



Covert Chaos (Mia Murphy #5)

Author: *Stephanie Rowe*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Mia Murphy has a big announcement, and her friends aren't going to like it. But when Hattie shows up two hours late with a corpse in her truck, Mia's news has to take a backseat to keeping her bestie out of jail.

Armed only with a stowaway cat, corded implements, and a cranky mystery writer, the trio of trouble must invade a cauldron of testosterone to uncover the murderer before he or she finds them.

Stolen recipes, secrets pasts, and inconvenient law-enforcement hotties stand in the way of justice, survival, and girl power. But desperate women are unstoppable, and the trio of trouble is no exception!

With only hours to uncover the truth, Mia must lead the way down a path that no one wants to go down...except maybe the cat.

Total Pages (Source): 17

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

One

The shiny, black, souped-up pickup truck came roaring into my parking lot much too fast.

That speed meant trouble.

Especially given whose truck it was.

"Uh oh." Lucy Grande sat up, taking her feet off the porch railing, her newly mixed margarita still in her hand. "This can't be good."

"Maybe she's just thirsty." But as the tires skidded through the gravel, whipping the truck sideways, I had a bad feeling.

Hattie Lawless, a seventy-something ex-race car driver, chef extraordinaire, and third member of our trio, was supposed to meet me and Lucy at my lakeside marina for evening drinks, because I had an announcement the two of them weren't going to like.

Hattie was late, but the sassy senior of an undisclosed age didn't care if anyone was annoyed by how she chose to live her life. She wouldn't be rushing for us, or for the gorgeous sunset she'd missed by two hours.

She might be driving fast just for the fun of it, but she always took care of her truck, and the way it was spinning out was not her usual maniac style.

It was reckless, and she was never reckless with her precious pickup. Reckless in life?

Yeah, maybe. Crazy, bold, irreverent, loyal, and unstoppable? Always.

But when the bumper of her truck hit the side of my deck with a crash, I knew something was up.

My purloined, massive Maine coon cat, King Tut, hopped up on the deck railing, his tail switching with irritation as the dust flew up, cloaking all of us in a cloud of dirt.

"This is it," Lucy said, watching as the driver's door flew open. "Hattie has murdered someone, and she's a fugitive on the run. Do we go with her or not? I don't want a life on the run, but could we really leave her to fend for herself?"

I put my drink down and stood up. "You mean, leave the world to fend for itself with Hattie on a rampage?"

"Good point. We'd need to protect the innocents."

"Mia! Lucy!" Hattie leapt out of the truck, her fuchsia hair glittering in the glow from the spotlight that lit up my parking lot. The overly bright lights were mostly to discourage assassins from sneaking up on me while I was sleeping. But also handy for moments like this. "We have a situation!"

"Of course we do," Lucy said, not quite able to keep the amusement out of her voice.

Hattie always had a situation. That was part of what my announcement was about.

I leaned on the railing. "What's going on?"

"And you're late," Lucy said. "I've been dying to hear Mia's big announcement, and she wouldn't spill without you here."

Hattie hurried toward the deck stairs, moving faster than she usually did. She was wearing pink jeans that matched her hair, a turquoise Hattie's Café T-shirt, and pink and blue running shoes. She kind of looked like she'd been possessed by a cotton candy machine, which wasn't surprising. Hattie was never predictable, but the urgency spilling off her right now was alarming. "I need to show you guys something."

My smile faded. "If it's a body, I'm not coming. That's what my announcement was. No more bodies. No more murders. It's hurting my business, and I can't do it anymore."

"No more bodies?" Lucy grinned at me, not remotely upset by my grand declaration. "That's ridiculous. You're the Corpse Whisperer. Bodies find you. The only way not to have any more bodies would be if you were dead, and then there'd still be a body."

"I'm serious. I'm retiring from hunting down murderers."

Hattie reached the top step. "No."

I sighed. I was a little sad about my announcement, but I didn't see any other way to handle what was happening. "Yes."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "You love it. We have such fun together. Why would you deprive yourself of something that gives you joy, friendship, and adventure?"

She wasn't wrong, but I had to ignore that fact. "My business is losing customers because every situation we get involved in winds up making my reputation worse, not better."

Lucy's face softened in understanding. "I have heard some people talking. Small town gossip does fly around."

"Right? I love this town. I need it to love me."

"We love you. No one who matters cares you were married to a drug lord," Hattie said. "But I care that you're excellent at solving murders."

"Actually, some do care." I pointed to my docks. "I spent three hours cleaning graffiti off there this morning."

"Graffiti? In Bass Derby?" Lucy looked appalled. "What did it say?"

"It mentioned Stanley, drugs, and the way I'm destroying the world." Stanley was my ex-husband. I'd helped the FBI put him in prison for being a drug kingpin. A big newspaper had recently published a lengthy exposé on him and his ex-wife (me), who had betrayed him to the feds, which reminded the locals of who I used to be, which wasn't helping my still-fragile business. "They'd painted a peace sign on my dock, too, so I'm hoping that's a message from the universe that I'm actually a good person?—"

"Hey! I know you're having an existential crisis, but you need to put it away right now and focus on me." Hattie held up her hands to silence us. "Mia, turn off the parking lot cameras."

Lucy and I both stared at Hattie, and my gut sank as I saw the look on Hattie's face.

It was bad. Whatever it was, it was bad.

"It's illegal?" I finally asked. "You got involved with something illegal?" I shook my head. "No. Absolutely not. You know about my past. I can't get involved. This, right here, is why I have to retire from repeatedly breaking the law with you guys, even if it's in the name of justice."

"Oh, man, Hattie," Lucy groaned. "What did you do?"

"Cameras," Hattie repeated.

Oh, God. This was really not good. Regret building in my belly even before I did it, I pulled out my phone and used the app to turn off all the cameras in the marina. "All clear, but think really hard if this is something that Lucy and I want to know about."

"I want to know," Lucy said. "I definitely want to know. What's going on, Hattie?"

"Come!" Hattie turned and ran back down the stairs again, heading to her tailgate.

Lucy hurried after her, and even King Tut leapt off the railing and strolled casually after them, pretending he wasn't following Hattie, even though he definitely was.

Betrayed by my nearest and dearest. All I wanted was for my little business to prosper. Was that so much to ask?

But I followed them to the truck, because, well, it was Hattie. And the things that happened to Hattie were always surprising, entertaining, and dangerous.

All of which I enjoyed, unfortunately.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Two

But I wasn't getting involved. I had to retire. Mandatory retirement for the sake of future Mia's financial and business well-being.

When I reached them, Hattie unlocked the back of the truck and raised the flap on the canopy. She shined a flashlight into the back. "Look."

Lucy immediately leaned closer, King Tut hopped up, shot over the tailgate, and went right in. I reluctantly peered inside.

It took me a moment to figure out what I was seeing, but the blue jeans, faded yellow T-shirt, sneakers, and limp hand were clues I couldn't ignore. "There's a man smashed up against the front of the truck bed. Napping, maybe?" I hoped he was napping. But the angle of his head was very wrong.

"Is he bleeding? He looks like he's bleeding," Lucy said.

"It's not blood," Hattie said. "It's raspberry pie."

I wanted to cheer for the fact he was covered in raspberry pie and not blood, but the fact he wasn't moving at all was concerning. "Is he drunk?"

"Oh, come on, Mia. Seriously? You two can't recognize a dead guy when you see one? Where's your corpse radar? Honestly. We don't have time for this."

Oh...man.

Lucy clapped her hands. "This is great. Who is he?"

I stepped back. "It's not great. Why is he in your truck? Why did you bring him here? Why didn't you call Devlin?" Devlin Hunt was a local cop. Not the police chief, because Chief Stone was an underqualified dandelion who was Lucy's cousin and the son of the mayor. Devlin was ex-black ops, former gang member, and besties with the FBI agent who had managed my undercover work against my ex. Devlin was fully incorruptible, even by us.

Definitely a smart choice to call Devlin about a body.

"I didn't call Devlin because he's going to have to arrest me for it," Hattie said.

Unless the evidence pointed toward one of my friends.

Lucy's eyes widened. "Did you kill him?"

Hattie didn't take offense at all, which said so much about Hattie. "Nope. I could, though, as we all know. Devlin will know that too." She closed the flap and leaned against it, folding her arms over her chest. "The man in my truck is Beckwith Barnes. We met for drinks at the Ugly Man Tavern tonight, and now he's dead in my truck."

Um...joy.

Lucy frowned. "Well, that doesn't mean you killed him. Devlin is smarter than that."

I watched Hattie, my hopes of retirement fading by the minute. "What else is there?"

"Beckwith wanted to buy some of my pie recipes for the Diamond Pie Company, which he runs with his brother, a big, rude, unpleasant man named Charles. When I said no, he got mad. Then, I realized the pie he'd brought me to try tasted like my

recipe. When I mentioned that sweetly, he started shouting at me for accusing him of theft, then grabbed the pie and stormed out."

A public argument. Money and reputation involved. "That's still not enough," I said. But the fact she was driving around with his body might be. "How did he wind up in your truck?"

"I don't know!" She threw up her hands. "I didn't leave for a couple hours, but when I was on my way here, I felt this bad vibe from the back of my truck, and I looked back, and bam! There he was!"

Lucy grimaced. "Oh...Hattie."

"Right? And let's recap: who was eating raspberry pie? I was. He took my pie with him. I haven't sampled it to make sure it's the same pie, though." She wrinkled her nose. "I'm a food connoisseur and eating the pie that's all over a dead man's shirt is way below my standards."

"As it should be," Lucy said. "I'm with you there."

"Are you sure he's dead?" I asked, still hoping for an easy out.

"As a doornail. I've been around enough to know."

"How did he die?"

"I don't know. I turned around to look at him at a stoplight, but all I could see was the raspberry pie." She grinned. "It's up to us, ladies." Hattie clapped her hands. "Isn't this fun? High stakes, a body, wayward pie, and the Ugly Man Tavern on a Saturday night? It's pretty much perfect, right?"

"Absolutely." Lucy looked thrilled. "What do we do first? Go back to the Ugly Man and start snooping around?"

"I'm thinking that's best." Hattie tossed the keys at me. "You drive. I'm taking your antique beauty of a truck, Turbojet."

I caught the keys. "Me? I don't want to drive Beckwith."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, I can't drive him. I'm the suspect. If I'm driving him, then I'll be on death row by morning. You're innocent. You have to be the one caught with him in the back."

"Seriously, Hattie? This is why I'm retiring! I can't drive a body around!"

"I'll drive!" Lucy snatched the keys out of my hand, ran around to the front, and climbed in.

Hattie looked at me. "You can't leave Lucy alone with a body, Mia. You know that. She's new to this kind of trouble." She held out her hand. "I need the keys to Turbojet, Mia."

There was a tense edge to Hattie's voice that caught my attention. Her jaw was set, and there was worry in her eyes. Yes, Hattie and Lucy loved the excitement of tracking down murderers, and honestly, I did, too. But this wasn't just about fun. Hattie could be in real trouble if we didn't sort this out, and fast.

Shoot. I was going to have to retire tomorrow, not today, wasn't I?

"Fine." I handed her the keys. "But we have to keep this quiet. I can't afford any more damage to my reputation. And this is the last time. This is it."

She held an invisible key to her lips and turned it. "No one will ever know."

Except they would know.

Because there was a dead man in Hattie's truck, and we couldn't hide that fact for long.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Three

We made it to the Ugly Man Tavern without running into police, or anyone who suddenly wanted to look inside the back of Hattie's truck.

As Lucy pulled into the parking lot full of pickup trucks, I had a sudden memory of being chased down that two-mile dirt driveway by gun-wielding lunatics, because that was the kind of clientele that frequented the Ugly Man.

This probably wasn't the first murder that had happened on the premises, which was a fun thought.

Lucy backed into a spot at the far end of the lot, almost in the woods. "I like this isolated spot, don't you? Less likely someone will look in the truck, and we have a straight shot out of the parking lot if we're in a hurry."

"We're investigating a murder," I pointed out. "Odds are we'll be running for our lives before the night is over."

"Right? Can't wait." She parked the truck as Hattie drove my precious Turbojet into the lot, and parked him right next to the bar under a spotlight, presumably to keep him safe from acquiring any corpses.

See? Hattie was very responsible when it came to trucks.

"What's the plan?" Lucy turned the engine off.

"Let's talk to—" I paused, cocking my head. "Did you just hear a meow?"

"You hear it, too?" Lucy sighed with visible relief. "I always hear meows. I dream about being killed by King Tut almost every night. He's the most terrifying attack cat on this planet."

"He would never hurt you," I said, almost certain of my words. I heard a meow again, and I turned around in my seat, then jumped when I saw King Tut's yellow eyes glaring at me through the window to the back of the truck. "Oh, God. We forgot he was in there!"

I slid the window open, and he gave me a disgruntled look before easing his way into the front seat between me and Lucy. "There's raspberry filling on his whiskers."

"He was probably so disappointed when he realized it wasn't blood." Lucy opened the door as Hattie ran up. "Too bad we can't bring him into the tavern. He'll have to wait in the truck."

"In the truck? What if the murderer steals the truck with the body in it?" I pulled him into my arms. "We're bringing him in."

Lucy shook her head. "You can't bring a cat into a tavern."

"No one will even notice." I unzipped my sweatshirt and piled seven hundred pounds inside, and then zipped him up. "When I rescued him from my nasty neighbor, I made him a promise to always keep him safe. That includes not letting him get kidnapped by a murderer."

Lucy gave me a resigned look. "You look like you're about to give birth to an elephant."

King Tut popped his head out of the top of my sweatshirt and started purring.

Lucy threw up her hands. "No one's going to notice him? Really?"

"Honestly, King Tut would probably take out the murderer," Hattie said. "Maybe leave him in the truck? Just to make our life easy."

I stared at them. "No."

"Yeah, you're right. King Tut would have to go to cat prison then, and we love him too much for that. It'll be fine. No one here is going to care," Hattie said. "Much worse things have been in the Ugly Man many, many times."

Lucy shot us both baleful looks, but she got out of the truck. "I'm going to get a really big dog to eat that cat."

"Wouldn't work. King Tut would win," Hattie said. "Leave the keys in the ignition. Just in case someone decides to steal the truck. I'm willing to sacrifice my truck to stay out of prison?—"

She stopped, staring across the parking lot with a frown.

Lucy and I turned to see what she was looking at. A large man in jeans, a black sweatshirt, and work boots was walking into the Ugly Man. He glanced across the parking lot, giving us a chance to see his face in the spotlight.

"Oh..." Lucy took a step back. "He looks like the kind of man who would shoot us for fun."

"He's got a nasty vibe." My mom, champion con artist that she was, had spent much of my childhood teaching me how to read people, mostly to make sure that when we

selected a mark, we chose one who wasn't actually dangerous.

The man who'd just walked into the Ugly Man Tavern was dangerous. I could feel it in my bones, and I trusted my bones.

"Well, that man is Charles Barnes, Beckwith's brother and business partner of Diamond Pie Baking Company," Hattie said. "Let's follow him." Then she took off across the parking lot, raced up the steps, and disappeared into the front door of the seedy, man-cave tavern.

Lucy didn't follow her. "You know, I think I may have been a little overzealous when I said how much fun this was going to be. I forgot about the whole murderers-actually-kill-people thing."

I shifted King Tut to the right side of my sweatshirt, and then tucked my left arm through Lucy's. "Well, let's go get Hattie, talk her into reporting it to the cops, and then go home and finish our drinks."

She looked over at me as we headed toward the front door. "Hattie's future freedom is at stake. Plus, she basically stole a body, and we were accessories after the fact. She'll never turn it over to the police."

I sighed. "I know."

Boy, did I know.

As I pulled open the front door, I hoped I was wrong about how dangerous Charles Barnes was.

But my mom had trained me well.

The odds of me being wrong were not nearly as high as I wanted them to be.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Four

The Ugly Man was packed with loud, manly men and the women who they'd sucked into their vortexes of bearded, beer-bellied hell.

Hattie was standing just inside the front door, her hands on her hips, surveying the boisterous crowd.

No one made eye contact with her.

Because she was Hattie, and she had more power in that seventy-something body than Lucy and I would ever have, even if we combined forces and added a thousand more of us. Unless we included King Tut. Then we might be almost even.

"I don't see Charles," Hattie said. "He must have gone in back. I'm going after him?—"

I caught her arm. "Hattie, if he did kill Beckwith and put him in your truck, I don't think you want to run into him alone in the back halls of the Ugly Man."

She frowned at me. "I think I do, actually. I liked Beckwith. I dated him for a while when he was a newbie chef."

Oh... "So, this is a revenge quest as well as a prove-your-innocence quest?" I shifted King Tut to my other side. Even supported by the sweatshirt, he was heavy, and I didn't have the arm strength that Lucy had.

Hattie nodded. "He was a good man, and a fellow chef, Mia. It would be impossible for me not to care."

Dang it. I was a sucker for justice. That was why I'd betrayed the man I'd loved and called an FBI hotline when I'd found the bags of white powder in our China cabinet. Stanley had given me the home and the family I'd never had, and I'd had to walk away.

Because I couldn't stand back and let bad people get away with bad things.

Was I trying to overcompensate for my criminal childhood? Maybe. Didn't really matter.

I was stuck with who I was.

If Beckwith was a good man, then this was about more than Hattie, and Hattie was already a good enough reason for me to get involved. "Let's grab a table and make a plan," I said.

"No." Hattie folded her arms over her chest. "I'm going to find Charles and?—"

"I'll find him. He doesn't know me, so he won't try to attack me." Hopefully. I patted King Tut. "I'm armed with a demon cat, remember?" I tried to pull my sweatshirt back over his head, but he looked at me and growled, that low, dangerous growl that made me decide he was just fine where he was.

Hattie eyed me. "If Charles saw us together when we arrived, he'll know. He'll kidnap you as a hostage to force me to succumb to his amoral pressure. I won't sell the recipes to him. You'll be on your own."

Lucy hit Hattie's arm. "You're a big, fat liar, Hattie. You'd sacrifice yourself for Mia."

"Myself? Yes. My recipes? No." Hattie looked at me. "Go get him, then. I'll give you two minutes, and then I'm coming after you."

I shifted King Tut again. "You know by now that we need a plan. The reason my mom and I never wound up in prison, or even arrested, is because she insisted on a strategy." My biceps were starting to burn as King Tut purred, turning himself into dead weight in my arms. "So, we're going to sit down, and take three minutes to figure out the best approach."

And so I could put King Tut down. Good heavens. Why had I thought carrying a massive beast around for the evening was a good idea?

Lucy took Hattie's arm. "Mia's right, Hattie. That's why this is fun. Because we manage to stay alive each time we go after a murderer. If we get killed, then we don't get to do it again, and where's the fun in that?"

Hattie grumbled under her breath, but she knew we were right. "Fine." She turned to survey the room. "Every table is full. I'm trying to evil-eye someone into giving up their seats, but everyone is avoiding eye contact."

Lucy nodded. "You're like Medusa. Everyone knows not to look at you."

Hattie raised her brows. "Medusa? You're calling me a banished, evil goddess with snake hair, who turns people to stone simply by getting them to look at her?"

"I am."

Hattie blew her a kiss. "Thank you for the compliment, my dear. I appreciate it. Every woman needs to feel empowered."

"We do, indeed," Lucy said cheerfully. "Mia, go send King Tut out there. Have him

eat someone. I can see he's getting restless."

I zipped my sweatshirt up higher to cover his head. He immediately started growling, and his back claws dug into my stomach in protest. "Hang on. Maybe we know someone."

"I looked already. There's no one here?—"

"Check again. There's always an opportunity if you keep looking." It was kind of disturbing how often my mom's con artist advice came into play in my law-abiding adult life. Once a criminal, always a criminal was the life wisdom I was trying to prove wrong, but the corpse in the truck outside was making that difficult.

While Lucy and Hattie discussed who they could kick out, I carefully scanned the crowd, one table at a time.

The middle of the tavern was filled with long tables and benches, designed for groups to sit together and new friends to be made.

Along the outside were booths, and that's where I wanted to sit, because it would give us the best view of the tavern. I scanned each one, and then, I grinned. Whoever was sitting in the end booth had hidden behind a notebook, sunglasses, and an old fishing hat. His sweater was ragged, and his shorts were ripped.

He looked like a homeless truant, except for the obscenely expensive watch on his wrist and the bejeweled flipflops on his feet.

I knew those flipflops.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Five

Those flipflops were on some very famous, very anti-social feet.

Beau Hammersley, a local recluse who was an extremely successful and wealthy mystery writer about Hattie's age. He hated the world, he hated people, but he had a mad crush on my mom.

"Bingo," I said. "Follow me." I hoisted King Tut up, then headed across the tavern.

I trotted across the bar and slipped into the booth beside him. "Beau. Hi!"

He lowered the notebook while Hattie and Lucy sat across from him. "No. Just no." Then he raised the notebook again to block us out.

I rested King Tut on my lap, and shook out my aching arms. "Beau."

My favorite mystery writer ignored me.

"Beau!" Hattie said.

"Hi, Beau," Lucy said cheerfully.

He swore under his breath, then raised the notebook higher. "You are all unwelcome."

I winked at my friends, then leaned in close to Beau to whisper in his ear. "We found

a body. Murdered."

He lowered the notebook so fast I was worried he'd get a cramp in his hand. He whipped off his sunglasses, his blue eyes fixating on me. "Again? You found a body again? God almighty, Mia, you're evil personified. How do you do it?"

"I'm magical." King Tut shoved his head out of my sweatshirt and meowed at Beau.

Beau eyed the cat. "King Tut," he said formally. "It's always good to see you. I admire the streak of pure menace that runs through you."

King Tut flicked his tail, which had slipped out from the bottom of my sweatshirt, and then suddenly launched out of my sweatshirt and onto Beau's lap, his claws raking a path of carnage across my chest.

I yelped in pain. Lucy grabbed a spoon and held it up for defense, while Hattie chuckled. "The cat who would not be contained. I delight in that beast."

Beau patted King Tut. "Where's the body?"

I knew we'd lose him as soon as he knew it was outside. "Did you see where Charles Barnes went?" As one of the most successful mystery writers of all time, Beau had a sensibility about murder that I didn't. His mind was diabolical, and he was a master of observation. His experience was all fictional, of course, but I respected his wisdom. Plus, he'd been here all night watching people, and I wanted his help.

"Charles?" He looked thoughtful, and for a moment, I had hope. Then he said, "You know I don't get involved. I observe only." He scratched King Tut under the chin, and the massive black beast curled up in a ball on his lap, closing his eyes to bask in the attention.

"The corpse is Beckwith Barnes," Hattie said, clearly trying to drag our unwilling expert into conversation.

"Beckwith?" He looked surprised. "That's unexpected." He opened his notebook to a new page and started scribbling notes.

I leaned over to see what he was writing, but he smacked my arm. "My ideas for a new book are sacred. If you read them, I will have you killed."

I paused. "You're very alarming."

"I know." King Tut raised his paw and tapped Beau's arm to politely request more patting, but Beau ignored him and went back to writing.

I leaned over his shoulder again. "If you help us, I'll show you the body."

He immediately put the notebook down. "I've been here since five, people watching for research. Charles Barnes has been here all evening, in and out. I saw Hattie get in her kerfuffle with Beckwith, and watched him storm out. Hattie left a while later." Understanding dawned on his face. "You're in trouble for Beckwith getting killed?" He shook his head. "You know better than to get into a public fight with someone who is about to be murdered, Hattie."

She raised her brows. "If only I'd known he was going to be murdered."

"Someone knew." Beau tapped his pen against his chin, clearly thinking. "Who knew?"

We waited, but he didn't write anything down or say anything, which meant he didn't know either.

Dang it. I'd been hoping for a miracle. "Why were you surprised it was Beckwith?"

"Because he's always been a nice fellow. Smart." He paused. "But his brother is a bit of a beast, and they do business together." He shrugged. "You are who you hang out with."

"He wanted my pie recipe," Hattie said.

"Of course he did." Beau nodded. "They supply the pies for the Ugly Man. They're quite good, actually."

"I knew it!" Hattie slapped her hands down on the table. "Son of a biscuit! The Ugly Man is selling my pie recipe. Everyone knows my raspberry pie is the best in the state."

I had no doubt about that.

"Charles probably killed Beckwith when he failed to get me to hand over my recipes. And now he wants me in jail so he can steal all my secrets." She whirled around, searching the bar. "When I find that little punk, I'm going to kill him."

Lucy grinned. "That's a great idea to announce that, Hattie."

Hattie shrugged. "You know I don't mean it."

"But someone could overhear."

"I've been as helpful as I'm going to be." Beau put his notebook in a little bag by his hip. "Show me the body."

"It's in my truck outside," Hattie said. "Truck's unlocked."

"It's here? It's been here the whole time? You wench!" Beau dumped a protesting King Tut on the bench, leapt to his feet, climbed over me, and then sprinted for the door, his phone out and ready to record.

And as he walked out the door, to my horror, in walked the local cop in question, Devlin Hunt, and my FBI ex-handler, Agent Hawk Strauss, who I'd nicknamed Griselda to take my power back. I swore under my breath and turned my back on them. "Boys night out," I whispered.

Hattie and Lucy turned to look, and they both grimaced and ducked behind their menus. "No," Hattie said. "We do not have time for this! They're both way too smart, and they'll sniff that body out within seconds. Mother trucker!"

I pulled up a menu and hid behind it, turning it so I could see my friends, but hopefully not be seen by Devlin and Griselda. "We need to find Charles," I said. "Is there a back room to this place?"

Hattie nodded. "They have darts back there. And a pool table."

"Of course they need darts in a place like this." With Griselda and Devlin within sneezing distance of Beckwith, we didn't have much room to maneuver. I rubbed my hand over my forehead, trying to think. "We need to get to Charles."

"And what? Get a massive, dangerous man to admit he's a murderer?" Lucy looked skeptical. "I know you're talented, Mia, but that seems a little outside your skillset."

"I don't know what to do when we find him, but we'll figure that out." I lowered my menu slightly and inspected the tavern. I could see the door to the back room. It was off to the right of the bar. "Griselda and Devlin are at the bar," I said. "They aren't facing the room, but they would see us in the mirror."

Lucy and Hattie grinned. "You know what that means, right?"

I sighed. "I do."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Six

Two minutes later, Hattie and I were down on our hands and knees, crawling along the sticky, dirty boards of the tavern, using the rows of tables to stay out of Griselda and Devlin's line of sight. Lucy was staying behind at our table to make sure Charles didn't reappear.

As I crawled along the floor between the tables, looking at all the different boots that had chosen the Ugly Man for their social activities, while clutching a purring cat to my chest, I couldn't help but grin.

This was like my childhood, sneaking through crowds.

It was just plain fun. I looked back at Hattie, and she gave me a thumbs-up, a big grin on her face.

This was why we were friends. Because we were both a little crazy.

I scurried along the floor, checking between pairs of legs to make sure I was heading toward the back room. We were almost there when a boot landed in front of me and didn't move.

Crap.

I looked up to see the tree trunk of a man, Diesel Dalton, standing in front of me. His beefy arms were folded across his chest, and he was staring down at me with a mixture of irritation and fascination.

I waved up at the owner of the Ugly Man and sat back on my heels, still staying low. "Hi, there." I'd had a few situations with Diesel. Not all of them had gone well. I zipped my sweatshirt up a little bit higher just to make sure King Tut stayed hidden.

"Hey, Diesel," Hattie said, crawling up beside me. "What's going on?"

He stared down at us. "Why?"

A man of great eloquence.

"Mia's dating two men at the bar, and she doesn't want to have some testosterone-induced, male-dominance fight to ruin her night, your night, and maybe wreck your bar," Hattie said cheerfully.

I poked my foot into Hattie's calf to protest, but she kicked me back even harder.

Diesel's gaze went to the bar. "Which ones?"

"Officer Hunt and his FBI pal," Hattie said.

Diesel's gaze narrowed. "I bet that gets complicated in a hurry."

"It does, but Mia's resourceful," Hattie said cheerfully. "We were just going to zip back to the ladies room."

King Tut began to squirm inside my sweatshirt, and I clutched him, trying to keep him quiet. "Where do you get your pies, Diesel?"

His eyes narrowed. "My pies?"

"Oh, yes." Hattie sat back on her heels, both of us acting like it was completely

normal to be sitting on a tavern floor talking with the owner about pies.

"Diamond Pie Baking Company," he said. "Why?"

Hattie beamed at him. "They're delicious. I might have to order some for my café. How do I get in touch with them?"

He shrugged. "I usually go through Emmeline, but Charles and Beckwith Barnes are around here tonight. They own it."

"Emmeline?" Hattie stiffened. "Emmeline Wilson?"

The tone in her voice got my attention. Who was this Emmeline person?

"I don't know her last name." He turned his head. "Hey," he shouted. "No fights." He spun away from us and headed to the other side of the tavern.

Hattie looked at me. "Emmeline used to work for me at my café. She was a sassy little thing, but a good kid."

"Would she betray you for money?"

She raised her brows. "Doesn't everyone have a price, Mia?"

"I don't," I said without hesitation. "I'd give up my life to do what was right. I already had, actually, and I was trying to rebuild."

Hattie cocked her head. "Your ex would probably say you betrayed him when you told the feds he was a drug kingpin."

"Well, yeah." His mom had agreed with that assessment and hired an assassin to try

to kill me. "But since doing it eviscerated me and caused me permanent trauma, it's more of me being a hero than betraying him."

"Or maybe your price to betray your friends is your strong moral code."

I blinked. "I wouldn't betray you, Hattie."

"You can say that because you know I have a heart of gold. But we both know that if I didn't, you would be willing to make the tough choice."

"No, I?—"

Hattie grinned and put her arm around my shoulder. "Baby cakes, your moral code is one of the reasons I love you. I'm not worried. I'm a fantastic human being, and if I ever became a serial killer, I'd count on you to get me off the streets. Every gal needs a friend who will hold them accountable." She kissed my cheek. "Speaking of killers, let's go find one, shall we?"

Without waiting for me, she crawled away, her fuchsia hair like a beacon of joy in the dim light of the tavern. King Tut pushed his head out from the neck of my sweatshirt and growled, a low, aggressive sound that said exactly how amused he was by being stuffed in my jacket.

I'd stolen him from my nasty neighbor to save him. Was that a betrayal of my neighbor and my moral fortitude, or heroic to my cat? Maybe both.

I looked down at my cat. "You're fine with it, right?"

He fastened his yellow gaze on me, then snuck a paw out and tapped my chin with it. I was calling that a love pat, even though there had been a little bit of claw.

Lucy suddenly knelt beside me. "Griselda's coming this way," she whispered. "Devlin's heading into the back, to the restroom I'm guessing."

Crud. Men were so inconvenient.

We both froze as we saw Griselda walk past the end of the aisle. All he had to do was turn his head, and he'd see me and Lucy on the floor.

He was great at his job. We had only a split second before his subconscious would register we were there.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Seven

"This way!" I dove under the nearest table and crawled out the other side, Lucy right behind me.

"Hey!" A woman pushed out her chair and looked down at us. She was wearing jeans, pink sneakers, and a matching T-shirt that bragged about some sort of baking competition. "What the—" She paused, when she saw me, her eyes widening. "Mia? What are you doing down there?"

She knew my name? I stared at her for a second, trying to place her, but I came up with absolutely nothing. I was great with faces and names, but I was sure I'd never seen her before. Her eyes were a bright blue, which I would have remembered. She had a trail of stud earrings on both ears, and she had a tiny heart tattooed on her collarbone.

Things I would have noticed, right?

Lucy popped her head out. "Rachel!"

Ah... Rachel! Nope, still didn't trigger any memories.

Rachel's gaze shot to Lucy. "You're with Mia?"

Again? How did she know me? Her voice wasn't familiar. And was there disdain that Lucy was with me? Who was she dissing, me or Lucy?

Neither was okay with me.

"Where's Hattie?" Rachel asked. "Aren't the three of you always together?"

"She's around here somewhere," Lucy said, with admirable vagueness.

I didn't know who this Rachel gal was, but it was time to take control in defense of my girl Hattie, because I stood in defense of women, especially those I adored with all of my loyal little heart. "We're in a bit of a situation. Can you help us?"

Rachel's attention swiveled back to me. "Maybe. What do you need?"

Maybe? We were crawling on a sticky pub floor. Didn't girl code require that she be all in on helping us? Perhaps I didn't remember who she was because I'd intentionally blocked the memory of Rachel and her lack of female support from my mind.

At that moment, a big, burly man with glassy eyes bent down and stared at me. "Thought Rachel was down here a little long. Who are you?"

"It's Mia Murphy and Lucy Grande," Rachel said. "I went to high school with Lucy."

She knew my last name, too? What the fudge? I waved. "Hey, there," I said cheerfully, sporting my best girly smile. "You have great boots."

Burly Guy looked down at his muddy boots, then back at me. "You're Mia Murphy? You don't look like a drug dealer."

Of course. Right. The past that never dies. "I'm not. I put one in prison."

"So you could bring it to Bass Derby and ruin our town," Rachel said, an edge to her voice that went right through my smushy little heart. "We all know it. You and your

demon cat."

My demon cat stared at her silently, his claws flexing in my stomach. Silent stalking King Tut was much more dangerous than growly King Tut. "No, kitty," I whispered. "No attacking."

He kept staring. He definitely sensed Rachel's hostility, and I appreciated his loyalty. But we didn't have time for him to unleash feline mayhem in the Ugly Man right now.

Lucy put her arm over my shoulder. "Mia's a great person. She's a hero."

At that moment, the demon cat in question twisted suddenly in my arms, trying to launch himself at Rachel. Unsuccessfully, because I was ready, but my stomach was definitely going to have bloody claw marks on it when I got home.

I was never sneaking him in anywhere again.

Lucy immediately took her arm off my shoulders and backed up slightly, which didn't really help with my reputation in this dicey moment.

Rachel's gaze narrowed. "That cat attacked the police chief."

"It was an accident." Not really. She was absolutely correct, but it had been heroic, so I was voting for King Tut.

"That cat attacked Chief Stone?" Burly Guy grinned. "Good kitty."

My gaze swiveled to him. Rachel might hate me, but we had a chance with him. "We need a favor," I told him.

Burly Guy raised his bushy brows. His beard was like a grizzly after a long winter, and his red flannel shirt was horrifyingly stereotypical. "I don't deal drugs."

I sighed. "Neither do I." Rachel wasn't about to give us any girl support, but this guy might be just the man we needed. "We're hiding from the cops," I whispered, taking a chance on the type of clientele that frequented the Ugly Man. "Help us."

Rachel kicked me in the knee. "Shut up. The cops are here? Where?"

Um, ow. They weren't in my kneecap, thanks so much.

Interest flickered in Burly Guy's eyes. "Why? Drugs?"

What the fudge? "No, because..." I had to think fast. What would Burly Guy think was a great reason? "We're innocent."

He nodded. "Yeah, I know how that goes. Damn cops judge everyone."

Guilt flickered through me. Was this the kind of betrayal that Hattie was talking about? Sending the Ugly Man customers after Devlin and Griselda so Hattie didn't go to prison for murder?

Yep, yep, that was what Hattie had been talking about. My moral compass was a complete lie. I was somewhat shattered, but I didn't have time to plunge into the depths of a personal identity crisis. I was about to betray two men who I liked, who were willing to risk their lives to save mine.

But hey, they were former black ops. It might even be fun for them. I tried not to feel guilty. "The guy at the end of the aisle in the blue T-shirt and sunglasses, and the one at the bar in a black bomber jacket and black sneakers."

They both sat up and looked around.

"Blue shirt is coming this way. I got this." Burly guy shot to his feet. "Drinks on the cops!" he shouted, pointing to the bar.

"Don't help Mia, Bert," Rachel snapped. She waved her arms to get Devlin and Griselda's attention. "Hello! Mia and Lucy are under here!"

Um...wow. That was brutal.

But she was too late, because the tavern had already burst into rousing cheers, and everyone jumped to their feet and surged away from the table, no doubt over to Griselda and Devlin.

If they had any brains, Griselda and Devlin would know that was my fault, especially if they'd seen Turbojet outside. I was going to pay for that, but right now, we had to go save Hattie. She'd had a head start going after Charles, and despite what she thought, she wouldn't have a chance in hand-to-hand combat with him.

Bert the Burly Guy leaned under the table, a smug grin on his face. "Favor given, favor owed."

Dear heavens. I didn't want to owe that man a favor. "Thank you!" I said brightly, not quite agreeing to sell my soul to him.

"You're amazing," Lucy said. "Thank you!"

"My pleasure. Chaos is my friend." Bert did have a twinkle in his eye, which made me think he might be my kind of guy after all.

Rachel stood up and walked away, and I had a bad feeling she was going to rat us out.

"Let's go, Lucy." We scrambled to our feet and raced through the crowded room, staying hunched over, ducking around people flooding to the bar to order drinks.

I caught a glimpse of Griselda getting back slaps and man hugs, and then we were through the swinging door and into the back hallway.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Eight

The moment we stepped into the back hall, I saw Devlin.

He was only a few feet away, his back toward us as he spoke to Diesel, the owner of the Ugly Man.

Crap!

I skidded to a stop, and Lucy crashed into me. She hit the wall and bumped a picture. I lunged and grabbed it before it hit the ground, and King Tut squirmed out of my arms. Lucy let out a muffled burst of laughter, then Hattie popped out on our left from the kitchen, grabbed us and yanked us sideways, dragging us through the swinging doors.

I grabbed King Tut at the last second and pulled him with me, ignoring his rumble of irritation.

As the door swung shut, I saw Devlin start to turn around, his cop instincts no doubt alerting him to the "trouble is behind me!" warning. "Devlin's out there." I swaddled King Tut back in my sweatshirt, but I knew he was running out of patience.

"Obviously. That's why I saved you," Hattie said.

"There's a back hallway." I knew about the back hall all too well from a past visit to the Ugly Man. "Let's go out that way."

"You got it." Hattie led the way through the kitchen, waving at the staff as she went. "Hello, my lovelies. You all are doing a wonderful job!" She stopped suddenly. "Emmeline?"

A woman about my age was in the back, standing over a table of pies.

Raspberry pies.

Emmeline looked up, frowning for a moment as if she had no idea who Hattie was.

Uh oh... She had to be faking it. No one could ever forget Hattie, or fail to recognize her.

Emmeline was a short little thing, but she exuded a fierceness that was all fight and attitude. There was nothing soft about her, despite her casual T-shirt and jeans. After a moment that was only a split second, but which gave her plenty of time to think fast and decide how to proceed, she burst into a wide smile. "Hattie Lawless! So great to see you."

Hattie walked over to her. "I heard you're part of the Diamond Pie Company."

Emmeline nodded. "I am. Beckwith and I do all the baking."

"Raspberry pie?" Hattie leaned over and peered at it. "Smells like my recipe. That's a funny coincidence, don't you think?"

Emmeline blinked in innocent surprise. "Are you accusing me of stealing your recipe?"

Hattie burst out laughing and patted her shoulder. "Lordy no, Emmeline. I'm teasing. I had some earlier. It's not mine. But it's delicious. Well done."

I blinked. That was a lie. Hattie absolutely believed it was her recipe.

Emmeline looked flustered. "Um, thanks?—"

"Speaking of pie, has Charles Barnes come through here?" Hattie asked. "I wanted to chat with him about pies. I want to have him supply pies to my café. I'm so busy now that I don't have time to cook everything, and that pie is up to my standards."

Emmeline tensed. "Charles? Is he at the Ugly Man tonight?"

Oh...that news hadn't made her happy. "He is," I said. "We saw him walk in." King Tut moved around in my sweatshirt, and I saw Emmeline's eyes go to the elephant baby I was pregnant with.

Fortunately, she was polite enough not to comment on my oddly shaped, undulating body. "I haven't seen Charles." She wiped her hands on her jeans, and I saw there were streaks of raspberry pie on her pants. Because she was cutting pies, or because she had had a pie incident with Beckwith? She glanced toward the door that led to the front of the tavern, and I could see she was definitely nervous.

"What's up with Charles?" I asked softly.

Emmeline shook her head and went back to serving up pie. "Nothing. It's fine."

I looked at Hattie and Lucy, because it definitely wasn't fine.

Hattie leaned on the table. "Emmeline. I've known you since you were sixteen. What's going on?"

Emmeline finally looked up. "Hattie," she whispered. "Charles and Beckwith have been fighting. I want out, but I sold them my recipes."

Hattie grimaced. "All of them?"

Emmeline nodded. "I know, it was stupid. But I was broke, and my friend Rachel was dating Beckwith, and she convinced me. But Charles is..." she paused. "He's terrifying."

Hattie nodded. "I know, sweetie. You need to get out."

"I can't."

"You can make new recipes. Every great chef has a million recipes inside her. Your greatness doesn't come from this pie." She held up a plate. "It comes from what's inside you. Walk away. Create something better. Own your awesome, girl. It's the only way."

Lucy grinned at me, and I felt my heart go a little mushy. Hattie gave the best speeches, and she was the strongest advocate for woman power that I'd ever met. I loved her so much.

Emmeline sighed. "I have to wait. I think Beckwith is going to buy Charles out, and then it will just be him. I can work for him. He's a good guy."

Hattie frowned. "If the business is making money, Charles won't sell out."

Emmeline shook her head. "Beckwith has a plan to make him."

I grimaced. Forcing bullies to do something didn't often end well.

"What's the plan?" Hattie asked.

Emmeline shrugged. "I don't know. Rachel told me that Beckwith was working on it."

She doesn't know either. Beckwith was going to talk to Charles tonight about it."

We all looked at each other. "Here?" Hattie asked. "Were they meeting here?"

Emmeline shook her head. "No, that's why I was surprised that Charles was here. Do you think Beckwith talked to him? If he's mad, I don't want to be around." She wiped her hands on her pants. "Maybe I should leave."

Ohh...I hated seeing women afraid of men, of standing their ground. Fresh urgency surged through me, new determination. It was bad enough that Charles might have killed his brother and set up Hattie for it. But ongoing intimidation of women? Screw that. "No," I said. "You're safe in here. We'll find him and see what's going on."

Emmeline's gaze swiveled to me, and I saw her gaze go to my bulging sweatshirt again. It was like a train wreck she was trying not to look at. "Who are you?"

I locked my left arm around King Tut, and held out my right to shake her hand. "Mia Murphy. I own the marina."

She didn't shake my hand, which I tried not to take personally. She did have her hands full of pie prep, right? Of course, my hands were full of a six-ton cat, and I'd managed to get a hand free, but I was special, so it was fine.

Recognition flashed in Emmeline's eyes, and I knew she'd heard of me. I paused, bracing myself for the kind of reaction that Rachel had had, but after a brief hesitation, she put down the pie, shook my hand, and smiled. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Emmeline Wilson. Friend of Hattie's."

I relaxed. Wow. I had totally overreacted there. Not everyone hated me. I needed to pull myself together. Apparently, I was getting paranoid. "Me, too."

Lucy waved. "I'm Lucy Grande. Also a friend of Hattie's."

Hattie rolled her eyes. "You all make me sound like I'm way less selective than I am. Very few people make it onto my friend list."

I grinned. "Hattie, you wrap many, many people into your protective circle, and we all know it."

She snapped her fingers at me. "Quiet, little minion. I am a mountain of independence." But her eyes were twinkling with amusement. "Emmeline, if you see Charles, text me. You still have my number?"

"Yes, I do. Thanks."

I paused, wondering how far to push it with Emmeline. She seemed a little nervous, but she was also the third wheel in the Diamond Pie Baking Company. "Has Beckwith been here tonight?"

Emmeline shook her head. "I haven't seen him, but I've been in the kitchen for the last couple hours."

"Why?" Now that I thought about it, wasn't that odd? "You serve the pies you sell?"

She laughed. "No, not usually. But they were short of help tonight, and I always want to make sure my pies are plated well. It makes a difference."

Hattie nodded. "Take pride in your work, and others will do the same."

"Right? Always." Emmeline shrugged. "With Charles out of the business and not using his connections to help us get clients, every opportunity matters more. I wanted this to be right tonight, so when I saw what the pies looked like coming out of the

kitchen, I went back to help."

I frowned. "You were eating here tonight?"

She nodded. "With my friend Rachel. She said Beckwith was going to meet us here after his meeting with Charles, and we were going to start planning for the future." She glanced at her phone. "She hasn't texted me that he has come by yet, though. If Charles is here and Beckwith isn't..." She sighed. "Maybe it didn't go well."

Um...yeah...maybe...at least for Beckwith.

Hattie cleared her throat. "Well, if it didn't go well, you always have a spot in my kitchen."

Emmeline smiled with evident gratitude. "Thanks. I really appreciate it."

"No problem." Hattie patted the table. "Keep in touch, Emmeline. Tap into your female power. The world needs more badass, successful women who believe they're worth it."

Emmeline grinned. "You bet."

The door to the hallway opened, and I instinctively dove behind Emmeline's table, but it was only a server coming in with an empty tray. I heard Devlin's voice in the hall, and I grimaced. "We need to get out of here."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Nine

"Let's go." Hattie pointed to the back of the kitchen. "Let's go that way."

Emmeline watched us. "Who are you hiding from?"

"Mia's boyfriend," Hattie said cheerfully as she led the way across the kitchen.

"One of many," Lucy said.

I elbowed her. "Just stop with that?—"

The back door flew open, and a gorgeous, and I mean gorgeous, Black woman burst through the door and crashed right into Hattie. "Whoops!" She grabbed Hattie's shoulders to steady her, then burst into a huge smile. "Hattie! What trouble are you causing in my kitchen?"

"Chef Felicia!" Hattie sidestepped a big, ebullient hug, which made me laugh. Hattie wasn't really the type to randomly hug. "I heard you were here. Congrats on this new position."

"Thank you! It's been amazing! I love having my own kitchen." Chef Felicia's hair was hidden under her chef's hat, and her white chef's shirt was splattered with food. At first glance, she sort of looked like she'd been murdered, too, but it was definitely just food.

Yay for that. I didn't need a walking corpse in my life right now. That would take

being a Corpse Whisperer to a level I had no interest in attaining.

She was wearing no makeup or jewelry. And yet, this woman was radiant. Not just her face, but her entire being seemed to emanate joy for life.

I wanted to be that happy. She was my life idol.

Hattie pointed at me and Lucy, even as she continued to move toward the hallway. "These gals are my nearest and dearest, Mia Murphy and Lucy Grande. Ladies, meet Chef Felicia, who is almost as good as I am."

"Almost as good as you, Hattie? That makes my day. That's the gold standard right there." Amusement flickered on Chef Felicia's face. "Dare I even ask why you and your friends are in my kitchen?"

"We're being hunted by Mia's boyfriend," Hattie said cheerfully. "Can you pretend you didn't see us?" Hattie reached the back door and shoved it open. "It's girls date night," she said. "No one wants a man to invade girls date night."

"Agreed," Chef Felicia said. "I'd say this is an odd place for girls date night, but I've known you long enough not to be surprised by anything." There was warmth in her voice that made my heart smile.

I liked this gorgeous, model-worthy breath of beautifulness. She accepted Hattie as she was, and that made her a winner in my book.

Hattie paused. "How do you like working with Beckwith and Charles for those pies?"

Chef Felicia's gaze slid over to Emmeline, then back to Hattie. "They're fine."

They weren't fine. She was lying. Dammit. All these people were lying.

At that moment, the door to Devlin's hallway began to open.

No more time for questions. But what was going on with Chef Felicia and the Barnes brothers?

Hattie placed her index finger across her lips and pointed at the door.

Chef Felicia winked. "Don't you worry, my dear. Head on out to the back deck. I'll send drinks out. Go do your girl stuff!" Then she grabbed her spoon and headed toward Devlin's door.

Hattie and Lucy sprinted out the door into the back hall, but I paused, because I couldn't quite help it. I wanted to see what was going to happen.

King Tut poked his head out of my sweatshirt, and I let him. If I got caught, King Tut being with me in a commercial kitchen would not be the top issue I was dealing with.

Emmeline pulled out her phone to text.

The door opened, and I saw Devlin poke his head in, but before he could take a step inside, Chef Felicia parked herself in front of him. "Hey! Out of my kitchen! Now!" she shouted, waving her spoon like a crazy celebrity chef gone mad.

Devlin looked at her sharply, but didn't pull back. "Did three women come through here?"

Emmeline looked up at the sound of his voice, her eyes going wide. Then she shoved her phone in her pocket, pulled back her shoulders, and started cutting slices of pie.

The kitchen door opened, and Rachel burst in, bumping into Devlin. "Where's Mia? Mia Murphy is here," she told Devlin. "She's hiding from you."

Yep. I definitely would vote for Felicia over Rachel as best friend of the year. Had Emmeline been texting Rachel? Emmeline had seemed too nice to betray Hattie. One of them alone might not have the strength to kill Beckwith and drag him out to the truck, but together? I would vote yes.

Devlin swore under his breath. "I thought I saw Mia. Did you see where she went?"

"She's in here somewhere." Rachel looked pouty.

I looked at Emmeline, catching her just as she slipped into the back of the kitchen between some shelves, and then she was out of sight.

Interesting.

Well, at least she hadn't ratted us out to Devlin and Rachel. Emmeline might hang out with less savory folk, but her moral code had some decent standards.

"I've been in the hall. The only place she could be is here." Devlin turned to scan the kitchen again, and I pulled back and crouched so only my right eye was around the door. I was also below eye level, because most people looked at eye level, not below.

Of course, Devlin was a great cop, so he would probably look down, but maybe his observation skills were out of practice after living in Bass Derby for a while.

Felicia put both hands on her hips, pulled her shoulders back, and stepped right in front of him, forcing him to look at her. "This is my kitchen," she snapped. "I can assure you that no one has been running through here, and that includes you both. Out. Now."

She was fierce. I loved her.

Devlin narrowed his eyes at her, apparently decided she was in cahoots with us (damn his cop instincts), and looked past her, scanning the kitchen.

I ducked out of sight just before he looked my way. Hattie and Lucy were waiting in the hallway as I let the door shut gently. "He's such a suspicious man," I said. "It's so annoying."

Hattie grinned. "Well, he does know you pretty well. How could he be anything but suspicious? Speaking of suspicious, did you guys find Charles?"

We both shook our heads as we headed toward the back deck. "No sign of him," I said. "He must be in the bathroom, or the back room. We didn't get that far."

"Let's recap on the deck," Hattie said. "We'll figure this out."

I paused as we passed the door of the storage room. "The entire kitchen staff heard Chef Felicia tell us to go to the deck. I don't think we should go there." I pushed open the door to the storage room. "Let's go this way."

I stepped inside, saw the meat freezer that we'd recently had a bad experience with, and decided to ignore it. "What do you guys think?" I asked as Lucy and Hattie followed me inside.

Lucy locked the door behind her.

"I think Charles and Beckwith had it out over the business," Hattie said. "It went south."

Lucy nodded. "I agree. We need to talk to Charles."

I ran my hands through my hair. "No, we don't. We're definitely not talking to him."

He's big and scary and a possible murderer."

Hattie grinned. "So, we find evidence, right? To trap him?"

I nodded. "Exactly."

"Emmeline probably knows more," Hattie said. "She sold her recipes to the Barnes brothers. Losing control over your livelihood can make any woman cranky. She'll be willing to talk."

"Or Rachel," Lucy said. "There's a lot of hostility in that woman."

Hattie frowned. "Which Rachel are you guys talking about?"

"Rachel Harrison," Lucy said.

"Son of a biscuit." Hattie sighed. "She was Emmeline's best friend in high school. Rachel was trouble. Emmeline begged me to give her a job because she was broke, but I caught her stealing credit card numbers the first night. I fired her, and had a long talk with Emmeline about choosing her friends. Last I heard, Emmeline had cut her off."

Yeah, that was the vibe I got from her. "Sounds like they're in business together again."

Hattie sighed, and looked over at me. "You pick up on anything else?"

I walked across the room and peered out the window at the lake. "I feel like there's something going on with their business that we need to find out about."

"It's a pie situation," Hattie agreed. "See? Recipes matter. They are worth gold."

"But murder?" I shook my head. "People murder over money, yes. Revenge, yes. Love, yes, Power, yes. Jealousy, yes. Recipes, no. Unless it's tied to something else like money, love, power, or revenge."

"Recipes are money," Hattie said.

"But for the Diamond Pie Baking Company? Is that enough money?" I shifted King Tut, thinking. "And why you, Hattie? Why did they pick you to dump the body on?"

Hattie shook her head. "Honestly, they all have a reason."

I glanced at Lucy, who sighed. "What are they?"

Hattie sat down on a crate. "I dated Beckwith briefly at one time."

I nodded. "You mentioned that."

"He tried to convince me to go into business with him, but I refused. No woman should ever go into business with a man. Woman power all the way."

I grinned. "We know about Rachel, but what about Emmeline?"

"Mia!" Devlin's voice echoed down the hall, and we all went silent as his footsteps strode past the room.

Stubborn man had blown right past Felicia and headed to the side deck.

"He's going to come back and realize we're in here," Lucy said. "Why does he care where you are?"

"Because he knows I'm up to something. Let's go before he turns around." I hurried to

the door, opened it, and peered out just as Devlin walked out the door to the deck. "It's clear!" I sprinted back down the hall to the kitchen, Lucy and Hattie on my tail.

We raced through the kitchen, waving at Chef Felicia as we sprinted past. Emmeline and Rachel were nowhere to be seen.

Chef Felicia turned to watch us. "Is that a cat? Do you have a cat in my kitchen? Hattie, you know better than that!"

And then we were out of the kitchen before she could stop us.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Ten

The hallway was now clear, so we bolted down the corridor and into the back room in search of Charles.

He wasn't there.

Because the back room was apparently closed for renovations.

The lights were off, and there was a tarp across the pool table. The chairs and barstools were piled up in the middle under another plastic sheet. The couches along the windows were also covered, and they'd been pulled in several feet from the walls.

The right-hand wall was ripped open, exposing wiring and studs, and a table saw was in the middle of the room, primed and waiting for something else to slice up. There were also paint trays on the table, and a stack of gallon paint cans.

I stopped. "This feels like a horror movie." There was even plastic sheeting over the floor, which felt a little unnecessary considering the amount of beer that floor usually hosted on a good night.

It would be a really handy spot to murder someone, though. Wrap the body up in the tarp, head out the back door, and leave no trace behind.

"The fact that Beckwith is in your truck instead of back here is very telling," Lucy said. "This would be a great place to hide a body, but instead, he's in your truck."

"Hattie's truck has her café name on the side of it," I added, looking around but not quite entering the room. It was so dark that someone could be in a corner and not quite visible. "Anyone would know it was hers."

"I feel so honored to know how specifically I am being targeted. I'm taking it as a compliment." But there was a little less pep in Hattie's voice than usual, because in truth, chasing murderers might have moments of fun, but having one really focus on you? Not as uplifting and liberating as one might think.

We fell silent for a minute, and it was then that I noticed a part of the floor that wasn't covered with a tarp. It looked like a tarp was missing. I pointed to it. "You guys don't think that someone was wrapped up in that tarp and carried out, do you?"

They both studied the spot.

"I think it's suspiciously handy," Lucy finally said.

Dang it. "Right? That's what I thought, too."

"You guys are being melodramatic," Hattie said. "For heaven's sake. Let's stay focused!" She walked over to the wall and flipped the light switch.

We all had to shield our eyes for a moment, but when my eyes adjusted, I saw that Charles was not hiding in a corner with a machete, and the missing tarp had simply slid to the side, and was bunched up against the wall.

"That feels nice," Lucy said, taking a breath. "I like electricity."

"Shine a little light, and everything is better," Hattie said. "Charles is clearly not back here. Let's check the men's room. Or maybe he's back in the front of the tavern again. Let's head back out there."

"Hang on." The askew tarp was bugging me. My mom had taught me to always trust my hunches. The rest of the room was carefully tarped up, except that one spot. I eased across the room, trying not to touch anything, scanning the floor carefully.

I crouched at the bare spot and peered at it. As soon as I knelt down, King Tut squeezed out of my sweatshirt and hopped down. I gave him a pat as he stretched, his tail flicking with happiness.

An empty room with plastic sheeting was cat heaven.

"See anything?" Lucy asked from the doorway.

"No." But I didn't move. Something was definitely off.

Hattie walked over and crouched next to me. "What's that well-trained criminal brain of yours thinking?"

I appreciated the respect. Griselda had done the same with me when I'd been working undercover for him. He always encouraged my hunches, and most of the time, I'd been right. I pointed to the cans of paint. "This place is tarped up because they're repainting. When you repaint, you can't leave spots uncovered, and everywhere else is carefully covered."

"Which means?"

"Something happened in here since the last time they painted, which was probably this afternoon, since you can still smell the paint." I studied the floor.

Lucy came over and knelt on my other side. "What? Did Beckwith get killed here?"

"I don't know." I tried to work it out. "The tarp is pretty lightweight," I said. "It could

have been blown aside by a gust of wind."

"Indoors?" Lucy asked.

Hattie pointed. "There's a door to the back deck." She jumped up and tried the door. It was unlocked, and when she opened it, I felt a light breeze. Not enough to move a tarp, but a gust could have come in.

"What's out there?" I asked.

"A deck. It's separate from the side deck that Devlin is on. You can't see one from the other," Hattie said. She stepped outside. "No one's out here."

At that moment, the tarp rippled and moved a little as a breeze caught it and pushed it further back, in the same direction it had already slid. "Definitely the wind, then." Which meant the door had been opened.

As I stood up to go outside, I suddenly noticed that the bar stools to my left had been knocked over, as if someone had fallen into them. The window right above the chairs was cracked. A fight? If Beckwith and Charles had gotten into a fight, Charles would definitely have won.

My heart started to race, and I hurried to the back door and out onto the deck, King Tut trotting after me. The table closest to the door was on its side, and a chair was upside down. A white plate was on the deck, and raspberry pie was splattered everywhere across the floor.

"Oh, boy," Hattie said.

"It's the murder site!" Lucy ran up behind me. "This is where it happened. You think Charles killed Beckwith and then took him to your truck?"

"Looks like it." Hattie held up her hands. "No one touch anything. This is where I get exonerated. A fight between brothers went south. My DNA is nowhere out here."

"If someone wanted to set you up, why would they leave the murder scene like this?" I looked around, and then I saw a trash bag and a roll of paper towels on the deck. I pointed. "The killer came back to clean it up."

"That's why we saw Charles come back in," Lucy said.

"Except that we saw him come in long after the murder happened," I said. "He wouldn't have waited that long." King Tut hopped up on the railing and peered over the edge. His tail flicked, and I saw him tense. To jump off?

"Unless he couldn't get back before now," Hattie said.

"So what delayed him?" Lucy asked.

"And why didn't he finish cleaning up?" I walked over to the railing, but as I reached for King Tut, I peered over the edge to see what he was looking at. My gut sank when I saw a familiar Barnes brother sprawled on the rocks below, in a very unnatural position. "Guys?"

Hattie and Lucy hurried over and leaned over the railing. "Oh, man," Lucy said.

Hattie swore under her breath. "Son of a biscuit!" She took off toward the side of the deck, and I realized there were steps heading down to the ground.

Lucy and I looked at each other, then sprinted after her. King Tut leaped off the railing and tore after Hattie, delighted we were finally getting some action. "Hattie! Don't touch anything!"

"That drop isn't more than ten feet!" She shouted. "He's too mean to die from such a short fall! He has answers, though! Charles!"

I scrambled down the stairs as Hattie reached the prone man. She grabbed his shoulder. "Charles! Can you hear me—" She suddenly jerked her hand back as if she'd been shocked.

Lucy and I ran up, but then stopped when Hattie held up her hand. "No! Back up!"

We both stopped, and Hattie turned and walked back toward us, her face taut.

"What's wrong?" Lucy asked. "I mean, besides Charles being hurled over the railing, apparently. Is he dead?"

Hattie walked toward us. "There is a corkscrew in his neck."

My jaw dropped, and Lucy grimaced.

"It's my corkscrew," Hattie said. "It was a prize from a baking competition I won many years ago. It's engraved with my name."

Lucy touched her arm. "Oh, Hattie."

Now I was mad. Really mad. No one put my friends in prison, especially a murderer who was running around killing people. Suddenly, I was done trying to pretend I wasn't an ex-criminal. I was over trying to be a nice, upstanding citizen so I wouldn't get any more graffiti on my docks. My mind shifted into full-focus, criminal-mindset mode. "Where were you keeping it?"

"In my kitchen in the café. By the back door."

I thought of the third member of the Diamond Baking Company. "Was it hanging there when Emmeline was working for you?"

Hattie looked at me. "Yes."

I looked over at Charles. "We have to tell Devlin."

Hattie grimaced. "My fingerprints are now on Charles' jacket, and my corkscrew is in his neck. It's just getting worse for me."

I agreed with her. I hated to give up now, especially since the evidence was mounting against Hattie. It was worse than when we'd started, but I knew when we'd crossed lines. "Charles had to have been killed in the last ten minutes. We can't sit on this."

I pulled out my phone to call Devlin, but just as I pulled up his number, I saw King Tut freeze, staring toward the water. His tail was stiff, and his head was up.

I quickly turned and scanned the lake, looking for whatever it was he saw. It took a moment, but then I saw movement in the shadows by the shore. "Is that an animal?" I picked up King Tut so he didn't take off after a bobcat and discover he wasn't as tough as he thought.

Hattie and Lucy watched the shore with me, and the figure moved out of the shadows into the moonlight.

"It's a woman," we all said at the same time.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Eleven

The back of my neck prickled.

The woman was moving in a way that I had spent much of my childhood: that walk that was intended to appear oh-so-casual and unhurried to the observer, but underneath, adrenaline was firing, and urgency was rampant.

"Can you guys tell who it is?" I whispered.

"No," Hattie said, equally softly. "It's too dark."

"I can't either," Lucy said.

King Tut knew who it was, but since I wasn't a cat, that wasn't helpful.

"We need to follow her." But I didn't move. Did I want to follow a possible murderer into dark, shadowy woods? No. No, I did not. Especially one who had taken down a very large, mean man. We were three sweet women with an attack cat.

"She probably has a boat stashed," Lucy said. "My family installs the Ugly Man docks. There's an inlet around to the left where she could have tied up."

"We'll never get to her before she gets to the boat," I said, feeling quite relieved with that realization. "We need a boat." We could quietly follow her to her destination, then assess. "Beau's boat is fast." Fast enough to chase down anyone, and also to get away if, for example, a killer fleeing in a boat decided to come after us. And it was

sitting in the first slip, pretty much offering itself up to our adventure.

"We need his key," Hattie said. "He'd never leave his key in there anymore after it got stolen."

The woman disappeared into the shadows, and urgency coursed through me. No way was I letting the murderer vanish into the night while Hattie took the heat. I called Beau instead of Devlin.

"This body is fantastic," Beau said. "I?—"

"We found a second body by the back deck," I interrupted. "We're calling Devlin so you have about one minute until you can't get to it. Come around the outside, and be quiet!"

"I'm on my way!" He hung up.

Hattie raised her brows. "Operation pickpocket?"

I grinned, feeling a little less terrified. Pickpocketing was my zone of genius. It was a great confidence builder before heading out onto a dark lake in search of a murderer. "You bet."

"We'll distract," Lucy said excitedly.

I was perfectly capable of distracting and grabbing without their help, but I was proud of them for embracing the pickpocketing lifestyle. "Why don't you guys go untie Beau's boat and have it ready?" I paused. "Was that a boat engine starting up?"

"Son of a biscuit. Yes!" Hattie spun toward shore. "We need to be able to see which way she goes. Let's go, Lucy!" She took off toward the docks, but Lucy paused.

"You're sure you don't need help?"

"I got it. Go!"

"All right." Lucy turned and ran toward the lake as I heard a boat engine continue to rev.

My heart was racing. Where was Beau? King Tut sat by my foot, waiting. Did he sense a threat, and he was trying to keep me safe? Entirely possible. For all his crankiness, he was undeniably loyal, and I loved him for it.

The boat engine lowered to a low hum, and I knew our mystery woman had shifted into gear and was starting to head out onto the lake. Where was Beau? Didn't that man know how to run?

Lucy and Hattie made it to Beau's ski boat, and they were quickly untying it, moving with practiced expertise. Hattie paused and stared down the lake, then gestured at me to hurry.

Crap. We were going to miss her.

Moments kept passing, and Hattie and Lucy were ready. Hattie was keeping watch down the lake, and Lucy was holding onto a piling to keep the boat from floating away.

I clasped my hands on my head, pacing back and forth. I felt so helpless. Maybe I should have told them to check other boats to see if anyone had left their key. Stealing a boat was an outright crime, and I knew we could go to jail for it. I didn't want to do that. But what if a murderer got away? We didn't even know who it was!

Hattie waved at me frantically, and I held out my hands in helplessness. Where was

Beau?

"Where's the body? Where is it?" He came puffing around the corner in his flipflops. Running in flipflops? No wonder he'd been slow.

"On the ground behind me!" I didn't have time for subtlety. I just jumped in his path, caught him around the waist to keep us from falling, and yanked his keys out of his front pocket. I held them up. "The murderer is escaping on the lake. We're taking your boat."

"What? No!" He grabbed for his keys, but I was already out of reach.

"We have to! It's Hattie's corkscrew in his neck!" I didn't wait. I just took off for the docks, King Tut on my heels.

Behind me, I heard Beau shouting about making him choose between hunting a murderer and photographing a body, but I didn't stop. I ran down the ramp, skidded around the corner, then leapt onto the bow of the boat and tossed the keys to Hattie, who was already in the driver's seat.

King Tut leapt onto the boat beside me, and the boat engine roared to life.

"Wait! Wait!" Beau was shuffling down the dock in his flipflops, waving his notebook.

"We can't wait," Hattie said. "She's already around the bend."

Beau looked so funny shuffling down the dock, trying to move fast but unwilling to ditch his flipflops. His gray hair was askew, his ratty sweater hanging off him like a sack, his scrawny legs like little toothpicks. My heart turned over. This man was so tough and cranky, but he'd been there for us even when he was pretending he wasn't.

And he was smart, smarter than we were when it came to solving murders.

I grabbed the piling. "Wait for him."

"Dammit, Mia." But Hattie put the boat in neutral. "Hurry up, you old crazy bastard!"

"I'll file charges, you dangerous old bat," Beau yelled back.

"He called me old. I'm leaving."

"You called him old first." Lucy and I reached out for him as he neared. "Hurry up, Beau!"

He grabbed our hands, and we hauled him on board as Hattie shifted into reverse, almost pulling away before we could get him in. His feet dragged in the water, but he got them in, flipflops still on, before Hattie shifted into forward gear.

"Hang on!" She hit forward, and we all flew backwards as the boat took off. King Tut yowled and fell off the seat, then dug his claws into the carpet. I crashed into Lucy, and we both hit the back seat.

Beau was on the floor by Hattie's feet. "I'm driving!" he shouted.

"No way," she yelled back. "I'm the only race car driver here. My freedom is at stake, so I drive!"

Beau climbed to his feet, still bellowing at her to get away from the wheel. I ignored them as I got up. Lucy and I made our way to the front of the boat, scanning the lake for any sign of the mystery woman.

I saw nothing but dark water.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Twelve

The mystery boat with the murderer had been swallowed up by the night.

King Tut hopped up on the bow, the wind ruffling his long fur. He raised his face to the wind, his claws digging into the plush leather to keep his balance.

"Do you see her?" Hattie shouted.

My gut was sinking. "No."

Lucy shook her head. "Me either."

"Son of a biscuit," Hattie shouted. "We can't lose her!"

"I have binoculars." Beau opened his glove box and pulled them out. He scanned the lake, and then pointed. "I see the boat. She's driving without lights. Moving fast. Keep back, Hattie. I got her. She's close to the shore."

Hattie eased off the engine enough that we could talk, and I took a breath. "All we need to do is follow her to wherever she's going, and then we'll decide what to do." I pulled out my phone. "I gotta call Devlin now."

Lucy raised her brows. "That's going to be a fun conversation."

"I know." I grimaced, then hit send.

He answered on the first ring. "Thanks for the drinks on the house bit."

See? He was a smart man. They'd figured it out. "We have a situation."

There was a long pause, then he swore. "What's going on?"

"First of all, you need to address all of this with the mindset that Hattie is innocent and didn't do anything wrong, other than move one body and grab the shoulder of another. So, you need to look past the obvious evidence pointing to her and look for what's really going on."

Devlin unleashed a string of curses. "Two bodies? Where are they?"

"We followed Charles Barnes into the Ugly Man about fifteen minutes ago, and we just found him on the ground behind the building. He has a corkscrew in his neck, and he looks quite dead."

Devlin swore again. "Hawk! Now!" I heard him breathing fast, and I knew he was running. "Where's the other one?"

"Hattie found Beckwith Barnes in the back of her truck when she left the Ugly Man about an hour ago."

"In her truck?"

"Yeah. She panicked and kept driving to my marina to get help from me and Lucy. We brought him back. Her truck is in the parking lot of the Ugly Man now."

"Hawk! Go check Hattie's truck out front. Mia says there's a body in there."

I heard Griselda mutter something in response, and I grimaced.

"I need to talk to you all. Now," Devlin said. "Where are you?"

"On a boat ride."

"A boat ride? Come back." His feet pounded down steps.

"Yeah, we can't do that. We saw someone sneaking around in the bushes, and then she got into a boat. So we're following her."

"Hell, Mia. If that's a murderer?—"

"We'll stay far away. We just want to see where she goes. We'll report in. If the murderer is still at the Ugly Man, it's your party. We think it has something to do with the Diamond Pie Baking Company, and both Rachel Harrison and Emmeline Williams are part of it, and they were there tonight."

He swore, and from the tone of his profanity, I knew he'd just found Charles. "I need to call this in. Get back here now."

"Right. Okay. We'll be right there." I hung up. "Devlin says we have to go back to the Ugly Man." I paused. "He sounded like he meant it."

Maybe the urgency in his voice had been because he'd found a body. Maybe because he'd been worried we'd get ourselves killed. Or maybe because we'd crossed some lines that even he couldn't protect us from. Crap. How far did we push this?

"Then we should turn around right now," Hattie said, not slowing down at all.

"No damn way are we turning around." Beau was still watching the lake with his binoculars. "I walked away from a corpse for this. I'm not giving up now."

Lucy raised her brows at me. "Do you want to turn around?"

I sighed. "Honestly, sort of. If she's a killer, she killed two big men. She could take us out easily."

"They're men. Men aren't nearly as clever as women," Hattie said. "I'm not worried."

"I'm standing right here, fully capable of hearing you insult my intelligence," Beau said. "I can revoke use of my boat at any moment."

I hooked my arm around King Tut and hugged him as we flew across the water. Right in that moment, Devlin was probably reading Hattie's name on the corkscrew in Charles's neck. Griselda was opening the back of Hattie's truck and finding a body.

She was in such trouble.

We had to keep going. If we went back, we were out of options.

But as I stared across the dark lake, unable to see the boat we were chasing, I felt the night closing in on us. Hattie had asked me how far I'd go for a friend. What were my moral codes?

I felt like I'd crossed them tonight.

If I had called Devlin immediately when Hattie had driven up to my marina, would Charles still be alive? Had my concern for Hattie made me choose an option that had resulted in a man's death?

Hattie sat down next to me, and I looked over, surprised to see she'd turned the wheel over to Beau. "You're not driving?"

She put her arm around my shoulders. "I don't know what's up ahead, but in case we do run into trouble, I wanted to thank you guys."

Lucy grinned. "No need to thank us. That's what friends do."

Hattie studied me. "You want to go back?"

I took a breath. "What if Charles is dead because we didn't call Devlin right away?"

Hattie sighed. "I thought of that, too."

Lucy nodded. "Me, too."

We looked at each other. "Charles was a mean, nasty blight on this earth," Hattie said. "If he didn't kill his brother, he's probably killed other people. And whatever caused his death, he's the one who set that in motion. Not us. At least we can take comfort in that."

I nodded. It did help. "What was he doing between when he killed Beckwith and went to clean it up? Or, if he didn't do it, whoever did kill him still left a mess to be found."

We were silent, thinking about that as the boat sped along the water.

"Maybe he didn't want the mess cleaned up," Lucy said finally. "Maybe that mess was there for a reason."

"To incriminate me?" Hattie frowned. "I didn't see anything there linking it to me. Did you guys?"

We both shook our heads. "Unless the corkscrew was there waiting for the cops, and the murderer used it on Charles because it was convenient."

Hattie nodded. "That makes more sense."

I sighed as I went over what we'd learned, trying to piece it together. "Someone went out there to clean up from Beckwith's murder and didn't finish. Either the killer went back immediately and then got interrupted, or the killer wasn't able to return for over an hour."

Hattie rubbed her jaw. "Either way, we have an interruption."

"If Charles isn't the murderer, then he interrupted the murderer just now," I said. "If he did kill his brother, then who killed Charles?"

Hattie sighed. "The only names we have right now are Rachel and Emmeline."

We looked across the dark lake. "I guess we better hope it's one of them," Lucy said.

I didn't like relying on hope.

There had to be more. But what was it? What were we missing?

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Thirteen

Keeping our distance, we followed the boat through the channel from Little Diamond Lake, and out onto Diamond Lake, which was where most of the water activity in Bass Derby was.

And I still couldn't figure out the missing pieces.

Hattie was using the binoculars. "Do you see where we are?"

Lucy nodded. "I was thinking the same thing."

"Where are we?" I still didn't know my way around the lake, especially at night.

"We're heading toward your marina."

My heart clenched. "My marina? No."

"She could be heading toward the town dock," Hattie said. "Or the Yacht Club."

"Or your café," Lucy said.

"Or my café," Hattie agreed. She paused. "She's slowing down. I think she's heading into shore at your place."

My home. My new life. Protectiveness surged through me. "Beau," I said quickly. "Pull in to the left of the marina. There's a trail through the woods there."

He hit the gas and did as I instructed. His boat was the fastest boat on the lake, and at full speed, we were at our destination within a minute. He ran the boat up onto the sandy shore, and I jumped out before he'd fully come to a stop. King Tut leapt and took off into the woods, which was fine, because they were my woods and we were home.

Hattie and Lucy hopped out after me, and I led the way through the woods, moving fast.

We didn't even wait for Beau, who was tying the boat up. What would she do to the marina? Burn it down? I didn't know, but panic was in my throat, clogging it up.

We reached the edge of the bushes by the parking lot, and I crouched down, scanning.

"There's a light on in the café," Hattie said. "That little wench is trying to steal my recipes!"

"We don't know which little wench it is," Lucy said. "Or if she's armed."

"I'm going in," Hattie said.

I caught her arm. "Give me a sec."

Beau ran up, panting. "What did I miss? Tell me now!"

I moved away, thinking, trying to put the pieces together. Emmeline? I hadn't felt a mean vibe from her. Nothing dangerous. I had nothing to go on as proof, but she felt like a woman who was trapped to me. Would that trap drive her to murder?

Maybe.

Rachel had been rude and unsupportive of woman power. But being mean and judgy didn't necessarily translate to murder.

"Mia's thinking," Hattie said. "Give her a sec."

"Whoever is in there, we need to get a confession," I said. "Or get her to try to kill us."

All three of them looked at me. "That second option doesn't feel great to me," Lucy said.

"I agree," Hattie said.

Beau grinned. "I love the second option. I just need to be in place so I can record it. I've never actually seen someone try to murder someone. It will be great research. I vote for that plan."

Hattie smacked Beau on the side of the head. "Don't vote for something that endangers Mia. We love her."

"She's like her cat. Impossible to kill. It'll be great." Beau pulled out his phone. "I'm going to go get into position. Don't get her to attack you until I'm ready." And then he darted out across the dark parking lot and into the front door of Hattie's café.

"Wow," Lucy said. "He's a little crazy."

"A lot crazy," Hattie said. "Freaking mystery writers. Weird as hell, they are."

Would he really sacrifice me for research? He might. But after I was dead, he would feel much worse about it than he would be expecting to.

"It makes sense that I'd be here. It's my marina," I said slowly, thinking. "I think I'll go into the café as friends, and try to get on her side. Hattie and Lucy, you guys wait outside in case I need help."

"I wish I had my guns," Lucy said. "I never bring my guns."

"Mia has a hairdryer in her apartment. And some lamps," Hattie said.

"Oh...right! Let's go get them!" Lucy and Hattie then took off across the parking lot, used a key I didn't know Hattie had, and let themselves into my store, which had stairs that led to my second-floor apartment.

"Well," I said aloud as King Tut wandered out of the woods and sat down in the middle of the parking lot, "I guess that leaves us."

He stared at me, his unblinking yellow eyes glowing in the light.

I stood up, shook out my shoulders, then strode across the parking lot. I started singing a Taylor Swift song just a little too loudly, trying to drown out how loud my heart was pounding.

Friends. I had to just make friends. I could do that. I knew how to win over anyone.

Even Rachel?

Maybe not Rachel. But getting her to attack me would be easy enough, right?

I jogged up the steps to the deck, then stopped in my store to grab a hairdryer from under the counter. Not that I'd ever been robbed, but I had been almost assassinated several times.

A hairdryer might not seem like it would be better than a gun, but it was my zone of genius, and I owned it. Plus, Lucy and Hattie would be covering me in a few minutes.

"Come in, kitty cat," I called out as I strode into the café and flicked on the lights. "Hattie must have left the lights on in the kitchen." I could hear someone moving in the kitchen, and I wrapped the cord of the hairdryer around my hand, swinging it back and forth to get a little momentum.

Was I really walking into the kitchen to confront a possible murderer?

Yes, yes, I was.

Why? Because the murderer had no reason to kill me, and most criminals didn't want any more trouble than they had to have. I knew that, and I was counting on it.

King Tut trotted in with me, as I walked through the restaurant area. Beau was hiding behind the antique oven that Hattie used to bake bread.

Would he decide to be a hero and save me if I got into trouble?

He would claim no.

I would bet yes.

Unless it endangered him, in which case, definitely a no.

That was fine.

I had this under control.

I ignored him as I pushed open the door to the kitchen and walked inside.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Fourteen

Emmeline was standing on a stool, her hands buried in a box above the stove.

I was shocked. I had thought it was Rachel for sure.

"Whoa," I said, jumping back as if I was startled, which I honestly was. "I thought Hattie left a light on! I didn't expect to see anyone here!"

She stared at me, and I could see her quickly assessing.

"Did you accept Hattie's offer to come work here already?" I grabbed a water from the counter and popped it open. "I think that's a good call. Who needs to work for men, right? You getting a jump on tomorrow? Saturdays are crazy busy here. The whole world loves Hattie's food."

Emmeline nodded slowly. "Yes, I quit my job. Hattie said I could start in the morning."

I raised my bottle in a toast. "Awesome. You can't go wrong with Hattie, right?"

"Right." Emmeline was still on the stool, her hands still in the box.

What was in that box? I had never noticed it before.

"You need help with that?" I walked over and held up a hand while King Tut hopped up on the stove and began to clean his paws.

"Um, I'm all set. Thanks." She grabbed the box and climbed down, keeping it tucked against her hip. "I'm heading out now. I'll see you tomorrow."

Well at least she wasn't trying to murder me. I loved being right about things like that. I watched her head toward the door that led back into the front part of the cafe, and I noticed the sheen of sweat on her forehead.

It wasn't that hot.

Nerves? Stress? "I'll walk you to the boat. I've had some issues with security lately. I would hate for you to run into someone." I pushed open the swinging door and followed her into the front of the store.

Emmeline stopped immediately. "I'm all set. You don't need to walk me."

"It's my marina. It's my legal duty to make sure you're safe. I don't mind. Especially since there have been mostly assassins hunting me, which means they're exceptionally good at killing."

She stared at me. "Assassins."

"Yep, but they're from my old life, so they're getting less common. I'm sure we're fine. But if there's one out there, it's my moral duty to not let them accidentally kill you." I nodded toward the door. "Lead the way."

"Um, really. I'm all set." Her gaze flicked behind me, and suddenly the hairs on the back of my neck prickled.

Someone was behind me.

My cat?

Or a person?

I tightened my grip on my hairdryer. Emmeline was definitely sweating now. She was nervous, and sociopathic serial killers didn't seem like the type to have nervous sweats. "What's going on, Em?"

"Nothing. Just?—"

"What's in the box?"

She moved it to the side. "Nothing."

I sat down on a nearby table, trying to appear friendly and unconcerned. "Ems. I know you like Hattie. You're a good person. Whatever it is you're involved with isn't your fault. I can help you get it untangled."

"I'm not tangled up in anything?—"

"Did you know Beckwith and Charles were both murdered tonight at the Ugly Man?"

Her eyes widened. "What? No."

Holy crap. She was lying. She knew they were dead! Alarm shot through me, and I leapt to my feet just as Emmeline's gaze went behind me again. Her eyes widened as she stared over my left shoulder, and then back at me.

She was telling me there was something behind me. On purpose.

My heart started racing, but I didn't turn around. I tightened my grip on my hairdryer and swung it to get some momentum. "Who killed them, Emmeline? I know it wasn't you."

"It wasn't," she whispered, her gaze flicking behind me again with more urgency.

Dear heavens. What was behind me? It was then that I noticed Beau was on the ground behind the stove, not moving.

Holy crap. Beau.

Panic gripped me, but I fought to stay calm. I looked at the window of Hattie's store, trying to use it as a mirror to see who was behind me.

Alarm shot through me.

It was Bert. Freaking huge, scary mountain man.

My hairdryer wouldn't make a dent in him.

How was he there? We'd seen only Emmeline in the boat, and I hadn't seen any additional truck or boat outside when we'd arrived.

My brain started working at top speed, trying to build the connections. He knew Rachel, right? Was he involved in the business, too? He was big enough to kill Charles and Beckwith and drag them around. He'd been happy to shut down the cops.

Where was Rachel?

I looked at Emmeline's face again. She was still sweating, and she looked like she was going to pass out. Her hands were shaking, and her lips were almost gray. She was terrified.

What could make her look so scared? Simply being caught by me?

I wasn't that scary.

Especially because she would know I couldn't stop her if she had Bert with her.

Was Bert the enemy? Was he forcing her do it?

I hated bullies with every fiber of my soul. Hated. Hated. Hated.

I didn't know who Bert was or what his agenda was, but anyone who terrified women was on my bad list.

Bert was still standing behind me, not making a move. He probably didn't want to kill me if he didn't have to, just like I'd expected. But he was ready to do what he had to do.

How did I make this end well?

He was right behind me. If I went for the hairdryer, I didn't think I could hit him before he'd have time to react. I didn't have the space to swing. I did, however, have time for a low blow, right? Maybe.

I took a shaky breath, trying to stay calm. "It's no problem, Emmeline. I'll walk you to the boat. Let's go."

I took a step forward toward her, and I saw Bert move.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Fifteen

I ducked and swung my hairdryer.

I hit Bert in the crotch, and he went down with a noise that sounded like a dying werewolf.

King Tut let out a yowl and leapt in from the back room. He took a flying leap onto Bert as Hattie and Lucy charged in from the kitchen, waving a hairdryer and a lamp.

Emmeline dropped the box. "No!" She shouted. "No! They'll hurt Rachel! I have to bring this back!"

It was at that moment that I saw the lip tattoo on the side of her neck. It was the same one that Rachel had.

Matching tattoos.

Holy crap. Rachel and Emmeline were close enough that they had matching tattoos!

Was he using Rachel to make Emmeline steal from Hattie's kitchen? The corkscrew, recipes, and whatever was in the box.

Oh, I didn't like that. Rachel might have been judgy of me, but threatening her to make Emmeline do things was no good.

Hattie and Lucy were already zip-tying Bert, and Beau hopped up, videoing, clearly

just fine.

Emmeline went down on her knees. "No," she whispered. "I have to go back. We have to go back. She has Rachel."

"She? Who?"

"Felicia."

"Felicia?" Hattie looked over. "Chef Felicia?" She looked pained. "Dammit."

"Why Chef Felicia?" I asked. "Why would she care about you?"

"She thinks I stole her boyfriend when we were younger. And her job. And her business." Hattie shrugged. "I was always better than her, but I thought she was over that."

Well, there was our motive for tagging Hattie. I knelt in front of Emmeline. "Where is Rachel? Where does Chef Felicia have her?"

"In the trunk of her car at the Ugly Man."

I grinned. "That's easy." I pulled out my phone and called Devlin.

"Where the hell are you?"

"At my marina. We have a couple people here you need to meet, but first, please rescue a girl named Rachel who is locked in the trunk of Chef Felicia's car. The raspberry on Chef Felicia's shirt is probably a match for Beckwith's. I have a witness here who says she killed both of them."

"Bert helped," Emmeline said. "They did it together."

"We apparently have her murder buddy here with us."

Devlin swore under his breath. "I'll call you back."

"Send help. When you have time."

He hung up on me, and I smiled at Emmeline. "She'll be safe in a minute."

Emmeline sank down onto the floor, and tears started tumbling. She hugged her knees to her chest, and Hattie hurried over and sat down next to her, pulling her into her arms.

My throat tightened when I saw Hattie hugging her. Big, tough Hattie who was all sass and recklessness was holding onto Emmeline like the younger woman was still the sixteen-year-old girl who was lost and scared.

Emmeline leaned into her, holding her arm.

Lucy cleared her throat. "Mia. A little help here?"

I turned around, and saw that King Tut was sprawled on Bert's face, suffocating him with his big belly, his claws digging into his head. The growl emanated from King Tut was terrifying. "Don't kill him, sweetie. You'll have to go to kitty prison."

My cat didn't make eye contact with me, but his claws didn't draw blood, so I hoped he was listening.

Bert was still bent over, but Lucy had managed to get his hands zip-tied behind him.

Beau and I helped, and we quickly got him secured and tied to the post in the middle of the café. Once he was secure, I carefully and quietly detached King Tut from his face, and then stepped back.

Bert looked at me. "I saved you from the cops. You owe me a favor."

"I definitely don't."

"Let me go. I'll disappear."

I sat down in front of him, just out of reach. "Why did you kill them?"

"I didn't kill anyone. I grow flowers for homeless kids."

I raised my brows. "No one will believe that."

Bert looked at me. "One favor. You owe me."

I watched Hattie and Emmeline get up and walk outside to sit on the deck. Lucy and Beau stayed with me. "What's the favor?"

"Use your brain."

I looked at him. "What?"

"I know you. I know you put your ex in prison. You're not an idiot. Use your freaking brain."

I stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

He met my gaze. "I didn't kill anyone, Mia Murphy. But who did?"

"You tried to attack me!"

"Did I?"

I thought back to his reflection. I'd seen him move, so I'd reacted. Did I actually know he'd been planning to hurt me? I didn't.

I frowned and looked at Lucy and Beau. Lucy looked as confused as I felt, and Beau was videoing us.

I looked out the front window, but I couldn't see Hattie and Emmeline anymore.

Devlin called, and I answered. "There's no one in the trunk of the car, Mia. Who told you there was?"

Fear began to drip through me. "Emmeline Williams. Did you find Chef Felicia?"

"We're interviewing her now. I can't get anyone over there for a few minutes. You all right?"

"Yes, we're good." I stood up. "I gotta go." I walked to the front window and looked out. Hattie and Emmeline were nowhere in sight. "Bert," I said softly. "Why are you here?"

"Money. Rachel paid me a hundred bucks to come here with Emmeline. I hid in the bottom of the boat so no one would see me."

Well, that explained why we hadn't seen him. "How well do you know Rachel?"

"Just met her tonight before I met you."

His words resonated with truth, and a cold chill settled down on me. "Bert. What does Felicia have to do with this?"

He met my gaze. "I don't know anyone named Felicia."

I frowned. "So, Rachel set this up? What about Emmeline?"

"All I know is that Rachel paid me to come here with Emmeline tonight. That's it. And I sure as hell didn't kill anyone."

If he was telling the truth, then what? "Then who did? Rachel couldn't do it herself." As I said it, I met Lucy's gaze.

"Maybe Charles helped her with Beckwith. Then it would be easy enough for her to push Charles over the railing, especially if he'd had a few drinks. She could do that," Lucy said.

"Rachel might have seen the corkscrew when she was here," I said slowly, "but Emmeline definitely would have. She was the one who was trapped by the Barnes brothers. Hattie talked her out of being friends with Rachel when they were teenagers, but now they're friends again."

"Revenge," Lucy said.

"And money." Dear heavens, it was Emmeline?

I opened the door and stepped outside, listening for Hattie, but the dark night was silent.

Lucy stood next to me, and we listened.

Emmeline's boat was still at the dock, but Hattie and Emmeline weren't in sight.

Fear gripped me, a shocking fear that made my bones turn to ice "Hattie," I whispered, her name burning tears in my throat. "Where did they go?" I clutched my hairdryer, but there was no one to hit with it.

King Tut walked out and stood beside us, his tail flicking.

"It's been only a few minutes," Lucy said. "They couldn't have gotten far."

Beau hurried out to the deck. "Emmeline kidnapped her?"

"Emmeline's going to kill her and make it look like she was guilty." My body was trembling with the need to run after them, but I had no idea which way to go. They could be anywhere!

King Tut suddenly turned his head, looking toward the woods where we'd hidden the boat.

I didn't hesitate. I just started running, swinging the hairdryer by the cord as I ran. "Hattie!"

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

Sixteen

I wasn't a runner. But I ran like I was an Olympic gold medalist.

I bolted into the woods, vaulting over bushes and rocks, ducking under branches, nearly died twice when the hairdryer hit a branch and ricocheted back at my face, and then I burst out of the woods just as Hattie was backing Beau's boat away from shore.

Behind her stood Emmeline.

Hattie waved at us. "I'm just running Emmeline to my place to show her some recipes. We'll be right back!"

Lucy and Beau caught up to me. "She's fine?" Lucy put her hands on her hips. "Bert messed with us."

Bert. We'd left him alone. "Hattie would be yelling at us for leaving him unattended," I said. "But she didn't. She's not okay." I plunged into the lake, lurching through the water. "Hattie! Wait! I want to come!"

She shook her head. "No, no. Stay here. We need some girl time. Emmeline is traumatized."

Dear God. Hattie would never allow any female to claim the title of traumatized. She'd be smacking that word right out of Emmeline's mouth, telling her to get over victim status and own her power. Fresh urgency coursed through me. "Hattie," I shouted. "Stop this boat right now, or I'm telling Devlin that you killed Beckwith,

because I know you did!"

Next to me, King Tut was swimming delightedly, thrilled that I was in the water with him.

"You beast! I didn't kill him!" Hattie stood up, shouting at me.

"You did! You're a liar! You used our friendship to get us to help you, but you did it! He stole your recipes, and you were mad. You didn't even tell us you'd had an affair with him!" I shoved my way through the water.

"It's not an affair if you're not married, you uptight little wench!" Hattie shouted back, but I heard the clunk of her shifting the engine into neutral. Emmeline hadn't noticed because we were yelling like maniacs.

The boat was still drifting backward, but it was slower now.

I could make it.

"I have spent the last fifteen years trying to leave behind being a criminal, and you dragged me into that!" I reached the edge of the boat. "Just for that, I'm cutting you out of my drug business. You're such a rat!"

"You can't kick me out! You need me! How are you going to figure out where to hide all that money? You're a financial antique!"

"I don't need you!"

Emmeline finally spoke up. "Wait, you're still running the drug operation?"

I stared at her, like I'd forgotten she was there. "What? No? Don't be silly. Hattie!" I

grabbed the edge of the boat. Dear heavens. I was so sucky at pulling myself onto the boat from the water.

But Hattie's life depended on it. "You're such a rat!" I grabbed the edge and hauled myself up as hard as I could.

I made it halfway, and landed with a thud on the rail on my stomach. Crap.

Before I could adjust, I felt claws dig into the back of my legs as King Tut ran up my back and vaulted into the boat. He landed in front of Emmeline and growled.

She took a step back and then I heard Lucy behind me. "On three," she muttered. "One, two, three." She grabbed my legs and tossed me into the boat. I landed on my face, and then shot to my feet.

I put my hands on my hips. "Hattie, Bert told us everything. How you killed Charles and Beckwith. You lied to me!"

Emmeline moved her hand behind her back, and my heart jumped. Did she have a gun? Of course she had a gun. There was no other way she could have gotten Hattie into the boat.

Lucy vaulted over the railing. "I'm not going to lie, Hattie, I feel super rejected as well. You know I love excitement and bodies. I would have stood beside you, too."

"Hey! That's my boat! You don't get to take it!" Beau sloshed up beside me, grabbed the dock line, and pulled on the boat. "You are all monsters! Stealing my precious baby."

I looked at Hattie, and she nodded. Emmeline had a gun.

Oh, boy.

Attacking someone with a gun felt like such a bad idea.

But I'd done it before. What was one more time?

Hattie stood up. "I didn't kill them."

"Still lies?" Lucy moved in front of me to hide my right arm as I wound up the cord on the hairdryer and began to swing it. I was really good with the hairdryer, but one miss and we'd all be dead.

Not Beau.

Beau would save himself and at least be able to tell Devlin what happened.

Emmeline moved her arm, bringing it back to the front. Gun! "All right," she said. "All of you?—"

"Now!" Lucy dove out of the way, and I swung that hairdryer like a woman who was insane, desperate, and had full faith in her corded implement skills.

The hairdryer smashed into Emmeline's hand with a loud crack. She yelped, and the gun flew out of her hand and into the water. Hattie and Lucy immediately tackled her, shoving her to the bottom of the boat. King Tut let out a yowl of glee and launched himself onto her foot. He wrapped himself around it and started hammering with his back legs, apparently trying to disembowel her foot.

Emmeline screamed, but she was no match for a former baton twirler and a pissed off senior citizen.

It took only a moment before she was tied up in Beau's life jackets.

The minute she was secure, Hattie stumbled to her feet, panting. "She was going to kill me, ladies. I thought that was it. My fantastic life had reached a glorious, dramatic ending."

I let out a breath. "It's not your time, Hattie. Too much adventure left."

"I know, but boy..." She took a breath. "That was closer than I've been for a long time." She grinned. "So glad you guys figured it out so quickly!"

"Hattie!" Lucy threw her arms around Hattie and hugged her.

I did the same, wrapping the independent sassy senior up in a massive hug.

When she hugged us back, my heart got a little emotional.

I wasn't ready for Hattie to die over recipes and revenge. I wasn't ready for any of us to, actually.

After a long minute, Hattie pulled back. "See, Mia? If you'd retired, I'd be dead. You can't retire from adventure."

Lucy grinned. "It's true, Mia. And retiring won't change your past. No one hates you for what you're doing now. It's what you did before, and you can't change that."

I sighed. "I know."

Lucy tucked her arm through mine. "You're a hero, Mia. To us, at least. Eventually people will figure that out."

"And if they don't?" Hattie shrugged. "Life is too damn short to limit yourself to try to get other people to like you. Those aren't your people. Screw 'em."

I sighed, feeling the truth of what they were saying. "And my business?"

"Maybe it's time to start showing the world who you really are. Then your people will find you, and believe in you until the end of time," Hattie said.

Lucy threw up her arms. "Like us!"

Hattie nodded. "Exactly like us, Mia."

My throat tightened. These two incredible women made me feel more loved than any moment with my mom ever had. They saw me for who I was, and not only embraced it, but encouraged it with all their hearts.

"It's about damned time you stopped being boring," Beau shouted from the shore, where he was now tying up the boat. "Make your mother proud, Mia! Be a criminal and own it!"

I laughed. "I'm not going to be a criminal, but I do love the fun we have."

"Right?" Hattie grinned. "And if you have to be a wee little bit criminal in order to make the world a better place, then..." She shrugged. "You'd be very ungrateful if you didn't embrace all the gifts you have, wouldn't you, my favorite little pickpocket?"

I raised my brows. "Is that how you're positioning it? That I'm ungrateful if I don't chase down murderers?"

Hattie laughed, amusement dancing in her eyes. "Mia, you're so easy to manipulate.

You can't say no to that delicious moral code of yours. Just own it."

I sighed.

Lucy grinned. "Are you officially unretired?"

Hattie snorted. "She was retired for about thirty seconds."

"Unretire," Beau shouted, as he sloshed back toward the boat. "You and that monster cat of yours are my new muses. I can't write without you!"

King Tut meowed, and then launched himself at me. I caught him and hugged him to my chest, smiling as he purred. Even my cat craved adventure. "All right," I said. "I do love you guys too much to let you handle murderers on your own. You'd both be dead or in prison within the hour."

"Yay!" Lucy clapped her hands and hugged me. "The trio of trouble is back!"

I looked at Hattie's smug grin, and I knew what she was thinking.

The trio of trouble wasn't back...because we'd never left.

I was just going to have to learn to live with that, and the truth of who I was. Graffiti and all.

Because it was worth it. For love. For laughter. And for the best friends I'd ever had.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:29 pm

We finally got our girls time on my deck around dawn, just in time for the sunrise.

We had Hattie's delicious coffee and blueberry muffins instead of margaritas, but it was still wonderful.

The three of us sat side by side with our bare feet up on my railing, watching the gorgeous orange and pink fill the sky.

Devlin, the sheriff, and the rest of the law enforcement crew had finally left, leaving us alone so we could process all that had happened.

"You think Devlin is going to arrest us?" Lucy asked. "We did drive a body around, and fail to report it."

"Nah," Hattie said. "He has enough to deal with right now. He got his people, so it's good."

"Thanks to us," Lucy said.

"Damn straight, girl," Hattie tapped her coffee mug against Lucy's. "We're such a great addition to this town."

"We are!"

Rachel. Emmeline. Bert.

They had all been involved, but Bert was delighted to testify against them to save

himself. He was already talking as fast as he could.

Devlin had recovered the gun from the lake, and they were expecting a match to the one that had killed Beckwith, and, apparently, Charles. Death by bullet, decoration by corkscrew.

Grisly, but over. And we'd survived.

As we sat there, a sky-blue Jeep pulled into my parking lot.

We all sat up. It was too early for it to be a customer.

"Anyone have a hairdryer?" Hattie asked.

"Did we miss someone? Or something?" Lucy said warily.

King Tut jumped up on the railing, his tail switching as the Jeep circled around and parked right next to the deck.

I stood up as the door opened, and Chef Felicia got out.

We all went silent.

Chef Felicia had been declared innocent by all involved, but we were definitely responsible for the fact that cops had dragged her out of her kitchen and interrogated her. And broken into her car.

She leaned against her Jeep and folded her arms across her chest. In the dawn light, she looked as gorgeous and radiant as she had in the kitchen. Felicia was a woman who carried vibrance wherever she went. "Well, that was quite a night."

"It was," I said cautiously. "Look, sorry about setting the cops on you."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Are you?"

Crud. "I am?—"

She suddenly burst out laughing. "I can't fake being mad! Damn, ladies, that was quite a night! Who knew I had all these murderers in my kitchen? Pies, Hattie. Pies! People killing over pies!"

I relaxed, as Hattie let out a whoop. "Girl, people will be killing over my recipes until the end of time!"

Chef Felicia threw up her arms. "I concede defeat, Hattie. I've never had anyone kill over my recipes. You win, and honestly, as much as I like adventure, I'm happy to give that title to you."

Hattie grinned. "You want to join us for a cup of coffee?"

She grinned. "I'd love to, thanks!" She shut her door and trotted up the steps. "By the way, Mia, is it true that you're running a drug empire?"

I stiffened. "No, I was undercover against my ex-husband for two years to put him in prison for the drug empire he was running."

She studied me. "Really?"

"Yes." I lifted my chin, waiting for the questions. Like why had I married him if I knew he was a drug dealer, as if I hadn't run to the feds the minute I realized what he was up to. Like?—

"I bet that was scary and stressful," Felicia said as she sat down next to me.

"I was scared every minute of every day that he'd find out and kill me," I admitted.

Felicia smiled. "No wonder you, Hattie, and Lucy figured out what was going on tonight. You're a hero, Mia Murphy. I'm honored to meet you."

I felt the truth in her voice, and my throat tightened.

Hattie and Lucy beamed at me, and I couldn't help but smile.

Maybe they were right.

Maybe there really were people out there who were my people, who would see me for who I was, if I stopped hiding it.

Well, there were at least a handful, and that was more than I'd ever had.

It was a good start.

I'd take it.

Do you want to know what happens when Mia launches the grand reopening of her marina, only to have it derailed by a poisoned margarita? If so, keep an eye out for the next Mia book, *Margarita Mayhem*, today!

If you love the Mia girl power and sass in a contemporary romance setting, you'll love *When We Least Expect It*, a sassy romcom featuring a high-stakes fake engagement between a sassy wedding planner committed to being single and her reclusive, widowed landlord whose shadowy cop past makes him the worst possible match for her.

Three-time runaway bride Piper Townsend believes in four things: her friends, her career, staying single, and fulfilling the promise she made to her mom before she passed away. But when a series of wedding mishaps turns Piper into the viral hashtag of #weddingkillerpiper, she must resurrect her reputation before she loses all she's

fought for. The solution? A high-profile fake engagement to her grumpy, anti-social, deliciously hot landlord.

Declan Jones buried his heart three years ago, along with a secret that still haunts him. All he wants is his sledgehammer, his privacy, and his job back. Dating? Never. Romance? Forget it. His sassy, sparkly tenant? She's the one breath of sunshine in his life...not that he'd ever admit it.

When Piper proposes a fake engagement, it's the solution Declan needs. But can he fake-date Piper, kiss her senseless, "accidentally" get caught in bed with her, and still keep his heart in lockdown?