says, keeping up with me. “What for?” I already know, but I may as well have you admit it. He nods my way with the thought.

Funny how he didn’t dare say those words out loud.

“He’s about to tell me who the killer is,” I say as we enter the area where we last spoke, but there’s no sign of him. “That’s odd,” I say. “Maybe he’s still in his dressing room?” I lead the way over. “ Chris? ” I call out. “Chris, are you decent? It’s me, Bizzy. We were going to talk, remember?” I shout into the void, but no one answers. “I guess he’s not—” I stop short once I spot a black boot poking out from underneath the entry.

I pull back the flap to the tent and both Jasper and I groan.

Lying on the ground with a knife sticking out of his back is a man in a jolly red suit.

It looks as if Chris Winter caught his death after all.

CHAPTER 16

“ A nd then she got another one,” Georgie says after recapping last night’s horror to the poor women gathered at the Cider Cove Bake Shop as we nosh on sweet treats and decorate gingerbread houses.

It’s the very next afternoon, the day of Macy’s book club and their white elephant gift exchange. I thought I’d bring Georgie along for the ride. Boy, is that proving to be a big mistake.

I should have brought my furry friends, but then that would have been an entirely different error in judgment. It just so happens that Sherlock and Fish can’t control themselves in a place like this—one dedicated to all things delicious. And with Jingle here, too, I’m afraid the three of them would have cleared out all of the baked goods before I got a chance to stop them—or more importantly, clear the place out of baked goods myself.

It’s happened once before with just Fish and Sherlock. Personally, I’m half-shocked they let me back into the place.

The only reason they behaved themselves here yesterday was because there was a cinnamon roll involved.

And even though the four-footed cuties didn’t make the cut, I did promise to bring something back for them. Not to mention I had a craving the size of the entire North Pole for peppermint bark.

I've heard that pregnancy can make you crave the strangest things, but today peppermint everything has been calling my name. At least it's in keeping with the season.

"Geez, Bizzy. That's your second Santa this week," Macy spits out the words with marked frustration—although layered just beneath it was a hint of admiration. My sister is twisted that way. I knew it. My little sister makes bad luck charms look like a promising endeavor. "Really, Bizzy?" she snits my way. "Santa ? You keep this up and they'll put you behind bars for the rest of the holiday season as a measure of public safety. And don't think that baby bump will save you. Women give birth behind bars all the time—without the aid of modern medicine."

"Another reason why the prison system is so barbaric," I say.

Although I'm pretty sure what Macy just spewed is far from factual. I hope.

"I bet Jasper will cuff you himself," Georgie says, rubbing her hands together as if she relished the thought.

Macy smirks. I wouldn't mind if that man slapped a couple of silver bracelets on me. Why does Bizzy get the handsome husband who wields dangerous weaponry for a living? All I get is the guy in the liquor department challenging me to a game of beer pong. But then, I suppose Bizzy's luck has just run out. Heaven knows that baby is going to drain every bit of a good time from Bizzy's life. Who has time for diapers and sleepless nights when there's fun to be had? It's clear I'm the one winning at life here.

I shoot her a look.

I can't fault her for any of that. Jasper really is that handsome. I'm just lucky I spotted him first. And while Macy's inner dialogue about my impending motherhood

is far from my take on it, admittedly it's not different by much.

The bakery has a homey feel, with its butter-yellow walls and a flocked Christmas tree set near the window. Every last ornament festooning that snow-laden evergreen is a plastic replica of a miniature baked good, and each one of them looks equally good to eat. But lucky for me, they serve the real deal here, so I can take plastic off the menu.

Christmas carols play softly over the speakers, the scent of freshly baked brownies is thick in the air, and every single person in the shop is wearing a Santa hat, including yours truly.

I know, I know .

It feels completely sacrilegious after I found two of the jolly old elves without a pulse. But I couldn't help it. One of the girls from the book club insisted we all get into the holiday spirit. And to be truthful, my baby could use a little holiday cheer—and a mother who isn't too traumatized to wear a Santa hat.

I spent most of the morning helping guests check in and out of the inn. The holidays are our busiest season, so I didn't have time to pick up a white elephant gift, but Georgie said she had me covered. With what, I don't know.

Honestly? I was afraid to ask.

Noel grimaces my way. "So you were the one who found him?" Her red hair gleams an ethereal shade of crimson under the bright lights above. She's bundled in a red sweater and jeans, and has a black and white checkered scarf draped around her neck, looking about as cheerful for the holidays as can be.

I cringe her way as I pause from frosting the roof of my gingerbread house. In fact,

every last member of the book club is doing this exact same thing, decorating their very own holiday mini-mansion to the holiday hilt. I haven't had this much fun at a bakery since I was a kid. Although the fun seemed to stop as soon as Chris Winter was brought up.

"Sort of," I say to Noel. "Technically, Jasper found him. I just so happened to be with the good detective."

I make a face at Macy for making me out to be something worse than a bad luck charm—even if she did say those things to herself.

I don't know how Macy hasn't figured out that I can read minds just yet. Heaven knows I've called her out on her dicey thoughts more than once.

My mother likes to say that I'm intuitive. And personally, I'm shocked my mother isn't onto me either. But then again, Macy seems a little too busy focusing on how I might be inconveniencing my life—and most likely hers—to notice how intuitive I can be when it comes to her thoughts.

"I'm so sorry you had to see that," Noel says. "I heard he was stabbed," she whispers those last few words. "I guess the knife belonged to the tree lot, but clearly someone went after him. What does Jasper think is going on? Do we have a serial killer on our hands?"

A hush falls over the bakery as every Santa hat in the vicinity tips my way.

CHAPTER 17

“N o, no,” I say loud enough to reassure the merry masses that there’s no serial killer at large as we decorate gingerbread houses here at the cozy Cider Cove Bake Shop. “Nothing like that, I promise. Whoever killed those men—well, it was most likely personal.” The room begins to buzz once again as if that somehow makes it less vile.

“What do you mean, personal?” Noel waits for me to answer with bated breath.

“Jasper says as long as the two men knew one another, the odds of there being a shared motive with the killer is high.”

“Wow.” Noel blinks at the thought. “I guess it makes sense. Well, let’s hope it stops with those two. Were you at least able to talk to Chris and ask him any questions before the poor man’s life was taken?”

I shake my head. “He was about to tell me everything, but there was a mishap with his wardrobe and he had to change.”

Georgie nods. “He had an unfortunate accident with a cup of hot cocoa before he had an unfortunate accident with a knife.”

Macy sniffs my way. “Is it any surprise that you were the unfortunate common denominator?” And now she’s bringing a baby into this equation, she thinks to herself. I might just have to kidnap my niece or nephew just to keep them safe. Leave it to Bizzy to make me a mother before my time.

I bite down on a smile at the thought. Despite her misgivings about the fact I'm expecting, I know for a fact Macy will be a wonderful mother one day. She treats her sweet pooch, Candy, like a princess despite the fact she's not a fan of other people's pets—Fish and Sherlock aside.

Not to mention that Macy is hot and heavy with Emmie's brother, Jordy. The two of them have been destined to be together from the start—despite the fact I may have been hitched to Jordy once upon a time myself.

That little matrimonial malfeasance lasted less than a day—and had more to do with the fact we were in Vegas and found ourselves in front of an Elvis impersonator while in a rather shnocked state.

Suffice it to say, my legal eagle brother put his newly minted law degree to the test when he helped dismantle the unholy union—which was never consummated, by the way. And thankfully so now that he's on track to become my brother-in-law.

Noel shakes her head. "Oh, Bizzy, you must feel terrible. I'm just glad you weren't hurt. You were awfully close to a dangerous person."

"I agree," I tell her. "Say, actually, I did talk to Chris for a bit before he took off for the dressing room—and, well, was met by fate. He said something about the fact he and Virginia once dated."

"They sure did." She gives a dark chuckle while stabbing miniature candy canes into the frosting she's piped around the border of her gingerbread house. "I still consider her my stepmother so I have thoughts about this, but they started up a couple of years after my dad died. Virginia was slow to move on, and I appreciated that. It was very hard losing my father. I had already lost my mother at a young age. So when I lost my father, Virginia was all I had. But it was actually me who set Virginia and Chris up. I'm just sad it didn't work out."

“That was very sweet of you,” I say.

Macy groans, “I’d rather poke my eyes out than set either of my parents up with anyone. They’re divorced, but still. I wouldn’t even set them up together . I don’t like to think of my parents as amorous beings.”

“Of course, they’re not.” Georgie chuckles while shooting her gingerbread house with green frosting. It’s coming out so fast you’d think she had that frosting bag hooked up to a fire hose. “You and your siblings were hatched from a pod.” She nods my way. “Your mother and I didn’t want to tell you, but an alien spacecraft dropped you off in the middle of the woods all those years ago. You ate nothing but grass for the first three years of your life.”

Both Macy and Noel chortle at the thought.

“Very funny,” I say, sticking colorful gumdrops onto the roof of my culinary creation. “So, Noel, can I ask why Virginia and Chris broke up?”

She glances around at the other women as they chat, laugh, and have a general good time.

Her shoulders inch up a notch. “I guess it’s okay for me to say this now. For so long it was a nasty secret, but two of the three are dead so I don’t see the harm.”

“You let rats run around in the cookie dough?” Georgie says a touch too loud and the owner of the bakery gives us the stink eye. “Not this cookie factory,” she shouts. “The other one. The better one.” She winks at Noel.

But Noel isn’t laughing. In fact, she looks downright mournful.

“In a moment of weakness, Virginia had an affair with Nick.” She sighs. “It was

while she and Chris were together but rocky. And I'm not sure how they did it, but they managed to pull through that. The only reason I know about it is because I caught them together—Virginia and Nick. Anyway, they ended it, and Virginia, being the saint she is, confessed it all to Chris. And—he took her back. I'll admit, I was surprised to see it.”

“That must have been painful,” I say.

“That means Virginia did it,” Georgie says, hoisting up her frosting bag as if it were a knife. “She killed them both because they made lousy bedmates.”

Macy nods. “I think you might be onto something.”

“You would,” I say, and I wish I was teasing.

“I don't think Virginia did this,” Noel says. “In fact, I've got other theories.”

“Such as?” I lean my ear her way so as to not miss a vowel.

“Such as Ember Jewel.” She makes a face before licking the frosting off her fingertip. “Ember had some strange disagreement with Nick these past few weeks. Every time I asked her about it, she said it was none of my business. But boy, was she angry whenever they were together.”

“Ember?” I ask, surprised to hear it. “The pretty brunette? The one Nick gave a globe to that night?”

“Yeah, that's the one.” She nods. “Nick said something about her only being able to control what went on in that globe, remember? It was creepy.” She shudders. “Maybe Ember has control issues?”

“Maybe she does,” I say. “Can I ask you what’s inside that brass puzzle he gave you that night? I’ll admit, that looked like a pretty clever gift.”

She sniffs hard. “I haven’t been able to open it.” Although I know for a fact it’s a key that leads to a safe. Presumably the one in his office. “But if I do get it open, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

A key to a safe? I muse.

I wonder what could possibly be in that safe to make him think Noel would be interested?

Our time decorating gingerbread houses comes to a close and we gather into a circle right there in the bake shop as we ready to embark on our white elephant gift exchange.

Why do I get the feeling things are about to go sideways?

Most likely because Georgie is here.

And me.

Mostly me.

CHAPTER 18

Georgie hands me a giant red bag just as the gift exchange is about to get underway.

“Don’t worry, Biz,” she says. “Our gifts are guaranteed to be real crowd-pleasers. Expect a riot to break out as they attempt to steal these gems from one another.”

“If it’s that great, I might just steal it back and take it home with me,” I say. Although I’ve already started mentally baby-proofing the cottage as it is. I won’t steal anything this afternoon that might prove to be a hazard. And from what I can tell, just about everything is a hazard to a toddler, let alone a newborn.

“All right, everyone,” Macy calls out. “We’re all going to unwrap the gifts we brought to the exchange for everyone to see. Then we’ll work our way clockwise—starting with me, as we proceed to steal them.”

“That’s not how you play,” someone calls out.

But in true Macy fashion, she shouts right back, “Prison rules! Mark, set, open !”

Macy used to pull that prison rules stunt with me when we were little, too. Usually, it resulted in her either winning or flipping over the game board. There was never an in-between with her.

Soon enough, wrapping paper goes flying and gifts are exposed, everything from silk pillowcases to candles, to cozy socks, to fancy coffee cups.

Macy holds up a slim white journal in her hand. “Who’s up for an adult coloring book? And when I say adult, I mean adult . You’re welcome.”

A few whoops of approval are heard.

It takes me far too long to unfurl my own gift from the dozens of layers of red tissue paper covered in glitter, and now I’m covered in glitter, too.

“Whatever it is, it’s heavy,” I say to the group as they wait for me to finish so the game can begin. “And it has— hair ?” I say, pulling it out by the tresses and belting out a short-lived scream once I spot it. “Oh, for Pete’s sake,” I say as I turn it around, and half the room shrieks, too. “A skull with hair?” I say to Georgie disbelievingly, although considering the source, I should very well believe it.

It’s a ceramic skull with red glass eyes and long pink tresses—but still. I’m pretty sure a skull for Christmas isn’t on anyone’s wish list, least of all mine.

“Definitely not what I want decorating the nursery,” I mutter under my breath and Georgie scoffs.

“That’s typical of you, Bizzy,” Georgie snorts. “You didn’t even notice the jewels in her eyes. Maybe she’ll be your new babysitter?”

“Why did I have to get the skull?”

She shrugs. “It was either that or a kit to make a candle out of your own earwax. Consider it a win.”

“Now that I know it could have been worse, I do.”

“And now, ladies,” Georgie calls out. “The grand finale .” She quickly unwraps her

gift. “One magnifying mirror with tweezers—gently used.”

A series of oohs and ahhs circle the room.

Soon, we’re picking and choosing, and stealing with the best of them until everyone ends up with a gift of their own. Shockingly, I didn’t end up with the hairy skull—Georgie wanted it back.

“Priscilla belongs with me,” she says, petting the ghoulish-looking girl. “What did you get, Bizzy?”

“A cookbook,” I say, holding it up. “Fifty Shades of Pizza .”

“I bet it tastes like chicken,” she counters.

Noel laughs. “You girls were a hoot! Thank you so much for coming and please come back again.”

Macy rolls her eyes. “You really do like to live dangerously.”

“Thank you for having us,” I say as we each pick up our gingerbread houses while readying to leave. “Noel, I’d love to chat with Ember. Do you know where I can find her?”

Her ruby-red lips twitch a moment. “Do you know where Candy Cane Lane is?”

“You mean Holiday Lights Central, right off Main Street?”

She nods. “She lives on the corner of Highland and Green. She sells cocoa and cookies to all the looky-loos who come out in droves this time of year. You can’t miss her.”

“Good to know. I just so happen to be walking my dogs there this evening. Can’t wait to say hello.” Or at least now I’ll be walking my dogs there this evening, and I’ll bring my little cute cat, too. I rest my hand on my belly—and, of course, the baby by proxy.

“Careful”—Noel warns—“she might just talk your head off. She’s a bit of a Chatty Cathy.” Here’s hoping Bizzy finds everything she’s looking to hear. Heaven knows Ember is always more than willing to spill a little dirt.

Here’s hoping that’s true as gospel.

It’s getting dark out.

And I think it’s high time I head over to see the holiday lights, and perhaps a killer.

CHAPTER 19

If the Sugar Plum Tree Lot is a tried-and-true tradition, then Candy Cane Lane is an outright legend that demands to be repeated year after year.

“I can’t keep up,” I shout to Sherlock as he races ahead.

“Me either,” Jasper says as he struggles to keep from breaking into an all-out run as he holds Jingle’s leash. “And you’re supposed to be the one taking it easy,” he adds. “How about we let go on three? Three .”

We do just that and both dogs trot up the lawn next to us, sniffing at a blowup of Santa and his reindeer as if they might be concealing an active bomb—or more to the point, harboring a pile of bacon.

It’s about time you ditched the doggies, Fish pipes up from the kitty carrier I have her tucked in. It’s actually a pouch designed for babies that sits across your chest. But Fish just loves it and I love how warm she keeps me, too. I hope she won’t mind sharing it in just a few months. You should have let go of the leash a long time ago, Bizzy, she mews. In fact, let’s not pick it up again. If we lose the dogs, you won’t have to pick anything up again. And I don’t care how cute you try to make it sound. Those are not brownies Sherlock is depositing on the front lawn.

A tiny laugh trembles through me.

“You do have a point,” I whisper before kissing the cool tip of her ear. “And speaking of cute, you and the baby are going to make quite the pair snuggled up in this thing.”

Fish purrs so loudly at the thought you'd think a jet engine was about to land right next to me.

Candy Cane Lane is bustling tonight with families and couples congesting either side of the street. And it's no wonder why the crowds congregate here night after night. Candy Cane Lane is a stretch of several blocks that are not only interconnected with a canopy of twinkle lights interwoven via the oak trees planted along the green belts, but each house comes up with a unique holiday display to delight the masses.

"Here we are," Jasper says as we pause at the edge of the property our dogs are currently conducting a thorough sniff and search. "Highland and Green."

I nod as I spot a crowd congesting around a makeshift booth that boasts of the world's best hot cocoa and fresh baked cookies—both too delicious to pass up.

A breeze picks up through the icy night air, carrying the scent of something sweet and laced with chocolate.

"Oh my word," I moan, placing a hand on my belly. "I think a batch of those fresh baked cookies just came out of the oven."

Jasper moans twice as hard. "And I think they're calling our name—and the baby's." He glances at the dogs as they try their best to catch a ride on the blowup sleigh. "If we're fast, they may not notice we're gone."

"We are questioning a suspect," I say, widening my eyes his way, waiting to hear his response to the word we. Typically, he's averse to it when it comes to an investigation.

"We are, aren't we?" He sheds a smile that looks far more naughty than it ever is nice. "I like it when you invoke the royal we." He wraps an arm around my waist.

You know I can't seem to deny you a single thing—not even a suspect.

“Or a cookie,” I add and we share a quick laugh.

We make our way to the bustling booth and wait patiently until we're up at bat.

There she is. Ember Jewel looks adorable with a pair of antlers on her head that light up at the tips. A couple of teenage girls work alongside her and they're all hustling as fast as they can to get the goodies out to the cookie-hungry crowd.

A sign on the front of the stand garners my attention.

“A cup of hot cocoa and three cookies for ten dollars?” I muse. “Do you think it's worth it?”

“There's no price too high for justice,” he teases. Geez. Are these cookies laced with gold? He looks back my way. “And there's no price too high for keeping my wife and our little one happy.”

“You are a smart man, Jasper Wilder.”

“Smart enough to convince you to marry me.”

A laugh bubbles in my throat as I reward him with a kiss for the sweet thought.

Soon enough, we're up next and standing face-to-face with the exact faux reindeer we came here to visit.

Ember's mouth falls open as she looks our way. “You two look really familiar.”

“Oh?” I say. “My name is Bizzy Baker Wilder. I work at the Country Cottage Inn.”

Jasper offers an amicable smile before nodding my way. I think I'll let you do the talking. No sense in telling the poor girl I'm the homicide detective working on her coworkers' case—both of them.

“The Country Cottage Inn?” The whites of Ember's eyes light up the night.

“I'm the manager there,” I tell her.

I'm not sure why I didn't say the word owner . Most likely because it still feels so showy—and a tiny irrational part of me is afraid I'll open myself up to lawsuits that way, too. What with all the homicides that we've had on the grounds, I'm shocked the state hasn't interceded by now. Or in the least sued me silly.

“The manager?” She excuses herself from her post as she makes her way around the side of the booth and lands before us. “Do you know if they caught the killer?”

Look at that, Bizzy, Fish mewls. You've got a live one. This should be easy enough. It looks to me as if the baby is already bringing us some good luck!

Here's hoping. Although I have a feeling my sister would disagree.

“I'm afraid they haven't,” I tell her. “Do you know anything at all that might help with the case?”

Jasper gives my ribs a quick squeeze. Bizzy, you're better than just about any detective I've met. I wouldn't dare call you an amateur sleuth with all of the cases you've already solved, but please don't take my accolades as a green light. The last thing I want is for you to put yourself in danger.

I offer a covert nod his way. I know he meant to add that he doesn't want me to put the baby in danger either, but he would never want to imply that I wasn't a good

mother. Jasper is a saint that way.

Nor would I ever want to put the baby in danger either.

But it's not my fault I have a perfectly good suspect at hand.

Hey? Maybe I should be suing the state of Maine? Wait, does that make sense? I'm just positive there's legal recourse in here somewhere.

I press out a smile as I train my eyes on Ember.

"I don't think I know anything that can help," she says. "Is there anything specific the detectives are looking for?"

Fish huffs, Why couldn't all suspects be as accommodating? I hope she's not the killer. I've taken a liking to her even if she does have funny antlers. Plus, she seems nice enough to babysit someday if she's not the killer.

"Actually"—I lift a finger—"you wouldn't happen to know why Virginia and Chris broke things off, would you?"

I mean, I know that Chris took her back after she had an affair with Nick, but I never did learn why they broke things off officially.

"Oh yes, that's complicated." She laughs. "Chris had an affair."

"Chris had an affair?" I inch back, as does Jasper.

Plot twist, Jasper thinks to himself.

Plot twist, indeed.

CHAPTER 20

“Did Virginia find out about the affair?” I ask Ember Jewel with shock, here at Candy Cane Lane where the entire town has gathered to ogle the over-the-top decorated houses in the neighborhood.

“She sure did.” Her eyes widen a moment. “Let’s just say the cookies really hit the fan. Anyway, it was over as soon as she learned of his indiscretion. He begged for her to take him back and apologized profusely with flowers, chocolate, jewelry—you name it, but Virginia’s affection couldn’t be bought.”

“Good for her,” I say, looking up at Jasper. “I wouldn’t tolerate cheating either.” And there’s a threat in my eyes as I say it.

He’s been warned before, but it’s always nice to offer up a refresher.

Yeah, Fish belts out a sharp meow. Take that, you big oaf. Get cheating and get lost. She straightens. Hey? Would it be bad if I rooted for the cheating? I mean, what if it made our lives easier and stress-free? No stress is good for the baby, right?

I shoot a look at my precocious kitty that all but says, no way. Rooting for cheating is bad. Stress or no stress, we’re staying on the high road.

Jasper’s brows furrow as I make my stance clear on infidelity. You don’t think that’s in my wheelhouse, do you?

I shake my head his way, inadvertently answering a question he never truly asked.

Not verbally anyway. And he looks slightly relieved, nonetheless.

Good, he thinks to himself as his hand drifts to my lower back and curves enough to land on my belly.

I love the fact that Jasper is in protective daddy mode already.

“I’m sorry to hear things ended so badly between the two of them,” I tell her. “Ember, Nick gave you a gorgeous snow globe the night he was killed. But what he said about it sounded a little odd. Can I ask what he meant by that?”

Her lips tighten as she pulls her coat tight around her waist.

Her gaze gets lost in the holiday display behind me and she twists her lips a moment.

I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to out him now. He is dead after all.

I all but stop breathing.

This could be big. I’d hate to so much as sneeze and distract her from exposing all of the little secrets she may be harboring.

“Okay, I’ll tell you.” She steps in a notch. “When Tom Brighten died, he left a majority of the shares of the company to his daughter, Noel, and to his wife, Virginia. But there were still a lot of investors who held shares, too. But as the years have gone by, a mystery investor has been scooping up all of the errant shares. Rumor has it, they were looking to gobble up the shares that Virginia and Noel held, too.”

“Sounds like a hostile takeover was about to take place,” Jasper points out.

She gives a quick nod. “It was just a matter of time. I think it was set for after the

holidays. If the Cider Cove Cookie Company is about anything, it's about the holidays. And whoever was behind this was about to milk all the shares they could."

"I can see why," I say. "What goes better with Christmas than cookies and milk?"

"Make that eggnog," Jasper says and Ember and I laugh.

Speaking of eggnog, Fish mewls. Can we speed things along? Not only are my paws threatening to freeze off, but I suddenly have a craving for that special Christmas milk .

I give her a quick nod because it's the exact Christmas milk I've been craving, too. Something tells me Fish is going to make one great mama's little helper.

"A hostile takeover?" I shake my head, trying to put it together. "That's certainly something to give a person pause. Ember, you know who that person is, don't you?"

She closes her eyes a moment. "The same person who gave me that globe. I found out about it and tried my best to stop him."

"Ah , I see." I rock back on my heels. "So that's why he told you the only thing you can control was the weather in that snow globe."

"That's exactly why." She frowns at the holiday display behind me. "I was all set to rat him out, but he threatened to end my career. I love that company, I didn't want to leave."

Jasper tips his head to the side. "Why do you think the killer went after Chris? Do you think he was trying to scoop up shares as well?"

"I really have no idea." She shrugs. "Chris was a nice guy, save for that affair

business.”

“Who did he have an affair with?” I ask in hopes this might be the key.

She shrugs again. “I don’t know. But it was kept under wraps almost as if both Virginia and Chris were trying to protect someone—most likely themselves.”

“I agree,” I say.

Someone shouts for her and she holds a hand up their way. “I’d better get back,” she says. “Will I see you two at the inn for the town Christmas party?”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” I say.

“Great, see you then.” She takes off with a wave.

“Just our luck,” Jasper says as he looks at the crowd swelling near the booth. “The line is twice as long as it was ten minutes ago.”

Before I can respond, Ember comes back with a cup of hot cocoa for both Jasper and me, along with a bag of warm fresh baked cookies.

“It’s on the house,” she says.

“You’re officially my new best friend,” I tell her, rubbing my belly in delight. “Thank you—on behalf of the baby and me.”

She laughs. “I’ll see you on Christmas Eve!” she shouts as she disappears behind the crowd.

“How about we go find those dogs and nosh on some cookies?” I ask the handsome

man by my side.

“Best plan I’ve heard all night.”

We migrate over to an empty sleigh sitting under a canopy of twinkle lights and take a seat inside.

“So what do you think, Detective Wilder?” he asks as we each take a sip of our cocoa and moan simultaneously.

“Wow,” I muse. “This really is the world’s best cocoa. The baby agrees as well.”

“I’m betting the cookies are right up there, too,” he says as we break into the bag.

Sure enough, he’s right.

“I think we should come back tomorrow night,” he says. “And try to squeeze the recipe out of them while we’re at it. This could be the start of a new family tradition.”

I wrinkle my nose at him. “You do realize I’m a catastrophe in the kitchen.”

Fish pokes her head out of the carrier. Tell him about the great fire of 2017. It’s infamous. If that doesn’t scare him off for good, nothing will.

I clamp my lips shut. Nothing can get me to talk about that traumatic day. I’m still penciling in my brows because of it.

“Never mind the kitchen,” he says, wrapping his arms around me and landing a kiss on my lips. “You shine in other rooms of the house.” He gives my stomach a sweet pat. “And soon enough, it’ll show.”

“You’re hilarious,” I say, mock socking him on the arm just as both Sherlock and Jingle show up barking with glee.

Did you catch the killer? Sherlock gives a soft woof.

“No killer yet, boys,” I say, giving them both a quick scratch behind the ears. “But we’re talking about suspects.” I look at Jasper. “I think Virginia might be the only one with a solid motive.”

He nods. “She’s looking pretty guilty.”

“I mean, she left that night before I found the body. She might have been making a getaway.”

“And she had an affair with both of the deceased.” He sighs. “Love is a potent emotion.”

“So is money,” I say. “Maybe she found out Nick was about to oust her from the company? I mean, he could have tried. It sounds as if he was about to make her life miserable. And Chris, well, he had already done that.”

“I should be getting the full forensic report on both men and the weaponry that was used. I’ll see if there’s a smoking gun. If not, I’ll call her down to the station and see if I can’t get a confession out of her.”

Jingle whimpers. Don’t tell me that you think Virginia did this. She’s one of my favorite people. She’s always sneaking me treats. She says I’m the best employee the cookie company has ever seen.

“Aww , come here,” I say, patting the spot between Jasper and me as Jingle jumps up to take it. “We don’t know for sure if Virginia did this. But rest assured, whoever did

this to Nick will be brought to justice. No one should get away with such heinous crimes.”

Jingle gives a sharp bark. I wouldn’t want them to. He whimpers once again. I just hope it’s not Virginia who has to pay.

I give the poor pooch a hug as we huddle together and watch the crowds marvel at the sights.

Jasper and I pick up their leashes once again and we walk slowly up and down the street as we ogle all of the cleverly decorated homes.

Christmas is almost here, I’ve got a baby on the way, and a killer is still on the loose.

And if they strike again, it will be the deadliest silent night Cider Cove has ever known.

CHAPTER 21

There is something enchanting about a snowy evening in general, but a snowy evening on Christmas Eve is darn right magical.

The ballroom here at the Country Cottage Inn is brimming with bodies once again, although this time the ugly sweaters are few and far between. Instead, the entire town has shown up for tonight's festivities while donning their very best—and that goes for Fish, Sherlock, and Jingle as well, seeing that they each let me put a bright red bow onto their collars.

Everyone I know, my friends and family, have all arrived looking polished and dressed to the nines.

Christmas carols strum through the speakers, cookies and desserts of every variety are laid out on the tables, and there is enough eggnog on hand to fill a small lake. But the most stunning sight of all is a three-tiered cake, covered with white fondant and decorated with candied mistletoe. Next to it lies a cake knife that's been with the inn for as long as this building has been erected. The handle is ceramic and has a hand-painted Santa on it. I only pull it out once a year. And once a year, everyone threatens to steal it.

The din of chatter in the room is practically electric, the intermittent bouts of laughter assure me that a good time is already underway, and the mountain of gifts under the tree lets me know that the people of this cozy town have more than a big heart.

Tomorrow all of those gifts will be distributed to needy families, brightening the

holiday for those in need of a helping hand. That's what makes this gathering extra special. The hearts of the townspeople looking to ease the burden of others.

Jasper wraps an arm around my waist, his hand resting briefly on my belly as he lands a kiss on my cheek.

"Have I mentioned that you look stunning in that red velvet dress?"

His spiced cologne is enough to make my insides pinch with heat, but add the dark inky suit, svelte red tie, and that cutthroat handsome face of his—I'm pretty much a goner.

"Only seventeen times," I say. "But who's counting? And I have to say, you're not too shabby yourself, Detective Wilder."

"We do make a good-looking couple, don't we?" His chest rumbles with a quiet laugh. "And I know for a fact our child will be beautiful both inside and out, just like its mother."

"Aww, spoken like a true parent—and a wise husband."

Georgie comes this way with my mother in tow and all three pets among us perk up to attention.

Look cute. Sherlock barks at Jingle. Georgie is extra generous at Christmas. She thinks she's Mrs. Claus.

She is Mrs. Claus, Fish yowls his way. She's told me all about the cad she was married to who ran around the world filling other women's stockings.

My lips invert as I stifle a laugh.

I glance at Georgie who is clad in a red kaftan paired with a white fuzzy scarf and white furry boots to match. I've never heard the Santa story before, but Georgie is generous to the pets pretty much year-round. Although there might be a few extra treats handed out on this special day.

"All right," Georgie says, looking at the three furry cuties all seated at attention as they look up at her with more than a glimmer of hope in their eyes. "Who's been a good boy and girl?"

All three yip and mewl at the very same time.

"Get ready, because it's about to rain bacon," she shouts as she produces handfuls of the salted meat from her pockets and, sure enough, there's a meaty storm hitting hard.

Sherlock and Jingle eat most of it before it ever hits the floor, and Fish is quick to grab a piece before heading under the dessert table where she can eat in peace.

Can't say I blame her. It's pretty much a bloodbath between the dogs.

"Would you stop with the bacon deluge?" Mom tells her. Mom looks sharp in a cranberry-colored suit and a white crisp blouse underneath with the collar popped up next to her ears, per usual. "You're making these poor creatures go insane. And with all that growling and moaning, it sounds as if they're about to eat every person in the room, alive. Believe me, this town has been terrorized enough."

I wouldn't eat a living soul, Jingle whimpers.

Sherlock nods his way. We'd better make puppy dog eyes at everyone for the rest of the night just to reassure them.

Good thinking, Jingle says. Puppy dog eyes not only get you a pretty decent belly

rub, but they usually get you a cookie .

I've seen it yield both of those things for Sherlock Bones as well. And I'm usually the one delivering the belly rubs and cookies.

"Come on." Mom links arms with Georgie. "Let's go check out this dessert spread. I didn't wear an elastic waistband for nothing."

Georgie nods. "And it's about time I start working on my bowl full of jelly if I plan on taking over the family business," she says, patting her tummy as they make their way to the table behind us where Emmie is helping serve sweet treats to the masses.

A familiar brunette crops up before us looking gorgeous in a green velour dress.

"Ember," I say. "So glad to see you here."

"You're positively glowing, Bizzy. And I wouldn't have missed this," she says, giving both Sherlock and Jingle a quick scratch behind the ears. "Seeing these two cute, furry faces has already made my entire night." I would do anything to have one of these sweet angels in my life. She sighs at the thought while giving Jingle that belly rub he was looking forward to. Hey? Maybe I'll visit the shelter soon. It can be a Christmas present to myself, one I would cherish with all my heart .

"Dogs make great pets," Jasper tells her as if he, too, could read her mind. "Do you have one?"

"No, but I was just thinking about how wonderful it would be if I did." She nods to the two of us. "You're both very lucky." She takes off for the dessert table just as Jasper's phone pings.

He pulls it out of his pocket and blinks with surprise.

“Looks like we may have just gotten a Christmas miracle. It’s one of my buddies from forensics. They have evidence they want to go over. I think I’ll take the call back at the cottage. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He lands a kiss to my lips and lingers. “Do me a favor and stay out of trouble.” His hand drifts protectively over my belly once again.

A laugh bubbles from me as I bat my lashes at him. “Do I look like someone who’s looking for trouble?”

“Not unless trouble means spending some serious alone time with me.” He waggles his brows as he says it. “How about we have a cup of hot cocoa in front of a fire after this wraps up?”

“Now that’s the kind of trouble I’m looking for.”

Jasper takes off with a smile cresting on his lips, and I give another quick glance around at the festivities well underway.

I spot Mackenzie, aka Mayor Woods, whooping it up with her constituents, and my mother and Georgie each with a dessert plate piled high. Georgie wasn’t kidding about the bowl full of jelly she’s working on. And my mother seems to be working on one as well.

I don’t see why I shouldn’t join them. Elastic pants are all the rage—only I prefer to call them yoga pants. And with the baby on the way, I’ll be wearing tents until at least next fall, so I’m good to go in the all-you-can-eat sweet treats department.

Fish shoots me a look and I frown down at her.

“Why are you looking at me like that? Everyone knows that cookies are a perfectly balanced meal when you’re eating for two.”

I didn't say a word. She sighs. But since we're headed to cookie paradise, toss me one of those snowflake-looking treats, would you?

"Of course, I'll toss you one. And I'll toss myself two—dozen at least."

I can't help it. I'm craving carbs these days just as much as I'm craving justice.

CHAPTER 22

I 'm about to head that way when I nearly bump right into Macy and Noel, each holding their own plate full of sweet treats.

“Watch it, Biz,” Macy growls while glancing down at my belly. “You’ve got enough on your plate, literally and figuratively.”

“I don’t have anything on me in the literal sense,” I’m quick to point out.

“I’m sorry, Fish.” She sighs at my sweet cat. “It seems your mother is already forgetting all about you. That’s what happens when the next child arrives. I speak from experience.”

“Ignore her,” I promptly tell Fish before taking a better gander at the saucy sibling before me.

That little red dress she’s wearing looks as if it’s been painted on, and I’ll admit, I wish I had one just like it.

“Don’t worry, Biz,” she says with a nod. “I know what you’re thinking, but you’ll be back in fighting shape in no time. Just don’t expect me to babysit while you do it.”

“I was just on my way to get a cookie,” I point out. Even if she was partially right. I can’t wait to borrow that dress. “Or maybe steal your cookies.”

“Now that’s where I draw the line,” Macy teases. “No one gets between me and my

cookies.”

Noel laughs. “I’m the same way. In fact, I’ve taken that to the extreme a time or two. Cookies are my life.” And they were my father’s life, too. The smile glides off her face as she glances around at the crowd before settling back on me. “I guess you’ll be forced to share your cookies soon enough now that you’ll be a mom.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” I say with a grin. “I’m more than willing to share. And good thing, too, because I have a feeling they’ll be just as cookie-obsessed as I am.”

We share a quick laugh and I can’t help but notice how Noel’s red hair shines like glass as it lays smoothly over her shoulders. She’s donned a black gown with a red sash and paired it with a stunning emerald necklace. Stunning doesn’t begin to describe her accouterments. But it doesn’t change the fact she’s still grieving.

“This must be a very hard holiday season for you,” I tell the poor woman. “For everyone at the Cider Cove Cookie Company.”

She nods. “Hard is an understatement. But lots of changes are underway for January and they will all be good ones. My father would have wanted it that way.” And for my father’s sake, I’ll make sure his company thrives under Brighton leadership, just the way he intended.

I nod along with her thought. I’m sure he’s smiling down on her. She really cares about the family business.

“Hey?” Macy pulls back to get a better look at her friend. “Did you ever get that puzzle open, the one that Santa gave you?”

“I did .” Noel’s entire countenance enlivens. “It turns out, the code was my father’s birthday. The mini miracle happened last night.” She bites down on her lip as if she

were hesitating. “Oh, anyway, there was a key inside with a note telling me to head to Nick’s safe. So I went straight to his office this morning and opened it.”

My mouth falls open with surprise. “What did you find?”

“Pictures of Nick and my father at some event. And some paperwork on his share of stocks in the company.” She shrugs. “They were from back in the day when my father opened the cookie company.” And I’m going to frame them tonight as a gift to myself.

“That’s so nice,” I tell her. “They must be very special to you.”

“You have no idea.” She laughs to herself. “I guess I’ve been thinking more about family lately. It’s funny how certain events make you reassess what’s important. Like having a family of your own.”

“Careful, Noel,” Macy says, rolling her eyes. “Babies make you soft. I’m sticking to my plan—no kids, no mess, no stress.”

I can’t help but frown at her.

And why is stress suddenly a running theme in my life?

I offer an amicable smile to Noel. “I’m not worried about any baby-related stress coming my way. My husband has already committed to changing diapers right alongside me.”

Here’s hoping it lasts.

Macy balks, “I’d much rather have a man that can change my tires. But to each their own.”

Noel chuckles as she turns my way. “So how’s the case? Or I should say cases? I was hoping to ask your husband, but I don’t see him around.”

“Apparently, forensics is turning in their report tonight. I’m not sure if it will yield anything, though.”

I’d hate to get her hopes up.

“I wouldn’t worry about those cases,” Macy says to her friend. “It will be Detective Wilder who solves both cases but not the male Wilder in question—it’ll be Bizzy. And if I know my sister, she’ll have both cases cracked wide open before Santa slinks down my chimney tonight.” She takes a moment to scour the crowd. Now, which one of these lucky men can I get to don a red suit on short notice? Maybe he can help me with my own wish list? One that doesn’t involve diapers—and one that is very, very naughty.

I make a face at my saucy sister. She’s persistent, I’ll give her that.

“Wow,” Noel marvels. “Solving both cases tonight would truly be a Christmas miracle—and one both Virginia and I would very much appreciate.” Her gaze flits to the throngs of holiday revelers. Well, perhaps Virginia wouldn’t appreciate it all that much. I’m pretty sure spending the holiday in handcuffs isn’t her idea of a good time. But then, someone has to pay for what happened to those two men. And our employees can only hide Virginia’s hatred of both Nick and Chris for so long. Her time is running out. Speaking of which, I should find her and spend some time with her. Maybe have a little heart-to-heart chat.

My hand presses to my chest as I take in all that she’s said.

Virginia hated both of those men? It’s clear that Noel suspects Virginia did this. All of the evidence makes perfect sense. Poor Noel. She lost her mother at a young age,

then her father, and now she's about to lose her stepmother, too.

Macy and Noel take off to mingle with the masses, and just as I'm about to head for those cookies, I spot my prime suspect stepping out of the side exit that leads to the courtyard.

The cookies will have to wait.

Virginia Brighton may have slipped away the night Nick Bell was killed, but she's not going anywhere this time.

CHAPTER 23

The pale blue cast from the moon has the entire courtyard, and all of Cider Cove, glowing like an ethereal dream.

Snow glitters on the ground and over the trees that surround the courtyard right here next to the ballroom, adding an enchanting appeal to an already enchanted evening.

I spot the woman I'm tracking as she heads over to the makeshift memorial right over the spot where Nick Bell lost his life a week ago.

Bizzy, Fish screeches and I turn to see her racing this way. Don't you dare leave the building without me. And you shouldn't be chasing murderers in your condition. You know as much as I do there's a dangerous killer on the loose, and you're growing my future belly warmer, she yowls as she jumps straight into my arms. Her ears tip back a notch once she spots the woman not too far from us. Don't tell me that's her.

"I'm afraid it might be," I whisper. "Let's go find out."

The snow crunches under my shoes as Fish and I make our way over.

"Jasper isn't going to be thrilled with this," I mutter. "Virginia?" I call out the woman's name softly and she turns my way with a startled look on her face.

"Oh, Bizzy." A weak laugh strums from her as she holds herself tight. Her blonde hair is coiled to perfection, and she's donned a long golden dress that shines in this dim light like a star. It's a gorgeous gown, and sadly this might be one of the last

nights she'll have to do anything of her own choosing.

A pang of nausea hits me, but whether it's from the pregnancy or the thought of what's coming for Virginia, I can't be sure.

"You scared the daylights out of me." She chortles as she brings her hand to her neck. "I was just looking for a little peace and solace." She glances toward the ballroom. "Everyone is so jovial—and rightly so." She shudders. "But I'll admit, I can't stop thinking about the awful thing that happened to both Nick and Chris."

"It was awful," I tell her. "Those men hurt you, didn't they, Virginia?"

Her chin tips up a notch. "Yes, they did. I guess you could say we took turns hurting each other. But I suppose we're all human. That's what we do, isn't it? We hurt one another's feelings with reckless abandon."

"It seems so."

Fish sits up in my arms. If she's the killer, she hurt more than their feelings. She hurt them with a knife.

True, but emotional pain can feel like a knife to the heart, too.

"Virginia? Your husband Tom, was he close to Nick?"

"Very close." She closes her eyes a moment as she nods. "Not a lot of people know this, but Tom and Nick were best friends. They started the cookie company together."

"Together?"

"That's right. But some things happened. Nick had a serious gambling problem, so

Tom was forced to cut him off and had him removed as an owner. Nick was angry, but he agreed to stay on as an investor. He lost everything way back when, and it's taken him years to rebuild."

"I didn't realize that." I think on it for a moment. "Was Nick resentful that he lost so much?"

"Oh, he was," she's quick to say. "Tom was convinced he was bent on revenge. Some say he got it." I refuse to let my own indiscretions of the past come to light. It's Christmas for goodness' sake. I can't do this. She glances down at my belly and shakes her head. "You've got your hands full, Bizzy. Shouldn't you be resting?"

"Resting isn't exactly my forte these days." Besides, I want to say, my baby enjoys a good mystery as much as I do. "Did you get your revenge, too?" I shrug a little when I ask the loaded question.

The woman's eyes widen, and if I'm not mistaken, there's a fire brewing in each of them.

"Bizzy, are you implying that I had something to do with the death of those two men?" She sighs hard. "I'm sorry, I realize I'm an easy target here, but I didn't do this." Believe me, I may have wanted them both out of my life for good, but I wouldn't stoop to murder. If I wanted revenge, I would have done it in the courtroom where I could have really stuck it to him and inflicted far more pain than any blade was capable of.

I gasp as she gives the thought.

What's wrong, Bizzy? Fish asks, tapping my chest with her paw. Did she just admit to murder?

“Quite the opposite,” I whisper for her ears only.

Back to square one, Fish groans.

And believe me, I’m moved to groan right along with her.

“I’m sorry,” I say to the woman without warrant—or perhaps it was very much warranted since I all but accused her of murdering two men. “Virginia, I heard whispers earlier this week that you and Chris were an item.”

“We were.” She casts a cold glance toward the parking lot.

“I heard he had an affair, and that’s what ended things between the two of you.”

Her chest bucks as I say it. “That’s exactly what happened.”

I take a step in close to her. “I’m sorry to pry, but can I ask who he had that affair with? I know it’s painful to relive, but it might shed some light on the case.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t say.” She shakes her head. I may not have birthed that girl, but I love her as if she were my own. And I’ll protect my stepdaughter to the end. She gives a pointed glance to my stomach. Bizzy will understand soon enough. “Excuse me,” she says, making her way past me. “So many of my employees showed up tonight. I should be with them.”

I place a hand protectively on my stomach because Virginia’s thoughts are certainly not lost on me.

She takes off back into the building and I blow out a breath.

Fish mewls, She said something to herself that’s making your wheels spin, didn’t

she?

Before I can answer, two happy-go-lucky pooches run out from the building and bolt this way.

There you are, Bizzy , Sherlock barks. Jasper told me not to let you out of my sight tonight.

Same here, Jingle barks along with him. He says Santa would leave us both a little extra if we stuck to you like stripes on a candy cane.

That's funny, Fish mewls. Jasper didn't say a single word to me. Most likely because he knew he'd have to make good on his promise.

Don't worry , Jingle. Sherlock gives a soft woof. Jasper will keep his promise to us. Fish is just jealous she's not getting a bone. And the bones that Jasper gives aren't meant to clean our teeth. We'll actually enjoy these.

Jingle gives a happy bark and wags his tail like mad.

"Say, Jingle?" I whisper as I lean his way. "Do you remember Nick saying anything about Virginia? I know they had an affair while she was with Chris."

That's odd that Chris stayed with her despite the affair, but as soon as Chris had one, Virginia was out the door, Fish meows.

I nod. "I thought the same thing, but maybe she realized they were better apart."

Jingle gives a quick bark. Virginia didn't have an affair with Nick while she was with Chris. That happened when she was still with her husband, Tom.

A breath hitches in my throat and I can't seem to let it go. Did I get the details wrong?

Before I can process the implications of what that means, a shadow appears behind the three of them as someone heads this way from the ballroom.

"Hello?" I call out just as they come out of the shadows and into the moonlight. "Noel," I say as my adrenaline picks up and then it hits me.

Noel is Virginia's stepdaughter!

She's the one that had the affair with Chris?

Oh my word, I don't know why that didn't click as soon as Virginia had the thought. No wonder Virginia dropped him like a bad egg.

Scenes from the last week come crashing to my mind, one after another, and my heart races trying to keep up with them all.

"Hey, Bizzy," the redhead says, giving both dogs a quick pat, her purse swinging down to her waist from the heft of it. "Don't you two look spiffy tonight."

Fish leans close to my chest. I'm getting a bad feeling, Bizzy.

So am I.

CHAPTER 24

“O h, Noel,” I groan as the pieces fall into place faster than I can process them. “The day after Nick was killed you came by the inn. When I asked if Virginia and Nick were close, you were quick to tell me that not only were they close, but that they were having trouble. You painted a dark picture and then sent me to Chris for answers.”

“That’s right.” She nods. “Virginia heard me suggest it, of course.” She shakes her head. “That’s an awfully big coincidence that right afterward Chris ended up with a knife in his back.” Come on, Bizzy. Put it together. If you’re as smart as Macy says, you should have Virginia sitting in the back of a patrol car by the end of the night.

I frown at the thought.

Fortunately for me, I’m smart enough to know when I’m being manipulated—or at least I am in hindsight.

I lean her way. “The day we were at the bakery, you said something that should have tipped me off. You seemed to know I had found him. But I never alluded to as much. It’s because you were there at the tree lot, watching from a distance, weren’t you?”

She gasps and takes a half step back.

How does she know that? How could I have been so sloppy to say anything at all?

Knew it. She did this.

Now to get her to admit to it out loud.

“At the time you said you didn’t think Virginia did the deadly deed, and yet you expertly set her up. Leading me to Ember was just a ruse.”

“Set her up?” She blinks my way. This is going very wrong. “I didn’t set anybody up. Virginia wanted those men dead.”

“She may not have cared for them, but she didn’t want them dead. You did. Nick had an affair with Virginia while she was still married to your father. Nick had it out for your dad, didn’t he?”

“Yes.” Her entire body quivers when she says it. “He hated my dad. He blamed him for everything that went wrong. He wanted that company back. He never forgave my father for ousting him as co-owner, so he seduced Virginia. He got her drunk and that started an affair that led to my father’s death.”

“How is that?”

“He had a heart attack on the heels of hearing of it. Not a fatal one at first. That followed suit two weeks later. The coroner said he died of a broken heart.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say just as that odd gift Nick gave her enters my mind. The key to a safe... It had pictures of her father, but didn’t she mention something about stock information? “Oh, Noel, you knew that Nick was looking to do a hostile takeover of the company, didn’t you?”

She gives a few quick blinks my way. “Boy, you are good. Yes, he was going to do a takeover. I couldn’t have that. My father would roll over in his grave if I let that happen. He stole everything from my father, including his life. And as long as I had breath in my body, I wasn’t about to let him steal the company, too.”

“That’s why you killed him.”

She flinches as if I struck her.

Okay, Bizzy, Sherlock whimpers. I think we should all leave and find Jasper now. This looks as if it could get dangerous. But, of course, you’re not budging. Fish, why don’t you leave and get Jasper? I’ll stand guard with Jingle. Someone needs to protect Bizzy and the baby!

Fish yowls in response, I’m not leaving Bizzy’s side, you big oaf. You go and get Jasper. The man never listens to me anyway .

I’m not leaving your side either, Bizzy, Jingle says as he spins himself around my ankles.

“Bizzy, you don’t know what you’re saying,” Noel pants as she eyes the area, presumably for an exit. “Why would I kill Chris? Don’t you see? All of the clues point to Virginia.”

“They do,” I tell her. “But they point to you a little crisper. It was you who had an affair with Chris. It was you Virginia was trying to protect even after that. She loves you.”

“She hates me, just like she hated my father,” she bellows. “Yes, I killed Nick—and I killed Chris, too. He knew, so he had to go. And Virginia was the perfect person to take the fall. And she will. I didn’t want to do this.” She pulls something long and shiny from her purse and I recognize it instantly.

“That’s my cake knife,” I say in disbelief. “That belongs to the inn.”

She nods. “I’m sorry, Bizzy. I’ll leave it here on the grounds—buried inside of you.

I'm so very sorry for you. And I'm sorry for your child, too. But you've left me no choice."

She lunges my way and I grab her by the wrist as a struggle ensues.

Both Sherlock and Jingle start in on riotous barking while Fish leaps from my arms and onto the woman.

Fish digs her claws into the woman's neck and leaves a crimson line in her wake before scampering to the ground.

Take that, Fish yowls. And take this, too, she says as she rakes her claws over the woman's legs.

"Stop it," Noel screams as she tries her best to kick the animals away. Her arm jerks and the knife swings down, narrowly missing my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Bizzy. But I can't let you live."

And I can't let you hurt her or my new baby brother or sister, Sherlock howls, and soon both dogs knock Noel to the ground, inadvertently taking me with her—albeit I manage to fall softly over her body.

We roll feverishly in the snow, our limbs tangled, our heads knocking into one another.

The knife comes down next to me, falling like lead as she spears the blade between my arm and ribcage.

She yanks the blade out of the ground with a grunt. "This time I won't miss."

I bring my knee up and kick her in the gut before she can make a second attempt and

she lets out a hearty groan. It takes two seconds to land her on her stomach, with her hands behind her back, just as I hear Jasper shout my name.

“In the courtyard,” I scream as he bolts from the parking lot with his weapon drawn.

“ Everybody freeze ,” Jasper thunders, and soon enough he has the woman in handcuffs. “Bizzy, are you okay?”

Sirens break out in the distance, and in seconds the entire area is swarming with deputies.

“I’m fine,” I pant. “She did it. She killed both Nick and Chris. She confessed.”

Jasper lands me hard in his arms. “I know.” He rests a hand over my stomach as if he’s shielding the baby. “Forensics just confirmed her hair was found on both of the deceased and traces of fingerprints were on the murder weapons despite the fact she attempted to wipe them clean. I bet they will be a perfect match.”

“A perfect match.” I nod up at him. “Like us,” I say with a shrug.

A tiny laugh rumbles through his chest. “Like us.”

Jasper lands a searing kiss on my lips that sends more than a warm tingle all the way down to my toes and both me and my new raging hormones agree.

He pulls back a notch before resting his forehead against mine. “You know, we’re going to have to keep this little one out of trouble, right? I can’t have you and the baby chasing down killers every Christmas.”

A dull laugh rumbles through me. “Oh, don’t worry. I’m sure our little bundle will have us too exhausted to chase anyone.” I press my lips to his. “But you have to

admit, this baby is already a good detective by association.”

He chuckles and his voice softens. “A killer has been caught. And now, we get to focus on the most important thing of all.”

I raise a brow his way. “The baby or hot cocoa?”

He laughs in response. “Both, of course.”

It’s the most wonderful time of year after all. And with our family growing, it’s only going to get more magical.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:26 pm

“The killer is in custody?” Mom looks shocked by the turn of events as the party here inside the ballroom is still going strong.

“Rocking Around the Christmas Tree” is belting out over the speakers, and just about the entire town is rocking to it on the dance floor.

“I called it,” Macy says as she piles another six cookies onto her plate. “But why did it have to be Noel, of all people? You knew I liked her, Bizzy,” she says accusingly as if I orchestrated her friend’s guilt just to take a jab at her.

Georgie gives a dark laugh to my big sis. “Just be thankful it wasn’t you.” She looks my way. “We all need to play nice with the evil elf in our midst. And speaking of which, shouldn’t you be taking a break from your evil elf-on-the-shelf duties?”

“Oh, stop it,” Mom says, flicking her wrist at her old friend. “Bizzy is as innocent as the driven snow, and that bump she’s got brewing is proof she’s been busy with things other than murder.” She looks my way. But just in case, I might want to give her a little something extra to open tomorrow. It doesn’t hurt to play nice with anyone.

Good grief.

Jasper makes his way over and wraps his arms around me from behind.

“It’s all done,” he says. “They’re already in Seaview and they’re processing her as we speak. I’ll deal with the paperwork at some point tomorrow.”

“Good work, Detective,” I say, giving the scruff on his cheek a quick scratch.

“I think we all know you did the heavy lifting around here,” he says. “But from here on out, leave all the heavy lifting to me. You’ve got enough to think about.”

“Deal,” I say.

Both Sherlock and Jingle bark our way.

“And the two of you sure helped,” I say, giving them both a quick scratch between the ears just as Fish walks over and I pick her up. “You helped, too.” I drop a kiss on her furry forehead as a thank you.

“You know what that means,” Georgie says, digging her hands in her pockets. “Bacon for everybody!”

Fish leaps out of my arms, and soon the four-footed among us are dancing and prancing as it rains salted meat.

The music switches to something moodier, and before I know it, I’m swaying in Detective Jasper Wilder’s strong arms.

The cake is served—sans the ceramic cake knife that was taken in as evidence of Noel’s assault on me. Mayor Woods gives a heartwarming, yet slightly self-serving, toast as the town imbibes gallons of eggnog together. And, soon enough, in what feels like a whirlwind, we’re all saying goodnight under the moonlight out in front of the inn.

Sherlock and Jingle run circles in the snow as Fish chases them around the evergreens and a good time is being had by all. Well, maybe not the life-size deer ensconced in twinkle lights that just got knocked over in the furry flurry, but everyone else.

I give my mother a hug, same with my sister before I wave them off until I see them again tomorrow.

“Well, kids,” Georgie says. “I’d better get to my cottage. Rumor has it, my ex is stopping by tonight and I made him a batch of his favorite cookies.”

“Georgie, you baked?” I marvel. “Are you trying to woo him or poison him?” I tease.

She gives a sly grin. “With any luck, a bit of both.” She shrugs. “More like I stole one of the tins that was left behind on the night of the murder. But I’m reheating them in the oven. He likes his cookies warm, almost as much as he likes me in a red dress lined with fur.” She gives a little wink. “He might be a cad, but he’s my cad. Merry Christmas, kids,” she says, taking off.

“Merry Christmas,” Jasper and I shout after her.

A brunette heads this way, bundled in a dark green coat and matching scarf.

“Ember,” I say. “Thanks again for coming out.” I cringe because I’m not sure if I should out the fact her friend was arrested.

“Thank you for ending this nightmare,” she says. “Virginia told me what happened. I still can’t believe Noel did this.” She shudders. “I guess I should get going. Good night and merry Christmas to the both of you.” She’s about to take a step when Sherlock and Jingle spring in front of her.

Jingle jumps up and dances a little jig, making us all laugh in the process.

“Come here, you,” she says, giving him a big hug. “I’m going to miss you something fierce.”

“You don’t have to miss him,” I say. “He’s looking for a good home.”

Her eyes light up bright as stars. “Oh, Bizzy. Would you mind if I gave him that good home?”

I shrug at the furry cutie. “What do you say, Jingle?”

He belts out a string of happy barks and yips, and soon Sherlock joins in and Fish even gives a sweet mewl of approval herself.

Ember thanks me profusely and vows to take the very best care of him. They take off together toward the parking lot and Sherlock and Fish run alongside them to say their goodbyes.

“Well, that’s one more happy ending tonight,” Jasper says, pulling me close once again and warming my stomach with his hand. “One day we’ll have to tell our little one all about how Jingle found his forever home on Christmas Eve.”

I nod. “The first of many stories, I’m sure.”

Soon, it’s just Jasper and me, holding one another while looking up at the velvet night sky.

Then out of nowhere, the sound of bells ringing makes us straighten.

“Is that—?” Jasper winces as he looks around.

“Sleigh bells?” I ask as I crane my neck along with him as the volume increases, and soon an enormous red sleigh appears in the night sky, driven by what looks like an entire team of flying reindeer.

“Oh my word,” I pant.

“Are we having a dual hallucination?” he asks lower than a whisper and I don’t dare answer. I don’t dare move.

He’s here! He’s here! Sherlock Bones barks as both he and Fish race this way.

We need to get back to the cottage and fall asleep, Fish meows at the top of her lungs. Or Santa won’t leave us any gifts!

They take off for the cottage and a laugh gets caught in my throat as that enormous sleigh comes down this way before cresting its way over the inn.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think it’s headed for Georgie’s cottage,” I say with more than a little holiday wonder in my voice.

“I think you’re right,” Jasper says, holding me tighter. “And next year, Santa will have another stocking to fill.” He lands a kiss on my lips. “How about we head to the cottage and have that hot cocoa? Are you still up for it?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I say. “I wouldn’t miss anything with you.”

A smile curves on his lips. “Merry Christmas, beautiful.”

“Merry Christmas, handsome.”

We share a warm kiss that solidifies the fact all of my Christmas wishes have already come true.

It’s Christmas in Cider Cove, the most magical time of year.

But then, it's always magical here in Cider Cove—if not murderous.

Thank you so much for reading! We hope you enjoyed it!

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:26 pm

RECIPE

CHRISTMAS brOOKIES

From the Cider Cove Cookie Company

(Country Cottage Mysteries Series)

Hello, Bizzy here! I've managed to wrangle the recipe for this holiday favorite just for you! I hope you have a blast whipping these up for friends and family. Don't forget to save a few for yourself. Happy baking and merry Christmas!

Ingredients for Brownies

??? cup all-purpose flour

??? cup butter (unsalted, melted)

2 eggs (room temperature)

??? cup granulated sugar

??? cup light brown sugar

1 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips

? cup cocoa powder

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

??? teaspoon salt

Ingredients for Butterscotch Chip Cookies

1 ? cups all-purpose flour

1 egg (room temperature)

??? cup butter (unsalted, softened)

??? cup granulated sugar

??? cup light brown sugar

2 teaspoons vanilla

??? teaspoon salt

??? teaspoon baking powder

??? teaspoon baking soda

1 cup butterscotch chips

Directions

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Line a 9 x 13 pan with parchment paper.

Directions for Brownies

In a large bowl, whisk together melted butter cocoa powder, sugar, salt, eggs, and vanilla. Combine all ingredients until well beaten.

Next, slowly add flour and stir until smooth. Add chocolate chips and combine into the batter.

Spread the brownie batter over the bottom of the prepared pan and set aside.

Directions for Butterscotch Chip Cookies

In a large bowl or stand mixer, cream together sugar and butter for about 4 minutes. Add in vanilla and egg, stirring well. Then add salt, and baking powder and baking soda, stirring it all in well. Slowly add the flour, a half cup at a time, and mix well. Then sprinkle in butterscotch chips, folding them into the batter.

Add dollops of cookie batter to the top of the brownie batter in the pan until the surface is almost covered.

Cover the pan with aluminum foil. Bake for 25 minutes before removing foil, then bake for another 15-20 minutes until a toothpick comes out clean from the center.

Cut and serve warm.

Merry Christmas!