



Drama in the Bahamas Cruise (Cruising Through Midlife: Cruise Ship Cozy Mysteries #9)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: The Emerald Queen is headed for paradise but for one unlucky passenger, smooth sailing is about to take a deadly turn.

There's a bachelorette party on board the ship but amidst the laughter and champagne something wicked lingers, ready to turn their revelry into a nightmare.

Welcome to paradise where even the brightest smile can hide the darkest intentions, and the promise of a good time leads to murder charges.

The party is on. Get ready to have a killer time.

If I thought the first half of my life was a bumpy ride, I'd better buckle up because I'm about to go over the hill and off the rails.

My name is Trixie Troublefield, and I live on a cruise ship. My days are filled with exciting shore excursions, nonstop buffets, and ceaseless games of bingo—can life get any better than this? But then there's that body.

Midlife on the high seas is proving to be murder.

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CHAPTER 1

E merald Queen of the Seas , Royal Lineage Cruise Lines

Itinerary

7 Day Cruise

Day One = Departure from Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Day Two = Nassau, Bahamas

Day Three = Sunset Cay Resort Bahamas

Day Four = Freeport, Grand Bahama Island

Day Five = Bimini, Bahamas

Day Six = Relaxing Day at Sea

Day Seven = Return to Fort Lauderdale

Three hours from now...

The Victim

The deck of the Emerald Queen sparkles under a canopy of stars as the ship gently

moves through the warm Florida breeze.

Twinkle lights crisscross above us, casting a soft glow on the crowd gathered for the Bachelorette Bonanza, a cheesy but fitting name for the kickoff party for a second marriage celebration.

Sharp cackles break out every now and again, a sure sign the liquor is doing its job, and rather quickly, too. Soft rock music plays from unseen speakers, creating the perfect atmosphere for just about any celebration.

I sip my champagne and survey the scene. The ship has hardly left port, and yet the cruise is already brimming with people, far too many people for my liking. I can only imagine what the pool situation will be like. I'll have to plan on going early tomorrow morning so I can get some pool time to myself before it turns into a petri dish of germs and bodily fluids.

One of the girls we're traveling with jumps into the middle of the deck and howls while doing her best to coax the rest of us to shake our bodies along with her. And sure enough, a few of us do so with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Need I remind them we're a book club, not a dance club? And judging by some of these moves, it shows.

The scent of grilled burgers wafts from the buffet and it's making my stomach claw at itself as if a rabid lion were trying to claw its way out.

If there's one thing I plan on doing in abundance during this trip, it's eating my weight in all the delicious food I can handle—starting with those burgers. I don't see why not, I've essentially already paid for every bite of it and then some. Heaven knows there's not a lot in my cupboards as far as food goes these days.

I lean against the railing, watching as the guest of honor glides across the deck in a radiant white dress—a sundress, but still. I have a feeling white is the only color we'll see her in until she's hitched herself to that buffoon.

If I were her, I'd wear black from here on out, and I would be in mourning until one of us finally keeled over—or opted for another divorce. Statistics show that second marriages hardly stand a chance.

I shake my head at the sight of the bride-to-be as she struts her stuff. Her face is flushed with happiness and it's a stark contrast to the things I know—the things I've seen. I've tried to warn her, but it seems I'm the last person people listen to these days.

Some people prefer to believe in a fairy-tale ending rather than face the harsh truths that reality offers.

Although I have been warned not to meddle. But then again, meddling seems to be what I do best.

My eyes wander to a corner where that annoying gnat who won't leave me alone holds court with a small group of women. Her laugh rings out, overly loud and shrill, grating on my nerves. That woman has always been a thorn in my side, constantly vying for attention and trying to outshine me at every turn. I wish she would just leave me be and stop turning everything into a ridiculous competition. A competition that I won a long time ago.

I cast a glance at the deep blue water as the ship sets sail for the Bahamas, and my past comes to me in snatches. I can't help but feel a twinge of regret over the direction I've decided to take my life. There were decisions I made, chances I took that led me to this very moment.

Who I am today is a testament to the lengths I went to escape my past. It was a fresh start, a new life free from the burdens I once carried that I was after. But it also comes with its own set of complications and secrets, ones I guard fiercely.

The music shifts to a slower tempo, and my thoughts drift back to my old life, a life filled with financial woes, romantic woes, and unfulfilled dreams.

I left all that behind, or so I thought.

Yet, the shadows of my past still loom, threatening to surface at the most inconvenient moments. And ironically enough, my life today isn't all too different.

I turn my attention back to the party, forcing a smile as the guest of honor approaches.

"Having fun?" she asks, her eyes bright with excitement, and yet there's an undercurrent of darkness in them reserved just for me.

"I sure am," I say. "This party is perfect, just like you deserve."

Her expression hardens before she moves on, leaving me alone with my thoughts once more. I glance at the horizon, to the endless expanse of dark water reflecting the twinkle lights from the ship.

Life has given me a second chance, but it is a fragile one, constantly threatened by the secrets I harbor and the people I have to manipulate to keep them hidden.

I can't take it anymore. That's exactly why I'm determined that this trip is going to turn everything around for me no matter what the cost to her might be.

But there's something nagging at my conscience. I can't shake the feeling that my

carefully constructed life is on the brink of collapse. The evidence I hold over certain individuals—the secrets I keep buried—they all feel like ticking time bombs. That's because they are.

They know what I want. I explicitly let them know what my demands were before we left port. And once we get back, they know exactly what they have to do to keep me quiet.

The music starts to fade, and the party begins to wind down. The Bachelorette Bonanza eventually disbands as everyone eagerly takes off to get ready for dinner.

Guests drift away in pairs and groups, some heading back to their cabins, others lingering by the pool for one final drink.

I take off in haste with my mind still buzzing. I'm finally in the driver's seat and I don't know how to handle it all.

Maybe they were right. I'm not meant for success. I'm destined for mediocracy, and maybe I should stay in my own lane.

But I didn't.

And I won't.

I make my way to my cabin and my heart skips a beat when I see a familiar face standing in the middle of the room.

"What are you doing in here?" I ask, taken aback by the intrusion. "Wait, we're not sharing a room, are we? I specifically asked for a single. Sure, it cost more, but that's why I opted for the interior cabin." I squint over at her. "Why aren't you saying anything?"

There's no answer, only a cold, calculating stare. The silence is heavy and it seems to be pressing in on me from all sides.

I glance around, noting the disarray of my once tidy cabin. Something is very wrong.

And then I see it—the knife in her hand.

“No,” I say, taking a step back. “You don’t have to do this,” I whisper, but the words fall flat in the air.

There is no mercy in those eyes, no hesitation as she steps forward, the knife gleaming with a deadly intent.

I think of all the secrets I’ve kept, the lives I’ve affected, the desperate scramble to protect my own fragile existence. It all flashes before me in an instant, a lifetime of choices leading to this final, irreversible moment.

As the knife rises, I belt out a scream, but it’s quickly buried beneath a chipper dinner announcement that carries over the speakers.

I fall to the floor as the ship moves across the water, oblivious to the end of my journey.

CHAPTER 2

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hey there, adventurous readers!

Are you ready to help me embark on an unforgettable journey through the tropical paradise of the Bahamas? I'm more than ready to set sail! I'm already looking forward to so many things like diving into the gorgeous culture and flavors of the Bahamas by trying local delicacies like conch fritters and drinking coconut water straight from the source! And I certainly plan on taking a leisurely stroll on those pristine beaches. After all, there's no better way to embrace island life than with your toes in the sand and a Bahama Mama cocktail in hand!

Let the adventure begin. Here's to making the most of every sunny, sandy moment!

XOXO Trixie

The Florida sun casts a golden glow over the Emerald Queen of the Seas, and I can hardly contain my excitement just looking at this majestic beauty as Bess, Nettie, and I make our way up the gangway. Soon enough, we set foot right where we belong, onto the gorgeous ship that just so happens to be our home.

No sooner do we step on board than I take a deep breath, savoring the fresh, sea-scented air. The polished deck glistens under the sunlight, and I can hear the distant sound of seagulls mingling with the chatter of excited passengers.

This is paradise.

There's something magical about the first day of a cruise. The freshly scoured ship sparkles and gleams so bright you can see your reflection in every brass railing, the rush of the collective adrenaline from every last passenger eager to start their adventure fills the air, and the bubbling excitement within me—mostly for the culinary delights on the immediate horizon—is almost too much to contain.

I can't wait to get to my cabin and offload my suitcase. And as soon as Bess, Nettie, and I do that, we'll head straight to the lido deck to hit the buffet. We're not ones to dawdle when it comes to the tasty offerings on this great ship. But first, there's a certain someone I need to say hello to.

I crane my neck as the crowd around us swells, looking to find the reception line.

"First one to the buffet wins," Bess says it like the dare it is and I make a face her way. She knows how dangerous it can be, serving up a dare to Nettie.

Bess Chatterley and Nettie Butterworth are my constant companions here on the ship. They're both somewhere in their eighties and have been living on board the Emerald Queen for years now. Bess is a retired teacher who dyes her short locks a lovely shade of amber. And Nettie is a diehard hippie whose hair looks like a gray tumbleweed wobbling over her scalp. Both are witty, wealthy, and wise. And my life wouldn't be the same without them.

They're the ones that convinced me to call this ship home to begin with. And even though they're both retired, I'm still gainfully employed by the Emerald Queen herself. I happen to teach art classes here on board a couple of times a week. It works out well for me because I get to combine my two passions. The first is doing what I love, which is art in just about any medium. And the second is to keep as far away from my ex-husband, Stanton, as possible. And now that I've achieved both, I can

honestly say my life has been a success so far.

And as far as husbands go, I'm about to gain another one. I glance down at the sparkler Ransom placed on my finger last night when we docked and I can't help but smile.

"First one to the buffet wins, huh?" Nettie pushes up the sleeves of her blouse. "I'm in. But only if the prize is more food." She elbows me in the ribs. "I've got my eye on those chocolate fountains."

"You stay away from those chocolate fountains," Bess is quick to reprimand her. Although, let's be honest, the chocolate genie is already out of the bottle—or fountain as it were. "The only thing you seem to do with those things is land inside of them."

"I can't help it." Nettie's shoulders sag a moment as if admitting defeat. "A chocolate fountain is a siren song to my soul."

"Mine, too," I say as the crowd continues to grow in size. "But I think I'll start with a vanilla soft serve cone before we hit the buffet. The lava cake will meet my chocolate needs later. This humidity practically demands I have a cone every twenty minutes."

"Look at us." Bess shakes her head. "We've hardly stepped on board, and we're already planning our culinary conquests. And you don't have to remind me that I started this party."

"Well, someone's gotta make sure the food is up to par," Nettie says as she leads us back into the crowd. "It's a matter of quality control."

"Oh, they've got plenty of quality food here," Bess says as we follow along. "The problem is, we don't seem to have any control."

We share a quick laugh just as the crowd parts and we spot the usual lineup of a few crewmembers welcoming the passengers on board.

Captain Crawford, Wes as he prefers, stands tall in his all-white uniform with brass buttons running up and down the front of his jacket. He's wearing a matching hat with just as much hardware, and just about everyone is more than eager to take a selfie with him.

Next to him is Tinsley Thornton, the cruise director who for whatever reason I've never quite bonded with. Basically, Tinsley had a thing for both Wes and Ransom, and well, ever since I've boarded the ship, I seem to have garnered the attention of both of those men, much to her chagrin—and red-hot ire, too. Suffice it to say, Tinsley has a temper and she's not afraid to wield it in my direction.

I look past her and my heart lets out a sonic boom.

There he is, tall, dark, and lethally handsome.

Ransom Courtland Baxter has thick dark hair with matching dark stubble strewn across his far too handsome face, eyes the color of a tropical ocean, and a body built for destruction. His nature is brooding, he hardly ever smiles, and he can spot danger more than half a planet away. He's a retired FBI behavioral analyst, he's the head of vessel security, and he just so happens to be my shiny new fiancé.

"Hello, Captain," I say, passing Wes by. "Tinsley." I don't bother looking her way either. Instead, I'm immediately engulfed in Ransom's strong arms as he lands a kiss on my lips and spins me around.

"Hello, beautiful," he murmurs right over my lips. He's dressed to impress in an inky dark suit and holds the heart-stopping scent of musk and spice. "Why does it feel as if I haven't seen you in eight weeks?"

“It’s been less than eight hours,” I counter.

He lifts a dark brow. “Far too long.”

A wicked smile curves on my lips. “I wholeheartedly agree.”

“All right, you two,” Tinsley grunts. “I’m close to losing my lunch. Can you turn down the volume on that hot-to-trot routine, or do I need to shove you in the nearest swimming pool to cool off?”

“Don’t listen to her.” Wes nods our way and sheds an easy smile. “Congratulations once again on your upcoming nuptials. I’m guessing the two of you have a lot of wedding planning to get to.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Nettie says. “But first food . Come on, Trix. We’ll nail down the dirty wedding deets at dinner. The lido deck is starting to fill up.”

“Trixie, normally I’d swat her for you,” Bess says. “But with this heat, I can really use a big glass of sweet tea. I’m sure the details will come to you in time.”

“Every last wedding detail is in Trixie’s hands,” Ransom says, giving me a squeeze. “I defer to your wisdom.”

“My wisdom in that department is pretty rusty,” I say with a laugh. “Besides, I’d love it if you were a part of it. I say we tackle it together.”

His eyes crinkle with a warm smile all their own as he looks at me. “I’m honored to be a part of the process. But most important to me is that all of your wedding dreams come true. The sky’s the limit. Let it be known, there’s no budget for this shindig.”

I bite down a smile. Ransom is ridiculously wealthy, and it’s sweet of him to want to

shower me with whatever my heart desires but?—

Before I can say a word in protest, a boisterous group of women screams at the top of their lungs as they head our way.

CHAPTER 3

“C aptain!” a wiry brunette howls while pulling along a timid-looking redhead and a blonde, and the blonde can’t seem to stop giggling. Behind them is an entire entourage of middle-aged women who look just as enthused to plant their feet on the ship. “If it isn’t our lucky day,” the brunette sings, turning to the women by her side. “It’s so nice to meet you, Captain. I’m Hetty King and these are a couple of my buddies that I’m traveling with. We’re actually part of a much bigger group because this one is getting hitched.” She nods to the blonde who only laughs harder. “The bride-to-be is my good friend Jennifer Mitchell, and next to her is my good friend Lucy Taylor.” She points to the blonde, and then the redhead respectively.

“You must be the bachelorette party.” Tinsley steps forward. “I’m Tinsley Thornton, the one you’ve been emailing with,” she says to Hetty and the brunette gasps with delight.

I can’t help but notice how bloated Hetty’s face looks. Judging by the fact it looks stiff and she has to work hard to smile, I’m guessing she’s loaded with filler in her cheeks. Her lips are puffy and swollen as well. And being the ex-wife of a top plastic surgeon, I can tell she spent her money at the wrong place. It’s a shame. She’s such a beautiful woman, too. I’m sure she didn’t need any of it.

“Tinsley!” Hetty throws her arms around the reticent cruise director as if they’ve been best friends for life. Tinsley isn’t exactly your touchy-feely type. In fact, some days I wonder if she has feelings at all. Or if she’s human in general.

“My goodness, yes!” Hetty goes on. “It’s so nice to meet you. Is the launch party all

set to go?”

“What launch party?” the blonde bride-to-be looks suddenly suspicious.

She’s wearing a gorgeous white summer dress with eyelet trim around the edges, and it seems to highlight the pretty gold chain around her neck with the words *My Girl* written in cursive lettering. It’s cute and reminds me of the kind of jewelry I’ve given my daughter Abby on occasion.

Jennifer Mitchell is pretty, about my age, somewhere in her fifties, her blonde locks are down to her shoulders, as are mine, and her gray roots look as if they’re winning out, as are mine.

“Don’t you start.” Hetty quickly waves off her friend. “It’s just a little send-off with some cocktails and music. You didn’t think we were going to wait to start the party, did you?”

The timid redhead offers a consolatory smile to the blonde. “I told her to wait.”

“But I never listen to you,” the brunette howls with a laugh—albeit her face is frozen with a somewhat stoic expression. Clearly, fillers are not her friend.

“Yes, the Bachelorette Bonanza is all set.” Tinsley nods. “I’ve got a quarter of the lido deck marked off for you. In fact, the kickoff begins right after the muster drill.”

“The muster drill, aka the lifejacket shuffle, is sort of a necessary evil.” The captain winks their way and the three of them swoon. I’ll be the first to admit that our captain is swoon-worthy, but then so is Ransom, or Handsome Ransom as he’s better known.

Ransom leans in. “Did he just say lifejacket shuffle?”

I shrug up at him and nod. “The man has a sense of humor and he’s not afraid to show it off.”

Ransom nods. “We never said it was good.”

“Hetty, I feel so silly.” The blonde’s cheeks start to fill with color. “We don’t need to do any bachelorette parties. This isn’t exactly my first rodeo, you know.”

“Oh”—Tinsley straightens—“speaking of silly, we’ve got another silly goose on the loose about to hit the altar once again as if it were a bad habit.” She snatches me out of Ransom’s arms and lands me center stage. “This is our art director, Trixie Trouble. It sounds as if the two of you have some common enemies—i.e., state law and exes.”

“Funny.” I take a moment to shoot her a look before giving the blonde a bright smile. “It’s so nice to meet you, Jennifer.” I offer a hand and we shake. “I’m Trixie Troublefield, recently divorced, and even more recently engaged.” I hold up my left hand and we share a laugh.

“Then you have to come to my party.” Jennifer is quick to insist.

“I agree.” Hetty gives a vigorous nod. “There will be gourmet food, booze, questionably appropriate games, and the occasional table dance.”

“Okay, I’m in,” I say without hesitation. “You had me at food.”

“Then we’re in, too,” Nettie says, stepping up. “We’re a part of Trixie’s booze crew,” she says, linking arms with Bess. “We’re also known as the trio of fun.”

“Trio of terror is more like it,” Bess corrects—and she would be right. The three of us have caused more than a little terror both on and off the Emerald Queen .

“The more the merrier,” Hetty says. “We’ll see you ladies on the lido deck!” They take off and a whole group of women takes off following them. Another redhead lags behind, and judging by the look on her face, she looks good and miffed. I can’t blame her. The heat is on, the humidity is thick, and I’m guessing she could use an iced tea as well.

A man with a ball cap pulled low over his forehead steps onto the ship, with dark hair peeking out from the edges of his hat. I can’t help but notice he’s wearing a somber expression and looks as if he’s glowering at the crowd. Probably in search of his poor wife. He, too, looks overheated in a dress shirt and slacks. I certainly hope he’s prepared for the heat.

Honestly, half the people here look as if they’re headed to Alaska. This heat is dead serious and it’s not going anywhere. It’s also more than enough to make anyone dehydrated—me included.

“Speaking of libations,” I say, turning back to Ransom. “Hetty didn’t woo me with her talk of booze. I don’t drink—and for good reason.”

“So I’ve noticed. You do realize that’s made it exceptionally difficult to get you plastered.”

A laugh bubbles from me. “Try again. I do have champagne on occasion. You know I can’t resist that.” I cast a quick glance over my shoulder to make sure Tinsley is out of earshot, and lucky for me she’s already greeting the next batch of passengers. “Anyway, the real reason I don’t drink is because I’m afraid it’d make that unique little talent of mine a little more pervasive, and as it stands, one ghost is enough.”

Up until our last cruise, Ransom had no idea that I could see the dead. And up until a few months ago, neither did I. And for some reason, those ghosts always seem to be supernaturally tied to a homicide that’s just taken place.

He frowns my way. “You don’t see any now, do you?”

I give another quick look around and shake my head at him.

“Nope. All’s clear in the paranormal department. I suppose the Emerald Queen is all caught up on its hauntings.”

“Good,” he says, pulling me close once again. “Maybe, just maybe, we can enjoy one trip without a dead body getting in the way.” His phone chirps. “I’ve got a briefing I need to attend. I’ll try to catch you after the party.”

“Sounds good.”

We share a quick yet heated kiss and he takes off.

I turn to look for Bess or Nettie, but instead, a pretty brunette with a head full of dark curls catches my eye. She’s donned a fitted hot pink wool coat that cuts off at her thighs and she’s paired it with knee-high black patent leather boots with a decent spiked heel. But it’s not the wool coat or the boots that strike me as odd about her, especially in this heat. It’s the fact I can see right through her body.

It seems the Emerald Queen is due for another haunting after all.

She cranes her neck until she spots me, then offers me a cheerful wave and a brimming smile.

I’m about to wave back, albeit with much less enthusiasm, when she up and disappears in a spray of hot pink stars.

That woman is a ghost.

And ghosts only mean one thing around here.

There's about to be a murder.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:00 pm

CHAPTER 4

Family Group Chat:

Trixie: Guess who's getting married? Ransom popped the question and I said YES!!!

Abbey: Mom! WOW! Congratulations on the engagement! ??? Ransom is amazing! We love him!

Parker: Yeah, Mom, congrats! Ransom is the best! Can't wait for the wedding. When is the big day?

Trixie: Thanks, kiddos! I'm so glad you love him. The date is still up in the air, but I'll let you know as soon as we set it.

Abbey: I'm so happy for you, Mom! You deserve the best, and Ransom is definitely it. He's such a gentleman, and he makes you so happy! ??

Parker: And he's pretty cool, too. He taught me how to play a mean game of poker while we were on that cruise with you. Ha-ha. I'm looking forward to having a stepdad like him.

Stanton: I see everyone's just thrilled with the news. Interesting choice, Trixie. An FBI behavioral analyst? Do you really have to go dragging the feds into this family?

Abbey: Dad, can we just be happy for Mom? Ransom is great.

Parker: Yeah, Dad, don't ruin this. Mom deserves to be happy.

Stanton: Sure, sure. But we all know it's not going to last.

Abbey: Dad, that is so cringe! ??

Parker: Seriously, Dad?

Stanton: I'm just being realistic. Someone has to.

Trixie: Let's keep it positive, please. It's a happy time for all of us—or most of us.

No sooner do we put our luggage in our cabins and do the lifejacket shuffle—the Captain's words, not mine—than Bess, Nettie, and I show up on the lido deck ready to party with the best of them.

Of course, I filled Bess and Nettie in on that unexpected passenger—the pretty little phantom with the hot pink coat.

Both Bess and Nettie know all about my supernatural quirk, and they should considering they're the ones that unleashed the supernatural beast within me. It involved a bottle of questionable vodka and a very severe bonk on the head given by those two women—long story.

Wes knows about my supernatural secret, too, and now Ransom rounds out the in-the-know crowd. Tinsley suspects it, but I'll never cop to it with her. She's just looking for an excuse to have me locked up in some government lab so she can have Wes and Ransom to herself just like the good old days when I was still stuck with my cheating ex.

But I'm not longing for the old days. I'm one hundred percent here for the new days.

I hold out my left hand and admire my sparkler once again. These shiny new days are oh so much better. But speaking of the old days, something good did come out of them. My children. Two to be exact, both in their twenties, both at university. I already told them the news and they were both ecstatic. They both wholeheartedly approve of Ransom. Who wouldn't?

"There's the party," Bess says, pointing to the far end of the lido deck.

The lido deck is magic in every sense of the word. It's an open-air deck where most of the ship's pools and hot tubs are located, along with the Blue Water Café, the never-ending buffet that I seem to find myself at more often than not.

But we're not headed to the Blue Water Café, we're headed straight for the Bachelorette Bonanza just as the sun is beginning to set, casting a warm, dreamy golden glow over everything and everyone.

The sky is a canvas of pinks and oranges, blending into the deep blue of the ocean and I try to memorize it so I can paint a picture of it later.

Twinkle lights are strung above us, crisscrossing all across the deck, adding a magical touch as they flicker like tiny stars.

There's a sign that reads reserved for private party , and just beyond that at least fifty women have congregated while being loud and boisterous, a sure sign they're already having a good time.

There's a dedicated bartender doling out both champagne and fruity cocktails and next to his station are a few tables laden with a nice spread of both savory and sweet appetizers. And in the middle of all the bite-size desserts, there's a cake of a man's likeness from the head to his mid-torso. He's bare-chested and with fondant muscles for days. I'll admit, he looks every bit delicious.

“Hubba hubba .” Nettie all but drools at the ripped confection.

“This Bachelorette Bonanza is going to be one for the record cookbooks ,” Bess says.

I shake my head at the sight. “I’m just glad they chose not to recreate anything below his belly button.”

“But think of how delicious it would have been,” Nettie moans at the thought.

“I’d better have a drink.” Bess sighs at her bestie. “I have a feeling this is going to be a long night.”

“I’m right there with you, sis.” Nettie slaps Bess on the back so hard it sounds like a peal of thunder. “I just hope they have enough champagne to keep up with us.”

Bess shakes her head. “Nobody has enough champagne to keep up with you.”

“Truer words have never been spoken,” I say.

“And I’m not ashamed to say you’re both right,” Nettie beams with pride.

This end of the deck is alive with activity as the music from the speakers plays upbeat tunes, and the scent of those tropical fruity concoctions mingles with the salty sea air.

The three of us magnetize to the buffet, where the tables are covered with white linens and decorated with colorful centerpieces made of seashells and candles. The tables are laden with an array of delicious-looking dishes, from miniature grilled hot dogs—with a nameplate that reads Marcus’ teeny weenies —spinach artichoke dip baked into puff pastry, deep-fried mini mac and cheese bites, teriyaki meatballs—two on a skewer—and some miniature chicken and waffles sliders that look so good I’d fight to the death for them.

And don't get me started on the dessert offerings. Mini guava croissants, bite-size raspberry chocolate cheesecake, dainty cups filled with toffee pudding, salted caramel brownies, mini strawberry tarts in the shape of a heart, chocolate chip cookie whipped cream sandwiches, lavender and pink cake pops with sprinkles, and an array of pastel cupcakes that range from French vanilla to red velvet.

"Look at this spread," Nettie cries out as she shoves a mini cheesecake bite into her mouth.

"That should keep her quiet for about twenty seconds," Bess says.

My bet is ten.

I'm about to reach for a cheesecake bite myself when Tinsley glides over with a fruity cocktail in her hand. And on the clock no less.

"It's a virgin," she snaps my way as if she sensed my judgment. Tinsley is a knockout with her perennially tan skin, long, luscious chestnut locks, and the devil-is-my-father gleam in her eyes. "So when's the big day?" She glowers at me as if that day might just be my last.

"We don't know. We don't have the details," I say. "In fact, we don't have any details just yet. But as soon as we do, I'll more than happily spread the word." Most of the staff is happy for us. Correction, all of the staff is happy for us sans the one in front of me.

"I bet you will," she seethes as if she finds my engagement a personal offense. And I'm pretty sure she does.

Bess raises a finger as if to say something just as the brunette we met earlier, Hetty, comes this way with that same timid-looking redhead along with Jennifer who

happens to have a pink glitter-filled sash strapped across her chest that reads bride-to-be . That gold necklace of Jennifer's seems to be hanging crooked because of it, too, with the words My Girl listing over her collarbone.

"You came," Hetty trills, raising her arms and enveloping us in an all-consuming hug. "Oh, I'm so glad you're here! Isn't this great? Two brides for the price of one!" She lets out a whoop. "I say let's cut to the cake ." She laughs up a storm at her play on words before turning to Jennifer and handing her a knife by the blade. "All right, now cut into that muscled wonder so we can all get ourselves a bite of the most delicious man on this ship."

Clearly, she hasn't met Ransom.

"No, thank you!" Jennifer holds up the knife as if it were a hot potato before landing it back on the table. "There's no way I'm cutting into that thing. The chefs outdid themselves. He looks too realistic to carve up."

"I'm sure the stewards will be happy to do it for you." Tinsley is quick to pass the buck herself.

"We can always save it for later," Hetty says. "Besides, now we've got two brides to celebrate!" She lifts her fruity red cocktail and crows like a rooster—only to have the rest of the women here belt out a cock-a-doodle-doo themselves.

"What in the name of unholy matrimony is this crowing all about?" Tinsley all but snaps. As much as she doesn't want to show her true rude colors to the guests, she always comes close.

Hetty waves it off. "It's a little something we came up with once Jen landed a ring on her finger. We're all a part of the same book club back home called Just a Few Chicks and Their Books. So when Marcus popped the question we teased that she

invited a cock into our midst.” She giggles to herself. “It’s crude, I know. Anyway, we started to crow any time she brought him up. And, well, it’s sort of stuck.”

“A book club,” I practically coo the words. “How lovely.”

“One would think so,” Tinsley mutters under her breath.

“What state are you all from?” I ask the trio, choosing to ignore the grumpy cruise director in our midst.

“Connecticut,” Jennifer is quick to tell us. “In fact, Amber and I are charter members of the club.” She cranes her neck into the sea of women. “Oh, there she is. She’s the redhead near the railing.” She points to where a thin redhead gazes out at the open water with an ice-blue cocktail in hand. The woman glances our way as if she sensed us, and I’d swear on all that is holy that she just gave the trio in front of us a lethal look.

“I love Connecticut,” I say to the women. “I’m originally from Maine.”

“Maine is my favorite state!” Hetty is quick to belt out. “I spent years in Bangor.”

“Oh really?” Jennifer backs up a notch. “I thought you said you were from North Carolina?”

“I am.” Hetty laughs twice as loud before looking to the rather quiet redhead in their midst. “I was just passing through. But boy, was it beautiful.”

“Connecticut is lovely, too,” Lucy, the redhead, says rather firmly, and it seems she’s talking to Hetty in particular. She’s all business tonight with her dark blazer and matching pencil skirt, and right down to her dark loafers with their squared-off toes and shiny gold buckles. Honestly, it looks as if she swiped them right off a Pilgrim.

“That’s where we met Jen and her friends.”

“That’s right,” Jennifer sings. “Lucy here taught sixth grade to my youngest son. I have three kids, two girls and a boy. He’s my baby.” She mock cries. “I just can’t believe how quickly they grow up. Soon, they’ll be older than me!”

“But they still need you.” Lucy is quick to tell her. “And they need a healthy environment, too.”

Hetty and Jennifer exchange a rather tense glance.

“Yes, I totally agree,” Jennifer says with a newfound soberness to her tone.

“Do either of you have children?” Tinsley asks Hetty and Lucy while Nettie finds this the perfect excuse to dive back to the dessert table.

“None for me,” Hetty says with a shudder. “No, thank you. Although I was once married to a man with a toddler and that was about as close as I’d like to get.” She hitches her thumb at Lucy. “And as for her, she’s too much of a prude to figure out how they’re made. Kidding! She’s sort of the opposite.”

“You were never married.” Jen inches back as she inspects Hetty. And by the looks of it, Lucy seems relieved to have the heat taken off of her so-called prudishness.

Lucy belts out a laugh and I can’t help but think it sounds forced. “Hetty tends to get her facts mixed up when she’s had one too many.” She snatches the cocktail right out of Hetty’s hands. “I think you’ve had enough.”

“You give that back to me,” Hetty demands, but Lucy takes off with it, and Hetty bolts right after her while laughing up a storm.

“If you ladies will excuse me,” Bess says. “I think someone else here needs an intervention.” She nods toward Nettie who’s currently building what looks like a Jenga tower out of the sweet treats as she piles them onto a plate no bigger than a saucer.

Tinsley growls, “And I’d better check to see how the rest of the guests are doing.” She nods to Jennifer. “We’ll be seeing a lot of each other this trip. Have a great rest of the night. Please, enjoy your party.”

They take off and Jennifer leans in.

“Don’t mind my friends,” she says. “Sometimes I can just kill them.”

And seeing that there’s a ghost on board, it does beg the question of when and not if someone will get killed indeed.

CHAPTER 5

“So it’s your second time around the block, too, huh? I guess we’re both veterans in the marriage department.” Jennifer Mitchell grimaces as if she were terrified of the prospect of walking down the aisle again. Ironical, since we’re standing at her own Bachelorette Bonanza kickoff right here on the lido deck while she wears a pink glittering sash that pins her as the bride-to-be. “Are we insane to do this again or what?”

“Well, if your fiancé is anything like mine, we’d be insane not to.”

“Aww,” she coos. “That says a lot about your future husband. Mine is a little rough around the edges, but that’s exactly how I like them.” She wrinkles her nose. “My ex was a little too rough around the edges—so much so that other women found him just as irresistible. And well, he returned the sentiment more than once.”

“I’m so sorry to hear it.” My heart genuinely breaks for her, and my temper genuinely rises for her. “My ex was a cheat, too.”

“You’re kidding?” She inches back and we share a mournful laugh.

“Nope. I caught him with an entire bevy of floozies in my bedroom the day we were set to depart on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary cruise right here on this ship.”

“Please tell me you’re kidding.” She gasps at the thought and I shake my head. “Well, if it makes you feel better, I caught mine cheating on me with my yoga instructor. I found out when I walked into my own living room to see them practicing downward

dog together.” She says practicing in air quotes and we both share another mournful laugh. “Are there any good ones left?” She shakes her head as her laugh peters out. “How long have you been divorced?”

“Just under a year. And you?”

“I’m going on two.” She sighs. “I’ll admit, not having to share the remote or have anyone steal the covers has been bliss. Sometimes I just lie in the middle of the mattress and make snow angels just because I can. And boy, is it heaven.”

We share another laugh.

“Having the whole bed to myself is pretty nice,” I confess. “But I cannot wait to share that bed with Ransom. That’s my fiancé.” I blush just saying the word fiancé . Then a thought hits me. “Oh wow, I just realized that I broke the news to my kids and my ex in a text. The kids loved it, of course. My ex, not so much.”

“Oh, who cares.” She rolls her eyes. “He doesn’t have a say in it.”

“You’re right. And my kids have already met Ransom and they just love him. They’re older and in college, so I’m free to live here—and, well, sail off with the man of my dreams.”

“Wow”—she shakes her head at me with a look of awe—“I want to be you when I grow up.”

We share another laugh, but her jovial state is cut short once she spots something or someone in the crowd.

“Excuse me, Trixie. There’s someone I need to speak with. But hey, let’s get together again.” Her eyes land on mine and there’s a sincerity about them. “As fun and light as

everything looks, I feel like I'm still processing everything. And you and I are in the exact same boat—quite literally. I hope you don't mind if I bend your ear a bit.”

“Are you kidding? I can't wait to bend your ear, too. In fact, after I unload on you, I'm half-afraid you'll bill me for the therapy session.”

We share another quick laugh before her attention is snagged again and she takes off into the crowd.

I head for the dessert bar with Bess and Nettie and load up on all of the mini guava-filled croissants and raspberry cheesecake bites that I can handle.

We watch the crowd and sway to the music as the Emerald Queen glides smoothly through the Atlantic.

An odd sight catches my attention as I spot Jennifer again, and it looks as if she's giving that redhead, Lucy, a piece of her mind.

“That doesn't look too friendly,” I mutter under my breath and Bess shakes her head.

“Not friendly in the least.”

Soon, Lucy takes off and runs into that other redhead that Jennifer had pointed out—Amber, the other charter member of their book club. And by the looks of it, they're having a rather nasty exchange as well. Poor Lucy.

A crowd moves between us and another thirty or forty minutes go by before the entire party begins to disband. I'm about to pop another salted caramel brownie into my mouth when I spot a man standing by the Blue Water Café, watching this area of the lido deck rather intently. And I'm not sure why, but I find the way he's leering at us a bit too creepy for my liking and a shiver runs up my spine because of it.

“What are you looking at?” Bess asks, staring in the same general direction.

“That man,” I whisper. “For some reason, the sight of him is giving me the creeps and making me shiver. Although I’m not sure why.”

“I call dibs,” Nettie says without hesitation. “Any man who can make you quiver is good enough for me.”

“She said shiver, not quiver,” Bess says as she swats her. “And if he’s spooking Trixie, then the man is probably a serial killer.”

“What’s more exciting than that?” Nettie sounds twice as interested. “And once I land me a serial killer boyfriend, the two of you had better be extra nice to me.”

“There won’t be any of you left to be nice to,” Bess says, exasperated. “Not after he chops you up into pieces!”

“The more of me to love.”

“There’s something familiar about him, too,” I say, inspecting him with his ball cap pulled low over his forehead. He’s wearing a dress shirt and slacks and— “Oh, he’s the man I saw at boarding,” I say as I shake my head at the lunacy of it all. “For Pete’s sake, he’s just some poor man who happened to step onto the wrong deck at the wrong time. I think I need a cool drink. Scratch that,” I say, looking at my watch. “We’d better head to dinner.”

First dinner seating is just about to start and the three of us decide to head back to our cabins to freshen up.

We exit the elevator on deck fourteen where we usually—scratch that, always reside. Since we’re regulars, we simply purchase the very same cabins for each trip. Ransom

used to live in a penthouse cabin that was two stories tall, but the ship is refurbishing it and turning it into two different suites so he's been staying on our deck lately as well. Although I don't know where he'll be for this trip. Who knows? He might just end up in my cabin yet.

That will be a first—or it will be if he stays all night. And how I cannot wait until he stays all night. Let's just say there won't be a whole lot of sleeping going on.

Ransom and I haven't exactly hit a home run in the bedroom just yet, but we're rounding out the bases nicely.

"We really need to throw you a bachelorette party, Trix," Nettie says as she swills the remnants of her fruity cocktail my way.

"No way," I say a little too sharply. "I'm not cut out for anything like that. I just want a small, peaceful wedding."

"Well, too bad," Bess says. "I think Nettie is right. You're one of us now and we need to give you a proper send-off."

"Et tu, Bess?" I tease just as we come across a cabin with the door slightly ajar.

I slow down, fully expecting someone to step out of it when I spot a shoe caught in the door—a black loafer with squared-off toes and a shiny gold buckle. "Hey, I recognize that shoe," I say. "This must be Lucy's room." I give a gentle knock on the door. "I'll let her know we're just across the hall. Lucy?" I call out and knock again. Only this time the door pushes in slightly to reveal the fact that the shoe still has a foot in it.

We gasp in unison as I open the door another notch, only to reveal a woman lying on the floor with a knife in her back.

Lucy Taylor won't have to worry about being called a prude or anything else anymore.

Lucy Taylor is dead.

CHAPTER 6

The sight of Lucy Taylor's lifeless body sends a jolt of horror through me, and I can't help but let out a scream. Bess and Nettie join in, and soon our little impromptu choir is echoing down the corridor—and I'm pretty sure the entire deck.

My heart pounds as we take in the grisly scene before us. Poor Lucy lies on her side with a knife protruding from her back and her mouth locked in what looks like a silent scream.

"Let me at 'em," Nettie says as she leaps over the body and runs into the heart of the tiny interior cabin.

"What are you doing?" I howl in horror.

"Oh my goodness," Bess gasps, her face white as a sheet. "Would you get out of there! You could be destroying potential evidence!"

"Would you two keep it down?" Nettie steps farther into the room as if our words actually spurred her on. "I'm looking for the killer. Or a ghost of the killer," she says. "Or a ghost who can point the way to the killer."

"I'd say she was losing it." Bess sighs hard. "But she might be right."

I shake my head, trying my hardest to stay focused. "Nettie, there's no ghost in there. If there was, I'd be the first to see it. Bess is right. You need to get out before you destroy something that could potentially help find the killer."

Nettie treks back and looks down at the body before stopping short. “Well, I may not have found the killer or a ghost, but I sure found something.” She points to the other side of Lucy’s body, and without thinking, and clearly, without my better judgment intact, I hop over the body and land next to Nettie. I squint my eyes to see what she’s pointing at and gasp.

“It’s that cheesy necklace,” I shout a touch too loud.

“What cheesy necklace?” Bess squawks as she leans in as far as the body on the ground will allow.

“Well, the necklace itself isn’t cheesy, it’s what it says.” I wince because I didn’t mean to say any of that out loud. “It’s the one Jennifer was wearing. It reads My Girl .”

Both Bess and Nettie are back to gasping.

“That means Jennifer is the killer!” Nettie claps her hands together as if the case were solved.

“I don’t know,” I say. “But I’m not pointing any fingers just yet.”

Bess cocks her head and squints at the woman. “What is the poor woman’s blazer covered in? Is that pink glitter?”

Now it’s me gasping again. “The only thing covered with pink glitter tonight was Jennifer’s sash.” I shake my head. “Okay, obviously, they must have hugged.” Although that argument I saw them having suggests otherwise. “We’d better call Ransom.”

And I do just that. It seems that no sooner do I text for help than Ransom and Wes

both come running down the hall. In fact, they were so quick to respond, Nettie and I haven't even had a chance to get out of the room just yet.

"What's going on?" Ransom says sharply before glancing down and closing his eyes for a moment.

"Geez," Wes grunts as he spots the knife.

"What happened?" Ransom growls.

"We were just walking back to our cabin to get ready for dinner when we saw a shoe sticking out of the door," I say. "And well"—I shrink an inch—"there was sort of a body attached to the shoe. This is Lucy Taylor. She's here with that bachelorette party. Someone must have stabbed her and took off."

Before either of them can respond, the hoofbeats of what sounds like a thousand horses trample this way and it's the rest of the security team along with Quinn Riddle, Ransom's partner in vessel security.

Quinn is tall, about my age, and her skin is deathly pale, some might say blue. Her frown is permanently painted brick red, and her dark hair is always spun into a bun so tight it gives her an inadvertent facelift.

Fun fact: My ex, Stanton, the renowned plastic surgeon to the almost-stars, always suggested a tight bun or a ponytail to those who couldn't afford his youth-enhancing services. Hand to heaven, I've utilized this technique more times than I'm willing to admit.

"What in the name of all things sacred is happening now?" Quinn leans past Wes and takes a look for herself. Her expression hardens to stone once she sees the body. She's not amused, and frankly, neither am I.

“There was an accident,” Bess says, shrugging my way.

“There was a murder,” Nettie gravels as if she were proud.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake. This seems to be a pattern with you, Troublefield,” Quinn riots as she looks to Wes and Ransom. “Can’t you two see that this woman is somehow responsible for the rash of homicides this ship has seen in the past year? Not a single dead body had turned up before she stepped on board the Emerald Queen , and now not only do we have homicide after homicide as if it were a contagion, but she’s front and center every single time another body gets discovered,” she growls as she turns her full ire on Ransom. “You and I are going to have one long talk once we clean up this mess.” She turns to Wes. “Captain, I implore you to have all three of these women removed from the scene at once.” She looks at Bess, Nettie, and me. “I’m putting you all on notice. You are at the top of my suspect list. For all I know, the three of you think it’s some fun game to go around mowing people down, then blaming it on others. And if that’s true, that stops today.”

“Quinn .” Ransom’s voice is loud and sharp. “I will not have you speaking to any of these women that way. You are correct, we will be having one long talk once we take care of this poor woman. But I won’t have you intimidating, accusing, or abusing anyone in this room if you’re to continue to work with me. Got it?”

Quinn’s lips twitch as she bores into him with all the venom she’s capable of. And knowing Quinn, that’s quite a lot. A den of vipers would be proud of her efforts.

“Got it,” she seethes. “Troublefield, don’t you dare meddle in my case. Now if you’ll excuse me”—she takes a moment to glare my way—“I’m going to talk to the rest of the security staff for a moment so we can prepare to remove the body from the cabin.” She steps back out and does just that while both Wes and Ransom shift their attention my way.

“We had nothing to do with this,” I say with my hands rising spontaneously as if it were a stick-up.

“Trixie, I’ll be honest, the optics don’t look good.” Ransom sighs. “The best thing you can do is stay as far away from this case as possible. Enjoy the cruise and leave the investigation to my team and me.”

Wes nods. “I’m in agreement with that. I need to head to the bridge and speak with the port authorities. Bess, Nettie, please heed Ransom’s words.” He looks my way and blows out a breath. “I’d tell you to keep out of the case, but I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Finally”—Nettie grouses—“someone with some common sense.”

He helps Nettie step over the body and escorts both her and Bess into the hall, leaving just Ransom and me with a body between us.

“Trixie,” he says mournfully, his blue eyes pinned to mine.

“I saw a ghost right after we split ways this afternoon,” the words speed out of me as if they were the answer to some horrible riddle—a Quinn Riddle.

His eyes widen a notch. “You should have contacted me immediately. I would have beefed up security. We may have been able to avoid something like this.”

“I guess we’ll know next time.”

“Next time?” His voice hikes an octave as if he were horrified—as he probably should be. “There shouldn’t be a next time.”

“There shouldn’t be.” I shrug. “You’re right.” My head floods with a flurry of

thoughts. “Maybe Quinn is right. Maybe I’m the deadly factor here. Maybe if I’m not here, the passengers will be a whole lot safer.”

He inches back as the concern on his face deepens.

“Trixie, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying maybe I should leave the ship.”

Ransom closes his eyes once again and pulls me in tight. His facial scruff rubs over my cheek as he moves his lips to my ear. “You’re not going anywhere.”

A sizzle of heat spirals through my stomach and right up into my solar plexus in the very best way.

I’m pretty sure having a heated moment with your new fiancé while a body lies at your feet isn’t the most romantic notion in the world.

It’s wrong.

So many things about this are wrong.

Face it, if I stay, I’m only going to rack up a body count.

And how I wish I were wrong.

I may not be right about a lot of things, but I’m pretty sure I’m right about that.

CHAPTER 7

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hello, Trixie!

Help! It's my first solo cruise after a recent breakup, and I've been assigned a honeymoon suite by mistake. It's awkward, to say the least. How do I make the most of this luxurious cabin without feeling out of place—and without revisiting my already broken heart?

Sincerely, Newly Single Sandy

Dear Newly Single Sandy,

Oh my, Sandy, that is quite the predicament! Okay, so I've thought about this. Here's a list of ways to turn that honeymoon suite into your personal paradise.

Embrace the luxury. Why not treat yourself like royalty? Order room service, enjoy a few bubble baths, and make the most of the plush amenities. This suite is an oasis where you can and should pamper yourself.

Also, feel free to host a small gathering for newfound cruise friends! A little soirée in your spacious cabin can turn awkward into awesome.

And you can certainly take a page out of my book and document your journey. In fact, you can capture the experience with both photos and journaling. This might just

be something you'll laugh about later and it will serve as a reminder of how strong you are.

Make this cruise all about you and enjoy every luxurious moment!

XOXO Trixie

It's the very next morning after the discovery of Lucy Taylor's body and I hardly caught a wink of sleep last night.

Since I couldn't manage to keep my eyes closed, I pulled out my art supplies and sketched well into the wee hours. I wrote in my blog, albeit omitting any mention of the recently deceased, and ignored about three different hostile text messages from Stanton demanding to know what the hell is going on with the mall cop and me.

I refuse to entertain Stanton when he's so rudely disparaging my new fiancé, especially now that I'm rethinking my life on board this big beautiful ship. What's going to happen to Ransom and me if I decide to leave? This ship is his home, too. I would never ask him to leave it.

All of the above has had my mind and stomach in knots. I had a couple of back-to-back art classes early this morning and I somehow managed to wade my way through them.

Since we'll be at port each day on this cruise, save for the last day, I've decided to host a crafts hour each morning. But the scenery here is so stunning I don't see how I can get out of at least a few acrylic landscape classes. It's practically a must.

Today, the ship has docked in Nassau, Bahamas and already the artist in me is lured by azure waters.

Speaking of waters, the Blue Water Café is bustling with the morning rush and the air is filled with the enticing aromas of breakfast delights. I've just finished up an early class—the only class I was teaching for the day—and since I'm not due to meet with Bess and Nettie on the gangway for another hour, I thought I'd feed the beast inside me.

My stomach growls in anticipation as I make my way to the buffet, eager to scoop up all my favorite offerings, starting with the fluffy scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, and golden hash browns glistening with a perfect balance of crunch and softness. And you can bet I've loaded my plate with a generous helping of all of the above.

Once upon a time, I'd starve myself calorically just trying to maintain the impossible standards that Stanton had set for my poor body. And now that I'm free of Stanton and his bad ideas, I've embraced my appetite, along with all of the culinary offerings this ship offers to curb it.

I love my body and I love food.

Lucky for me, one of my best friends on the ship, Elodie Abernathy, happens to run the Queen's Mall downstairs and she's more than happy to keep me in A-line dresses to accommodate my newfound love of carbs and artisanal cheeses alike.

Next, I move on to the sweet treat section of the buffet where I stack yet another plate high with golden waffles and pancakes before I smother them in syrup and then top them with fresh berries, and don't think for a minute that I forget about the whipped cream. I also snap up a selection of pastries—one chocolate-filled croissant (which shows remarkable restraint on my part), one cheese Danish, one marzipan Danish (one of my new favorites), and two buttery cranberry orange scones that promise to melt in my mouth.

Satisfied with my selections, I grab a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, create

the perfect latte, and then turn away from the culinary offerings in hopes of finding a seat. Just as I'm scouting for a table, a familiar voice calls out behind me.

"Oh no you don't without me!"

Before I know it, Elodie Abernathy herself strides over with her blonde bob bouncing with every step. Elodie is the aforementioned manager of the Queen's Mall, originally from South Africa, and a certified man-eater with a sarcastic charm to boot.

I shoot a genuine smile her way. "I'm starting to think I shouldn't do anything without you. Life for everyone might be safer that way," I tease.

"Anything?" She waggles her brows. "Don't tell me you're already looking to spice things up in the bedroom with Handsome Ransom. Talk about going from zero to hero. And in case you're wondering, I would be the hero in this scenario." She winks my way as we step outside onto the deck and the warm Bahamian breeze greets us, carrying the scent of saltwater and tropical flowers—it might actually be perfume from a fellow passenger, but a girl can dream.

We find a table with a perfect view of the bustling port and settle in as Elodie takes a bite of my croissant before breaking it in half and tossing a piece my way—the smaller piece.

The sun casts a warm glow over the ship, and for a moment I get lost in the brilliant blues and greens that Nassau has to offer. The sight of the turquoise water, the white sandy beaches, and the colorful buildings add a touch of paradise to our morning.

"Would you look at that view?" I say, sighing at the scenery. "Makes you want to forget all about your troubles, doesn't it?"

"I don't have any troubles," she says, toasting me with her half of the croissant—the

bigger half. “But you seem to be up to your eyeballs in misadventures as your surname suggests. Spill, Troublefield. I want all the dirt.”

“Last night was a mess.” I cringe before taking a sip of my coffee. “We found the body of a poor woman in?—”

Elodie cuts me off with a wave of her hand. “Not that dirt. I heard an earful from Tinsley this morning. Why would I care about the dead? I want to know if things have progressed in the bedroom with you and you-know-who now that he’s landed a ring on your finger. As far as I can tell, the man is alive and kicking. And believe me, I understand all too well what a living, breathing man expects in the bedroom, and it’s not a knife in the back.”

“Oh that,” I say, nearly choking on my next sip. “Is that where your mind goes first thing in the morning?”

“Of course. I’ve got my priorities straight. So, are you going to satisfy my curiosity or leave me hanging?”

I’ll confess. My curiosity has been venturing there more often than not, too. As I’ve mentioned, Ransom and I have yet to seal the deal, but I know for a fact that our journey to home plate is on the horizon and I cannot wait.

“Oh, Elodie, last night was so terrible—and I’m talking about that body again. That poor woman. She was here to celebrate her friend’s upcoming nuptials.”

“Yes, the bachelorette debacle.” She glowers as if it personally offended her. At least she and Tinsley have that in common. Although I’m pretty sure it was just my upcoming nuptials that Tinsley found offense in. “That’s enough of that subject. Try to stay on task, would you? What’s a little pillow talk over pastries? Besides, I need to live vicariously through you. The most excitement I’ve had recently was

convincing a particularly stingy passenger to splurge on a designer handbag. Honestly, where have all the hot men gone?”

“It’s that bad, huh?”

Elodie isn’t exactly known for her dry spells.

“It’s worse than that,” she seethes. “It’s practically criminal. I’m entertaining the thought of suing the cruise lines for creating such a hostile environment. But enough about me. In truth, I haven’t dug into the offerings this go-round to complain so much. My concern here is for you. You’re the one who’s practically hitched—and to Ransom Rut-Them-by-the-Dozen Baxter, of all people. Please tell me you’re not one of those wedding night holdovers.” She rolls her eyes and looks sick just thinking about it.

I’d call her out on that rather inglorious nickname she just gifted him, but that might just make it stick. Elodie is wicked that way. Besides, she’s not wrong. Ransom was a playboy before he met me.

“Well, I was one of those wedding night holdovers the first time around,” I confess. Although let’s be real, Elodie already knew that.

“A lot of good that did you.”

“Touché.” I shake my head at the thought. “But I can’t focus on Ransom or my love life right now.”

“Fine, tell me about the body then.” She tosses a piece of her croissant toward the railing and a seagull swoops in and snaps it up.

I give her a quick rundown of the events, from finding Lucy Taylor’s body to Quinn’s

outburst and my thoughts about leaving the ship.

Elodie waves off my concern with a flick of her hand. “Nonsense. You’re not leaving the Emerald Queen , Trixie. We need you here. You have a knack for solving these unfortunate events. And let’s face it, Quinn is insufferable, and quite frankly she’s lousy at her job. She’d probably declare the nearest bird the murderer if she could. Nobody listens to her and don’t you dare start either.”

I laugh despite myself. “You’re probably right. But Quinn’s not wrong about the pattern of bodies showing up wherever I go.”

Or the ghosts , but neither Quinn nor Elodie knows about my little supernatural quirk.

“Rubbish,” Elodie says, snapping up my cheese Danish. “You’re not the problem here. You, my friend, are the solution. Besides, if anyone can handle a little danger, it’s you. And that takes us right back to the topic at hand—you alone in a bedroom with Ransom Baxter. In the event you haven’t noticed, the man is lethally handsome. If you want a foray into danger, you’ve got one. And lest we forget he was my equal when it came to bedding women before you stomped out his feral ways like a kitchen fire? He’s smitten with you, but he’s also miles more experienced in the bedroom.” She slams her hand over the table. “Now, I’m here to propose an offer you can’t refuse.” One side of her lips curves into a malevolent smile and I have no idea what it means, but I’m pretty certain she’s up to no good. “I’m willing to give you all of my tips and tricks—without charge—so that you will be more than equipped on the night that bull decides to tear up your bedroom.”

“Sounds violent.”

“Only if you want it to be.” A greedy grin takes over half her face. “I’m not taking no for an answer.” Her phone buzzes. “Oh, for Pete’s sake, what now?” she grouses as she scans the screen. “ Ooh , speaking of bedrooms, I just got a shipment of naughty

goodies I ordered just for yours truly. I'd best go take care of those before Tinsley finds them and calls dibs by way of licking them."

"Why would she lick them?" I ask, horrified, then suddenly regret the question.

"Because they're delicious." She rises from her seat. "And that's exactly what your first night with Ransom will be—delicious. I'd warn you to keep out of trouble, but we both know that's useless. We'll speak soon. Your lessons are about to begin."

She takes off and I stare down at my breakfast for a moment, contemplating whether or not I have it in me to take another bite.

Oh, who am I kidding? My appetite can't be quenched.

I dive right in and contemplate whether or not my appetite for Lucy Taylor's murder investigation can be quenched as well.

I don't think so.

I can no sooner stop from taking another bite of my waffles than I can refuse to look at the glaring evidence in the case.

I just hope my appetite for justice doesn't turn into an appetite for destruction.

And if Quinn is right, it will do just that—again and again.

CHAPTER 8

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trip Tip Question:

Dear Trixie,

Sandy here again. I'm seated at a table for two in the dining room, and dining alone feels a bit awkward in general. Long story short, I'm not a fan. Any tips on how to enjoy my meals and perhaps even meet new people?

Sincerely, Dining Dilemma Sandy

Dear Dining Dilemma Sandy,

I've got some great news. Dining alone can be delightful but with the right mindset. First, don't hesitate to chitchat with your neighbors. Feel free to compliment their meal choice or ask about their day's adventures. Cruises are actually a great place to make new friends.

Another option is to bring along a good book or journal. Not only is it great company, but you'd be surprised that it's a great conversation starter, too! And it's a good way to keep you entertained between courses.

My final suggestion is that if you're really not feeling it, you can always request a change. Ask the maitre d' if you can join a larger table. They're usually happy to

accommodate and seat you with other solo travelers or friendly groups.

Bon appétit and enjoy the company, whether it's a book or new friends!

XOXO Trixie

Family Group Chat:

Trixie: Hey everyone! Just wanted to say Ransom and his daughter Emerson are joining our family group chat. I just added them! Welcome aboard!

Not only did I finish both of my sweet and savory breakfast offerings, but I went back to the buffet and snapped up another chocolate croissant to make up for the one Elodie ate—okay, so the half that she ate. But believe me, with the way I'm feeling, I could have inhaled a dozen of them.

I did a quick change and just met Bess and Nettie on the gangway where we're about to take off for tropical pastures. It's hot and humid, yet the crystal waters are promising us some much needed refreshment.

Stepping off the Emerald Queen and onto the sunlit streets of Nassau feels like stepping into a living, breathing painting. Nassau, with its bustling streets, colorful colonial buildings, and friendly locals, has a way of making you fall in love with it instantly. The blend of history and natural beauty is every bit as enchanting as I hoped it would be.

The brine from the sea mingles with the scent of something delicious grilling in the distance, and the sounds of lively calypso music float through the air. Vendors line the streets, selling everything from fresh coconuts to handmade crafts. The pastel-colored buildings are reminiscent of a time gone by, and they add a special charm to this Bahamian paradise.

“Look at that view,” I say as I follow Bess and Nettie on our new adventure.

Since I was busy with the class this morning, I entrusted the itinerary for the day to them.

Ransom texted and let me know he was busy with the port authority, and I knew he would be. But he did say he couldn’t wait to spend time with me later. Most likely to keep close watch over me in the event another body turns up. That seems to be my most prolific party trick at this point.

Speaking of text messages, I just shot a text to the group chat about a minute ago, and now my phone is going off like a popcorn machine.

Family Group Chat:

Abbey: Yay! Welcome to the group chat, Ransom and Emerson! So glad to have you both here officially!

Parker: About time! Welcome, Ransom and Emerson! You’ve already survived meeting us, so this should be easy, right? ??

Ransom: Thanks, Abbey and Parker! Glad to be here. And yes, Parker, I’m ready for anything this chat throws my way. ??

Emerson: Hi, Abbey and Parker! Excited to be part of the family chat!

Stanton: Oh great, another place for this guy to butt in.

Trixie: Stanton, please. Be civil. This is about family.

Abbey: Seriously, Dad. We like Ransom. He’s great for Mom.

Parker: Yeah, don't ruin this. We're all getting along well.

Stanton: Just saying. It's getting crowded in here.

Ransom: I'm not here to replace anyone, Stanton. Just to support Trixie and be part of the family.

Emerson: We're just here to get to know everyone better. And we're looking forward to it, too.

Abbey: We know that, Ransom and Emerson. You're both awesome. ??

Parker: Agreed. Welcome to the chaos, officially!

Stanton: Whatever. Just don't expect me to play nice all the time.

Trixie: Can we keep this positive, please? Ransom, Emerson, thanks for being here!

Ransom: Thanks, Trixie. And thanks to you, too, Abbey and Parker. I'm excited to be part of this family.

Emerson: Same here! Can't wait for family dinners and fun times.

Abbey: We're happy to have you both! Can't wait to see you both again. I can't wait for family dinners either!

Parker: And game nights! Ransom, Emerson, you're in for some epic Monopoly battles.

Ransom: We're ready! Bring it on. ??

Stanton: Hope you're ready for more than just Monopoly, Ransom. And fun fact: Trixie treats real US legal tender as if it were funny money too.

Trixie: Let's keep it friendly, Stanton. This is a good thing.

Abbey: Totally. Welcome again, Ransom and Emerson! ??

Parker: We're lucky to have you both.

Stanton: ??

And on that note, I put away my phone and turn my attention back to my favorite octogenarians at hand.

"So where are we headed?" I ask, almost afraid to find out. If I've learned anything about these two, it's that they have their own appetites—and not just for food but adventure.

"We're going to Paradise Island," Nettie says with a grin. "Next stop, Cabbage Beach."

"And a day of pure relaxation," Bess adds. "I, for one, cannot wait."

I tick my head wistfully to the side. "It's like you read my mind."

We board the ferry to Paradise Island, and on the way over the ride offers stunning views of Nassau's harbor. The water is a mesmerizing shade of turquoise, and the gentle breeze feels heavenly on my face. As we approach Paradise Island, the grandeur of Atlantis Resort looms in the distance and it's a stark contrast to the serene beaches we're heading toward.

Soon enough, we disembark and make our way to Cabbage Beach, a stretch of pristine white sand and crystal-clear waters. We find a beach rental stand and secure three blue and white striped sand chairs and a matching large umbrella. The attendant sets them up for us in a perfect spot, giving us a prime view of the ocean which is just steps away.

I can already feel the sun's rays working their magic as we grab our drinks from a nearby beach bar—virgin pina coladas all around. Nettie wanted the hard stuff, but since Bess and I couldn't promise she'd make it back to the ship if she got loaded, she acquiesced. Stopping at one isn't exactly Nettie's MO. It's not mine either, but that generally has to do with lava cake.

"This is the life," I say, settling into my chair.

"I couldn't agree more." Bess raises her glass. "Cheers to a day of relaxation!"

"And to solving mysteries," Nettie chimes in.

We take a sip of our drinks and they're a cool, refreshing contrast to the beating hot sun.

But the refreshment doesn't seem to last long. That conversation with Ransom and those accusations from Quinn are still far too fresh in my mind.

"I've been thinking—" I begin as I look to both Bess and Nettie, who happen to be seated on either side of me. "Maybe Quinn is right about all of these homicides we've been having. Maybe this is all somehow my fault. I mean, the only way to truly test her theory is for me to leave the ship."

Bess nearly chokes on her drink. "Over my dead body! You're not going anywhere."

“Yeah, Trix,” Nettie says in an alarmingly firm tone that I’ve never heard before. “If you even think about taking off, we’ll throw you into the deep end of the ocean ourselves. The three of us put the T in teamwork, remember?”

More like the T in terror, turmoil, or even plain old trouble.

“But what if Quinn is right?” I say, glaring out at the water as if it were Quinn herself. “What if the passengers would be safer without me around?”

“Hogwash,” Bess says, waving off my concern. “You’re not responsible for what happened. And besides, we need you to help solve this case.”

“Exactly,” Nettie adds. “We’re in this together. And I don’t care what Quinn says. You’re staying put. That woman has a lot of nerve,” Nettie growls. “I vote you off her next, Toots.”

The three of us share a mournful laugh. Okay, so my laugh was mournful, and both Bess and Nettie cackled far too loud as if they were rooting me on in that department.

“Well, I haven’t taken anyone off this planet yet,” I say. “And I’m not starting now. Quinn is safe as far as I’m concerned. But as for the Grim Reaper, well, he seems to have a mind of his own.”

Bess knocks her drink to mine. “I vote we toss the Grim Reaper out of our minds and enjoy this day. We’re on the beach in the Bahamas. To Trixie staying with us forever.” Bess hikes her glass with the toast.

“Forever,” Nettie shouts as the three of us touch our pina coladas to one another.

I only wish I was as convinced that I should stay.

We spend the next few hours lounging in the sun, sipping our drinks, and chatting about everything and nothing. The sound of the waves and the warm sun on my skin are soothing, and for a while, I almost forget about the toxic turmoil back on the ship.

“Who’s up for a swim?” Nettie asks, standing and stretching.

“I’m in,” Bess says. “Trixie?”

“Let’s do this,” I say as Bess helps me up.

We make our way to the shoreline as the cool waves lap at our feet. I dive right in, letting the refreshing water wash away any last remnants of tension. We splash around, laughing and enjoying ourselves, and for one brief moment, all of my worries are temporarily forgotten.

But then Lucy Taylor’s face comes back to me and that cloud of guilt is right back with it.

Maybe Bess and Nettie are right. Maybe I am needed here if only to keep them from throwing me into the ocean.

But Lucy deserves justice, and if I’m not going to be investigating this case, I may as well help Ransom from the sidelines.

And that’s exactly what I plan on doing next.

Armchair detective, here I come.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:00 pm

CHAPTER 9

Stanton: Really, Trixie? You think this engagement is a good idea?

Stanton: How many more men are you planning to parade in front of our kids?

Stanton: Ransom? What kind of name is that, anyway? Was he kidnapped at birth?

Stanton: And teaching Parker poker? Real great influence there. What's next?
Lighting up a fat one?

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trixie,

Help! My ex-wife is on a cruise, and word has it she's being seduced by the ship's head of security—a real deal meathead. What should I do to keep my cool while she's off gallivanting on the high seas (without my permission!) while playing hide the weapon with the aforementioned meathead?

Sincerely, Stanton the Steamed

Dear Stanton the Steamed,

Good grief. Hello, Stanton.

First, I am not amused by this. But what a juicy predicament (for her). Here's how to

navigate this juicy gem from afar:

First off, take a deep breath. The last thing you need is to channel your inner melodramatic name-calling king.

Maybe you should dive into your own adventures while she's off playing Titanic with the ship's brawny bouncer (and rather enjoying herself!). Try a new hobby like binge-watching a series that everyone's talking about or reading an actual book .

Worry less about your ex and more about yourself. Also, please stop leaving nasty messages in the family group chat. I see no need to drag the kids into this.

Focus on creating your own fantastic new memories with someone new. Think of it as your ultimate revenge—living your best life.

I'm certainly living mine.

Trixie

We returned to the ship just before first seating dinner so I dashed to my cabin to shower and change. No sooner did I primp myself to prom-worthy perfection than I got another rash of text messages from Stanton.

Stanton: Do you honestly think this guy is going to stick around?

Stanton: You're making a fool of yourself.

Stanton: I insist that you call off this sham of an engagement before it sends the kids into therapy. And we all know who's going to pay for that one.

Trixie: I'm happy, Stanton. And our kids are happy for me. That's all that matters.

Stanton: Sure, keep telling yourself that. Just don't come crying to me when it falls apart. And it will.

By the sounds of it, it's Stanton who will need therapy to survive my upcoming nuptials. For all the cheating that man did, he's acting as if he's the only man in the world that I should be with. He wishes.

I put on a sleek little black dress, a few gold baubles, and meet Ransom at the entry to the formal dining room.

"Hello, gorgeous," he says, giving me an approving once-over. "Has anyone ever told you that you look delicious?"

"You haven't been talking to Elodie, have you?" I ask as I fall into his arms and he lands a kiss on my lips—a delicious kiss no less.

"No. Should I?"

"Believe me, you don't have to," I say. "As for me, well, that's up in the air. She's determined to give me lessons when it comes to closed-door activities. You know, tips and tricks."

He winces. "I'd recommend against it. But do as you wish. We're going to have a great time all on our own. Besides"—he lands another kiss to my lips—"the plans I have for you have never been attempted before. They're something special just for you and me. I've been saving all my best moves. I knew you'd come along one day."

"Oh, you did, did you?" I laugh as I give his ribs a quick tweak. "Let's get in there before we change our minds."

The soft din of voices creates a serene backdrop as Ransom and I make our way into

the main dining room. Bess and Nettie will be joining us, but they've decided to be fashionably late, still recovering from our sun-soaked day at Cabbage Beach.

The main dining room makes me feel as if I've just been transported to the most elegant venue on the planet. It's a three-story wonder comprised of sparkling black granite floors and peach velvet chairs that are tucked against a bevy of round tables covered with white linen. The tables are set in a series of alcoves to allow for privacy as artsy-looking light fixtures hang from above.

We step into the room from the first floor and take in all of the drama and glamour it can afford. The soft clinking of silverware and murmured conversations fill the air, along with classical music playing softly to create the perfect ambiance of refined luxury.

In the center of the room sits an impressive ice sculpture, and much like the menu it changes every single night. I'm always anxious to see what the chefs have dreamed up next in both respects.

Tonight's frozen wonder is a masterful carving of a leaping dolphin with water cascading from its mouth, creating a mesmerizing fountain effect. The ice glistens under the soft lights, adding an ethereal glow to the sculpture and making it the centerpiece of the room.

Ransom and I are seated at our regular table, which boasts a spectacular view of the ocean through the floor-to-ceiling windows. And according to the menu, tonight's offerings are nothing short of spectacular themselves. I've already narrowed down my choices to lobster bisque, filet mignon with a red wine reduction, pan-seared scallops, and a decadent chocolate soufflé for dessert. Yum, yum, yum, and yum.

"This is perfect," I say, leaning close to the handsome man by my side.

Speaking of delicious, Ransom is dangerously sexy tonight in his dark suit, dark facial scruff, and that dark brooding look on his face that has every woman in the dining room turning their heads in his direction.

“I think you’re perfect.” He pulls me close for another kiss on the lips and this time we linger. I’ve never felt such a burning hunger for a man before—not even for the man I was married to for twenty-five years— especially not for the man I was married to for twenty-five years. Mostly I just burned with anger for Stanton. He could be that infuriating.

Ransom pulls back and inspects me with a twinkle in his eyes that warms me all the way down to my toes.

“Thank you for saying yes,” he says as he touches his forehead to mine and steals another kiss.

“As if there’s a woman alive who’s ever said no to you,” I tease as I wiggle that rock glistening on my ring finger between us. “You’re welcome. Quite frankly, I’m flattered you asked.”

“I’m just lucky a woman of your caliber wasn’t snatched up long before the night I proposed.”

A laugh bubbles from me at the thought.

“Let’s talk about the wedding,” he says, clasping his hand to mine. “What are your thoughts?”

“I just need you there. And our kids. And Bess and Nettie. Elodie should be there. And we can’t forget Wes. Oh, and your sister! Of course, my mother may or may not make an appearance. That’s par for the course as far as she’s concerned. But your

parents, too.”

“My parents are deceased.”

“Oh right.” I wince hard. Did I know that? Ransom and I have more or less experienced a whirlwind romance. “But we have a good start. We can always invite the guest list I just rattled off onto a cruise and do it then.”

“We can,” he says. “Or we can get married anywhere in the world you wish. I’ll fly them all in. No expense spared.”

A smile gets buried in my cheeks and I can’t fight it. “I don’t want anything ritzy. Just a simple ceremony followed by lots of alone time where you can show off all of those original moves you’ve been holding back from the world.”

His lids hood and a malevolent smile curls on his lips. Ransom looks ready to pounce and show off those moves right this minute. We might make a scene, but who cares? I’m all for skipping straight to dessert.

I’m about to yank him right out of his chair and hightail it to my cabin just as Wes shows up.

“Mind if I join the fun?” he asks, clearly unaware of the fun we had in mind.

“Not if you want to live,” Ransom mutters under his breath.

“Captain,” I say a touch too loud and my voice squeaks in the process. “Please take a seat.”

Wes looks regal in his dark double-breasted jacket with all the brass hardware a man of his stature requires.

“Just thought I’d say good evening to the lovebirds.” He lands in the seat on the other side of me. “First of all, congratulations once again on your engagement. I had planned to host a proper celebration for you both, but given the recent developments, I thought it best to wait until closer to the end of the trip.”

“Aww, thank you. We appreciate that,” I say, feeling a pang of guilt at the mention of the recent deadly development.

He nods to Ransom. “How’s the investigation going?”

I can feel Ransom grow rigid behind me. “I’m afraid I don’t mix business with pleasure, Wes. But I’ll get back to you with an update soon.” He hitches his head my way and I’m clearly aware that I’m the reason he’s evading the topic.

Wes nods. “Fair enough. And Trixie, any new sightings of that ghostly stowaway?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t seen her since we departed. It’s been pretty quiet on that front.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to your dinner.” Wes rises to his feet. “Oh, and before I forget, I wanted to extend the Emerald Queen to you as a wedding venue. Any room, lounge, or deck. You name it, it’s yours. And if you should need an officiant, I am a notary public with all the right credentials to get you hitched whether on land or on sea.”

“Wes!” I practically purr at the offer. “Thank you! I think that’s a wonderful idea. I would be honored for you to marry us. What do you think, Ransom?” I give his hand a tug and he gives a slow blink up at Wes.

“Honor might be a strong word.” He flexes a short-lived smile. “But I feel the same.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Wes rocks back on his heels. “Take your time. No rush. And it’s

me who's honored to be taking part in your ceremony."

Wes takes off and Ransom growls. "Believe me, he'd much rather play the part of the groom."

"I'm sorry to break it to him, but that role is already filled." I bite down on a smile. "I've been thinking about what you said—about me staying out of Lucy Taylor's case—and I wanted to let you know I'm in agreement with you."

Ransom inches back. "Why do I feel a but coming on?"

"But"—I bat my lashes at him—"I want to help from the sidelines."

"No way," he says flatly. "I've got this, Trixie. The only thing you need to do from the sidelines is relax." He turns his attention to the menu in front of him.

"But I've got evidence. I mean, did you see the necklace that was found next to the body?"

"The one that read My Girl ?" His head turns my way. "What about it?"

"It belonged to Jennifer Mitchell, our other resident bride-to-be."

His lips purse as he nods straight ahead. "Okay, I'll take it from here."

"And what about the pink glitter that was all over Lucy's blazer? Do you want to know where that came from?"

His eyes flit my way once again, but he doesn't turn his head this way. "Where?"

"From the sash that Jennifer was wearing last night."

He's back to pursing his lips. "Anything else I should know about?"

"That's all I've got for now."

A tiny growl rumbles through his chest. "Trixie," he says my name with an exasperated sigh. "The only way I can truly convince Quinn that you had nothing to do with this is for you to steer clear. She thinks you're causing all the havoc so you can solve the case and get all the glory."

"What?" I squawk so loud three different tables turn our way.

"You and I both know it's not true," he says, taking up my hand. "But just this once, let me handle things from here. You said yourself that the ghost hasn't made another appearance. Take that as a sign that this case isn't for you to solve."

"Stick your hands in the air," someone gravels from behind. "I've got a weapon and I'm not afraid to use it. Now get naked, get under that table, and have a good time."

I avert my eyes at the thought, but then again, there are worse directions this night can go in.

CHAPTER 10

Ransom's phone buzzes to life just as Bess and Nettie appear right here in the main dining room.

Nettie just threatened us with a naked good time, but judging by that look on Ransom's face, it will have to wait.

"Perfect timing, ladies," he says as he lands a quick kiss to my cheek. "There's a tussle in the casino and my help is needed. Can I catch you at the show?"

"You bet," I tell him as we share a kiss and he takes off.

"You don't look so thrilled," Nettie says as they take their seats. "Don't tell me he's trying to warm you up to a threesome so early in the marriage."

"Would you stop?" Bess swats her. "First of all, they're not married yet. And second of all, I'd throw him overboard myself if he ever proposed the idea."

"I'd help you do it," I say. "But nothing is the matter. Unless you count the fact that Ransom asked me to steer clear of the case all the way around."

"Tell me something new," Bess says. "He always insists you steer clear, but he's not once complained when you've caught the killer."

"True," I muse. "But it's not like there's a ghost lingering around begging me to hop to it either."

A spray of hot pink stars sparkles in the middle of the table and that cute brunette in the hot pink wool coat appears, with her midriff sank right through the votive candles twinkling away inside her belly. Needless to say, it's a disconcerting sight.

"Oh, she's here," I say, holding out my hands for Bess and Nettie to clasp onto me. I'm not sure why, but I seem to work as a conduit, and even though Bess and Nettie can't see the dead, they can sure hear what the dead have to say as long as they're holding my hands. Anyone can, really.

Come to find out, I'm something called transmundane, further classified as supersensual, which means I can see clear through to the other side. Well, not really. But I can certainly see the ghosts that come back to help me solve a case. It's some sort of an apparition-based justice system the universe has decided to pair me with no thanks to that bonk on the head Nettie inadvertently gave me.

"Hey there." The chipper brunette waves my way.

She looks somewhere in her early thirties, clear skin, and I do mean clear, pert nose, bowtie lips, and dark curls to die for. Her voice is high-pitched and she's both adorable and perky all around.

"So how does this work?" she asks. "It's my first time being evicted from Paradise, and to be honest, I'm not really loving the weather. Besides, I've got a date with Gannon Robinson and I've been after that heart attack on a stick for ages. He got that nickname because he had a heart attack on a stick when he was impaled—the Roman Empire was so barbaric. But then, it's still going strong, isn't it? Anyway, if I don't show up, he's libel to think I've ghosted him." She makes a face. "It works the same up there as well." She gasps as she takes a look around. "Am I on a cruise ship? Oh wow, I've always wanted to take a cruise. For some reason, I thought I was stuck back in Connecticut at the airport what with all the luggage I was seeing earlier."

That would be yesterday at the gangway, but I'm not about to correct her.

"You're not just on a cruise ship, honey"—Nettie leans in—"you're on a murder cruise of a lifetime."

"Would you stop?" Bess wiggles Nettie's hand. "Please ignore her. I'm Bess, that numskull is Nettie, and Trixie is your go-to girl when it comes to solving this homicide. What's your name, sweetie?"

"Beatrice Fiddlefae," she says, slightly bowing at the three of us. "It's so nice to meet you all. And a cruise? Don't get me wrong, but I feel as if I've won the homicide helpline lottery! The food, the shopping, the endless supply of pastries and cakes, and—oh please tell me they serve lobster bisque."

I nod her way. "I'm about to have some myself."

She squeals with delight. "Well, don't mind me, but it appears I'll be staying for dinner. But while we wait for the food, why don't you fill me in on the who, what, where, and why. Who's the poor thing that kicked the bucket?"

I lean her way. "A woman by the name of Lucy Taylor."

A horrible roar comes from the spirit among us and her entire body turns a bright shade of red.

"Did you say Lucy Taylor?" Her voice rolls like thunder as she asks the question.

I'm almost afraid to nod, but reluctantly I do.

Another roar comes from the woman, this time ten times louder than before and the entire table vibrates from it.

“That little witch had it coming,” she snips. “I hope she rots in hell.”

And with that, she up and disappears in a thunderous display of bright pink stars.

I take it she lost her appetite.

Bess, Nettie, and I exchange a glance as we pant in the aftermath.

“You heard the dead woman,” Nettie says as she picks up her menu. “The little witch had it coming. Case closed. What’s for dessert tonight?”

I shake my head at her. “No way is it case closed. That little tirade of hers only makes me want to dig in deeper.”

“What are you saying?” Bess asks with a hopeful expression.

“I’m saying that come tomorrow there’s a certain bride-to-be I can’t wait to have a word with. Something strange is happening here, and I want to get to the bottom of it.”

“Does that mean what I think it does?” Nettie lifts a wiry brow my way.

“That’s right. The investigation is back on, girls. I’ll let Ransom know myself. In due time, of course.”

One thing is for sure, this case is far from closed.

Lucy Taylor deserves justice, and whether or not the dead want to lend a hand, I’ll make sure she gets it.

CHAPTER 11

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Dear Trixie,

You won't believe this. My ex-wife—yes, the same one who was getting cozy with the ship's head of security—is now engaged to the guy! I feel like suing everyone, starting with the cruise line. Tell me how to turn this ship around because I'm about to lose it.

Sincerely, Stanton the Steamed

Dear Stanton the Steamed,

Oh, Stanton, sit down and be quiet. Let's take a deep breath and navigate this stormy sea together.

First off, suing the cruise line? Let's save the theatrics and the courtroom dramas. The cruise line isn't responsible for your ex's whirlwind romance. Instead, focus on turning your emotional ship around.

Imagine yourself as the captain of your own vessel. You've hit some rough waters, but with a steady hand on the wheel, you can steer yourself back to calmer seas—with someone else.

Remember, Stanton, you're the master of your fate and the decisions you've made in

the past have landed you where you are now.

But no hard feelings. I'm too far past that to care.

Wishing you smooth sailing and a fresh start from here on out,

Trixie

Stanton: I can't believe you're dragging Abbey and Parker into something that's going to amount to a big fat mess.

Trixie: They're adults. They can make their own decisions about people.

Stanton: Adults? They're still kids, Trixie. And they don't need to see you making the same mistakes over and over again. You're setting a bad example. It's going to take years of therapy to undo the damage you're about to cause!

Trixie: This isn't a mistake, Stanton. I know what I'm doing. You made the mistake of sleeping with a six-pack of women. And you knew what you were doing, too.

Stanton: We're not done here.

The very next morning the Emerald Queen docks smoothly at Sunset Cay, and the excitement on board is palpable. This isn't just any stop—it's a private island owned by Royal Lineage Cruise Lines, designed to give us an unforgettable day of sun, sea, and adventure.

As soon as the gangway is lowered, passengers spill out like eager ants at a picnic, each determined to make the most of their day in paradise.

Stepping onto Sunset Cay is like being welcomed into a slice of paradise designed

exclusively for the lucky few aboard the Emerald Queen . Sunset Cay has all the hallmarks of a perfect private island getaway.

Blue skies, white sandy beaches for miles, and enough water slides to make even the most premier waterpark jealous.

Sunset Cay is a feast for the senses, with glorious tropical flowers lining the walkways, the gentle sound of waves lapping against the shore, and the inviting scent of coconut sunscreen mixing with the salty sea breeze. And to top it all off, all of the amenities here are designed to make us feel like royalty.

According to the Seabreeze Newsletter that was slipped under our cabin doors this morning, the island is home to the Paradise Lagoon, the largest freshwater pool in the Caribbean, and it's rumored to be an absolute showstopper. It boasts a swim-up bar where you can enjoy island specialties like a drink called the crazy coconut among other fun yet silly-sounding libations.

The lagoon is dotted with in-water loungers and tables, perfect for those who want to soak up the sun without leaving the cool embrace of the water. For those seeking a bit of thrill, there's the Thrills and Chills Waterpark featuring the tallest waterslide in the Caribbean, an obstacle course at the Fun Zone Pool, and the largest wave pool around. It's an adrenaline junkie's dream come true—aka not for me.

For a more laid-back vibe, there are more than a few beaches the guests can enjoy. Treasure Beach offers serene white sand and crystal-clear waters, ideal for snorkeling or simply relaxing. There's Turtle Bay Beach—think swimming with turtles and becoming one with them as you float blissfully by their side.

Bliss Beach is another gem, perfect for those who enjoy beachside sports like volleyball, basketball, and paddleboarding. And let's not forget the floating bar, where you can enjoy a refreshing drink while literally floating in the sea. Now that I

might consider.

The island also features the Sunset Beach Club, a luxurious retreat offering overwater cabanas, an infinity pool, and a restaurant serving elevated fare like succulent lobster and prime cuts of steak. It's the ultimate spot for those looking to splurge on comfort and luxury.

And speaking of food, the Chill and Grill serves up complimentary barbecued chicken and Caribbean-style food with a spicy tang that makes your taste buds dance. Plus, there are over forty different snack shacks peppered around the island, offering something scrumptious for just about anybody.

As I take it all in, I can't help but think this is the kind of place where you could forget all your troubles and traumas—namely exes whose names start with the letter S. But knowing me, trouble has a way of tracking me down, even in paradise.

“This crazy coconut drink sounds like a dream,” Nettie says, scouring the newsletter as we step off the gangway and onto the pier that leads to our island oasis. The sun is hot, the humidity is high, and the air is perfumed with floral scents only the tropics can provide.

“Of course, you would think that drink sounds like a dream,” Bess grunts as she adjusts her wide-brimmed hat.

The three of us are all wearing the same wide-brimmed hats we picked up at the Queen's Mall during the last cruise and the brims are so wide we keep bumping into one another and knocking our hats to the ground. It makes for quite the show and quite the workout, too.

“The crazy coconut?” Bess says, nodding to Nettie. “You've got a crazy coconut sitting where your head should be.”

“I take that as a compliment.” Nettie tugs at the colorful floral muumuu she’s wearing. Those breezy, colorful, yet bordering on psychedelic numbers were Nettie’s go-to wardrobe staple while we were sailing through the Hawaiian islands, and I’m glad to see she’s reprised them. Mostly because she’s easy to spot in a crowd. Not that Nettie has ever blended in. She’s usually the focal point of any and every social situation—and that would be due to her penchant for causing an alarming ruckus or two.

“Well, I’m up for a crazy coconut. In fact, I can use it now to cool off,” I say. “Hey, I wonder if they can make that a virgin? I can sort of commiserate with that whole crazy virgin thing since I haven’t had any action in nearly a year. I’m starting to feel like a crazy virgin myself. Lucky for me, I have Ransom to cure what ails me—at least soon enough.”

“Never mind that coconut concoction,” Nettie says, knocking her elbow to mine. “You’re about to get lucky, Toots.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” I’m quick to say. “At least not anytime soon. And definitely not today. Ransom let me know he’s going over photos from the coroner in hopes of finding any other physical clues. But he did say he’d come down as soon as he could. Hopefully in plenty of time to share a crazy coconut with us.”

“I don’t think she meant that kind of lucky,” Bess says, nodding straight ahead. “There’s our first suspect along with her crew.”

Sure enough, I spot Jennifer Mitchell and her friends up ahead with their brightly colored swimsuits and wide-brimmed hats, which will make them easy to follow. And follow them we do.

They’re clearly on a mission, and from the snippets of conversation we catch, Turtle Bay Beach is their destination of choice.

“Come on, let’s keep up,” I say to Bess and Nettie as my beach bag bounces on my shoulder. “I have a feeling that Jennifer might have an idea of who our resident apparition is—or was .”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Bess says, picking up her pace. “If Beatrice knew Lucy enough to wish eternal damnation upon her, she may have known Jennifer—or anyone else in their book club.”

“Maybe so, maybe no,” Nettie says. “Lucy could have been the side piece for Bea’s not-so-sweet hubby. That would make just about any woman hate her.”

“True,” I say. “Although some days I’m motivated to pen a thank you letter to each of those tramps who Stanton bedded. If they hadn’t fallen in bed with my husband, I may still be falling in bed with my husband. And let’s face it, Ransom is the upgrade I never knew I needed. Confession: just one look and I knew I wanted him.”

Both Bess and Nettie cackle up a storm at that one, and I can’t help but laugh along with them.

“And that’s another thing that Ransom brings me,” I say. “Joy. Whereas all I ever got from Stanton was misery. It just goes to show that sometimes what we think is the worst moment in our lives really turns out to be the best thing that could have happened.”

“Here, here,” Bess cries out. “I wouldn’t be here if my husband hadn’t found his secretary hot-to-trot. Sure, he says it started out innocent enough as a routine dental inspection.” Bess’ ex was a dentist back in Honey Hollow, Vermont. “But soon enough he was inspecting more than just one orifice. At the time, I was pretty broken up about it, but look at me now.” She waves an arm around. “I’m in the Bahamas and he’s scouring all the bars back home, begging for someone to help him whittle down his prescription of little blue pills. Word on the street is, there hasn’t been a taker in

close to a decade.”

We share another laugh, this time at the expense of Bess’ ex.

“What about your exes?” Bess asks Nettie as we do our best to keep up with Jennifer and her buddies as they walk to the left like women on a mission. And judging by the fact all of the colorful slides and ocean-sized swimming pools are to our right, I’m guessing it’s going to be a beach day.

“My exes aren’t worth the mention,” Nettie growls, ironically at the mention of them. “But I’ll tell you what, the casino last night was filled with men I wouldn’t mind testing out a little blue pill with.”

“That’s because you had your booze goggles on,” Bess snips. “I told you that third rum hurricane was a bad idea.”

It’s true. After a lively show at the Emerald Theater, where we watched a Broadway-worthy performance of *Grease*, we hit the casino, only to have Nettie downing rum as if she were a pirate. And well, after three of those tall, brown elixirs, we had to practically carry Nettie out of there—once we managed to peel her off a man doing his best impression of a Kraken. Honestly, he looked as if the crypt keeper dug him up for the night. Thankfully, Ransom showed up and helped free Nettie from the man’s tentacles and helped schlep her to her cabin as well.

“All right,” Nettie says. “Now that you’ve got me thinking about those louses, I may as well shame a few exes. You both know my track record isn’t exactly spotless either.”

“Boy howdy.” Bess shakes her head with a laugh. “Please refresh us.”

“Well”—Nettie starts—“there was Crack-in-the-Back-Craig, the so-called

entrepreneur. Turned out his business was nothing more than selling knockoff designer handbags out of his van. I had to break up with him when he got me to model one of his fake Gucci purses at a flea market and then I got myself arrested.”

Bess snorts. “I remember you mentioning Craig. And I remember why you called him Crack-in-the-Back, too.” She looks my way. “Don’t you dare ask to see a picture of the guy. Let’s just say he had a lot in common with plumbers whose jeans don’t quite sit on the waist.” She looks back at Nettie. “Hey? Didn’t he also claim he was part of some underground poker ring?”

“Yup, and he lost his shirt—literally. That made that whole crack in the back thing even worse,” Nettie says, sticking her finger down her throat. “Then there was Tom, the so-called fireman. He was pretty hot, I’ll give him that. But as fate would have it, he wasn’t actually fighting fires—he was starting them.”

“You mean he was an arsonist?” I gasp at the thought.

Nettie’s shoulders sag a moment. “Let’s just say quantity over quality was my motto for a while when it came to men. But the worst was probably Dan, the self-proclaimed life coach. He ended up needing more coaching than anyone else on the planet. Constantly calling me for advice on how to deal with his other ex-girlfriends. I turned him into an ex and decided to lead by example.”

We share another quick chuckle.

Nettie sighs. “But as frustrating as it all was, I’m glad those relationships ended. They taught me a lot about what I don’t want in a partner.”

“Amen to that,” I say, nodding in agreement. “We’ve all had our fair share of Mr. Wrongs, but it just makes us appreciate Mr. Right that much more.”

“ Nah .” Nettie shakes her head vehemently. “I’m well past wanting a Mr. Right in my life. A Mr. Right Now will do just fine. It turns out, the perfect partner for me is— me .” She jabs her thumb to her chest and Bess applauds her.

“Here’s to dating ourselves and having the best relationship yet,” Bess says, linking her arm with Nettie’s.

“Speak for yourself,” Nettie bristles. “I’ve broken up with myself twice a week for the last few decades and I still can’t shake me.”

Bess tips her head. “I’ve been trying to figure out how to do that for years,” she teases and we’re right back to laughing, but it’s rather short-lived as Jennifer and her crew head straight for the water.

It looks as if our investigation is ready to begin.

CHAPTER 12

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Dear Trixie,

Guess what? I've moved on, too! I'm now dating a blonde bombshell who's half your age. She's everything you're not—fun, carefree, and far less dramatic. How do you like them apples? Any tips on how to handle all the jealous looks we'll be getting on the cruise I just booked?

Sincerely, Stanton the Smug

Dear Stanton the Smug,

Oh, Stanton, how charmingly cliché! A blonde bombshell half my age? My, my, you've certainly checked off all the midlife crisis boxes. I've got a few thoughts on how to navigate those jealous looks with a bit of panache.

First, let's talk about those envious glances. Are they really green with jealousy, or are they just trying to figure out if they've stumbled onto a father and daughter?

Next, while you're busy flaunting your new arm candy, remember that relationships should never be based on revenge.

And as for the cruise, just make sure it's nowhere near the Emerald Queen of the Seas

.

Finally, if you're really looking to get a rise out of me, you might want to remember that true happiness comes from within, not from external validation. But hey, who am I to rain on your blonde parade?

Sail on, Stanton, and remember—life is a journey, not a competition.

Wishing you all the best in your high-seas adventures,

Trixie

Stanton: Just wait until you meet my new sweetheart. Your face will turn green with envy and so will the face of that goon you've leashed yourself to.

Trixie: Let's see—she's young and hot and you're old and not. Could it be your money she's after?

Stanton: She's after what I'm serving up in the bedroom, sweetie. Don't fault me for being a good time, and don't fault me for being wealthy.

Trixie: Lest you forget my lawyers took you to the cleaners. If there's anything left, I hope she gets her blonde little mitts on it and makes a run for it. Sounds as if she's earning her keep. It might be a questionably honest living, but one thing is for sure, she works hard for the money. My condolences.

Stanton: I'm not laughing.

Trixie: I'm not telling a joke.

According to the map on the back of our newsletter, Jennifer and her entourage lead us to Turtle Bay Beach, a secluded cove famous for its crystal-clear waters and the resident sea turtles.

The beach is a haven for water play, with inflatable slides, floating trampolines, and kayaks scattered about. But the real draw is the chance to swim with sea turtles, a magical experience that everyone seems more than eager to try.

The beach itself is a postcard-perfect slice of paradise. The sand is powdery white and it's a gorgeous contrast with the bright turquoise ocean. A gentle breeze rustles the palm trees that line the shore and their leaves provide some much-needed intermittent shade. But there are other sources of shade to be had by way of cabanas. And the cabanas here are the epitome of beachside luxury—white and draped with sheer, flowing curtains that flutter in the wind. Each cabana is outfitted with plush seating, allowing guests to lounge in comfort while enjoying the stunning views.

Beach loungers and umbrellas dot the landscape and provide the perfect spot for sunbathing or simply relaxing with a good book—my idea of a good time. The loungers are a mix of sturdy wooden frames with thick, bright blue cushioned pads, ensuring that every moment spent here is as comfortable as possible. And luckily there are more than enough matching umbrellas to go around.

There's a snack shack to our left, already enticing us with the aroma of grilled burgers, hot dogs, and Caribbean-spiced chicken, making it impossible to resist. And there's a beach bar next to that, beckoning one and all with an array of tropical drinks and smoothies.

Bess, Nettie, and I settle in near our mark, and I can't help but note that Jennifer and her buddies are a lot more morose than they were those first few hours on the ship. Lucy Taylor's death seems to have knocked the proverbial wind out of them and understandably so. But as soon as they break off into groups, the chatter seems to pick up and there's more than one bout of laughter as the women begin to relax.

"Look at them," Nettie whispers while nudging me. "It's like watching an episode of *Real Housewives — Killer Cruise Ship Edition*."

Bess chuckles. “Yeah, but with more sea turtles, a dead body, and fewer table flips.”

“The cruise is young yet,” I tease. “Although in all fairness, the tables back on the ship are impossible to move, let alone flip.”

“And that’s why they had to resort to stabbing one another in the back,” Nettie says.

“Would you keep it down?” Bess practically hisses at her before looking my way. “Why do we bring her with us again?”

“Because I keep things interesting,” Nettie grouches back. “Now who do you think is going to attract the most turtles here at the bay?”

Bess’ eyes grow twice their size. “You stay away from those poor things. The sign clearly says you can swim with them, not on them. No touching!”

“ Pfft ,” Nettie huffs. “I’ll keep my hands off of those octagon-shaped cuties, but I doubt those little love bugs will be able to keep their flippers off of me. I’ve been known to attract quite the crowd when it comes to reptiles.”

Bess turns my way. “Did this conversation just segue back to men?”

Before I can answer, a collective and rather riotous group of women belts out a cock-a-doodle-doo from our left where Jennifer and her friends do their best to howl at the sky.

“Looks as if the party is back on,” I say, just as the entire lot of them runs and jumps into the water. “All right, ladies, sink or swim—Jennifer Mitchell is mine.”

We head to the shore and Nettie dives right under a wave and swims out like a dolphin until she corks back to the surface about ten feet out.

“Come on in, girls,” she shouts. “The water is warm as a bathtub!”

“It figures,” Bess says, wading in waist-deep. “Just when I was hoping it’d feel as if there was a glacier in the area.”

Bess and I sink down to our necks at the very same time and let out a collective sigh.

“I take it back,” Bess says. “This feels like heaven.”

“Indeed,” I say, going under and opening my eyes to a perfectly clear sandy bottom with a few stray sprigs of seaweed and what looks to be an entire army of sea turtles mingling amidst the bodies. “I see them,” I shout as I spike back out of the water. “There are tons of sea turtles out here.”

Bess and I swim out to Nettie and the three of us ooh and ahh at the bevy of gorgeous creatures in our midst. They’re here in every shape and size and their shells run from deep emerald green to a rich cocoa brown. We spend what feels like hours chasing them around and we let them chase us right back.

We’re about to venture out farther into the water—and no matter how far we swim we can still touch the bottom—but I see a sight that has me pausing my effort.

“Why don’t you ladies go on without me,” I say while nodding over to the edge of the cove where Jennifer Mitchell is lounging in the shade provided by a few boulders, and she happens to be all alone. “I just remembered why we’re at this beach to begin with.”

I swim off, and soon I find myself in the shade right along with my first and only suspect.

CHAPTER 13

“What a day,” I say as I give a friendly wave to Jennifer Mitchell as we huddle in the shade of a boulder right here in the waters of Sunset Cay.

“You can say that again.” She shakes her head out at the clear blue water. “I’ve never been to paradise, but I have a feeling it looks a lot like this.”

“I can’t argue with that,” I say as we share a little laugh. “I’m so sorry about your friend.”

She blows out a breath and sighs. Her hair is knotted up in a bun, and her face is bright pink from the heat despite the fact we’re out of the sun for now. She’s donned a frilly pink bikini with lots of ruffles that cover her top and bottom, and it’s so cute I’ve already made a note to try to track one down just like it. I’m sure Elodie can help in that department. Although knowing Elodie, she’d say it has too much coverage.

“It’s a horrible thing that happened.” Her blue eyes glow as she blinks back tears. “I mean, who would do something like that to such a sweet woman?” She sighs hard. “I guess it was a robbery gone wrong or something. One of the other girls suggested it could have been someone strung out on drugs or someone who was drunk who did it. I guess we’ll never know. It’s just so unfair.”

“I agree with you on that.” A gentle wave comes our way and we rise with it. “Have you spoken with her family? I can’t imagine how they’re taking it.”

“No, Hetty said she’d do that. I don’t actually know Lucy’s family. She was from

Oklahoma, I think. And she doesn't have a serious boyfriend. I mean, she dated around." She cringes when she says it.

"I take it they weren't nice guys?"

"Not nice at all." She shakes her head at the thought. "Anyway, all of us are so broken up about it. But my friends insist that Lucy would have wanted us to go on with this farce of a bachelorette party—and so we are, I suppose." She makes a face. "My friend, Amber, suggested we do so in memory of Lucy. And then Hetty mentioned that when we get home we should honor all of Lucy's book pick requests for the next few months. That way her spirit will remain with us in a sense."

"That's a beautiful thought," I say.

She nods. "I agree. It's all we can do at this point."

Speaking of spirits...

"You know, I heard someone in your group mention a name along with Lucy's and it seemed to cause a ruckus." Okay, so this is all a fabrication from my imagination, but that's beside the point. I need a vehicle to get me from point Lucy to point Beatrice and it just so happens that this is it. "The name was Beatrice Fiddlefae?"

Jennifer rocks her head back immediately. "Oh wow, that's a blast from the past. Oh poor Bea. She was a member of our book club for years. She used to work at one of the department stores downtown. She was hoping to be a buyer for them one day. Real sweet woman. She passed away at one of our meetups about a year ago, if you can believe it."

"What?" Every last inch of me prickles. "How?"

“Cantaloupe.” She shrugs. “It turns out, she was deathly allergic. And well, we do a little dessert potluck every time we meet and there was cantaloupe in the fruit salad. I guess she didn’t see it. Odd since she was always so careful.” She shudders just thinking about it. “Anyway, that was a horrible night. It was actually at my place. That’s why I remember it so well. We always start off with dessert. And, well, we never got farther than that. No sooner did Bea take a bite out of her fruit salad than her face started turning colors. She was blue before I could call the paramedics. They arrived in no time and they revived her for a bit, but we lost her before they got to the hospital.”

“Oh, that’s horrible.”

“It was a nightmare. But that was just a horrific accident. Nothing compared to what happened to Lucy.”

“Did Lucy and Bea get along? I mean, judging from the way those women were going at it, I gathered not.”

“They used to get along just fine.” She’s back to wincing. “For as sweet as Lucy could be, she had a habit of scooping up people’s exes—and on occasion—some of those men weren’t even exes yet.”

“Wow,” I say, suddenly seeing Lucy in a whole new light and it’s not so sweet.

“I know it sounds bad—because it was. Anyway, with Bea, well, Bea says that she and Teddy weren’t quite on the skids, but Teddy fed Lucy a different story. Regardless, Bea came at Lucy with venom. Honestly, if Lucy were the one who died that night, I would have pegged Bea for being responsible. But trust me, Lucy couldn’t hurt a fly.” She frowns at the horizon. “But despite Lucy’s bad habits with men, she did care about relationships. If anyone was slighting someone else, well, let’s just say it infuriated her.”

“Did anyone in the group infuriate her?”

Jennifer sinks an inch in the water. “ Me .” She gives a little laugh.

“What?” I laugh along with her in hopes she’ll say more.

“It was silly.” She gives a mournful look back at the water. “She thought I could do better than Marcus. That’s my fiancé.” She flexes a wry smile my way. “And I told her that Marcus and I are a perfect match. He’s strong, both physically and emotionally. He makes me feel safe.” She shakes her head as she says it. “And he loves the outdoors, he likes the water, and we both like food.”

“Sounds like a match made in heaven. And a lot like my old golden retriever. Boy, how I miss that furry guy.”

We share a laugh and it sounds genuine on her part.

“All right, Trixie, let’s hear what you love most about your new man.”

“Where do I begin?” I give a dreamy sigh at the mention of my new man. “Ransom is whip-smart, cuttngly handsome, and a gentleman through and through. He puts me and my needs first, and is forever caring about my wellbeing and my safety.” Case in point, in regards to me stepping into the case. “He’s way out of my league in every capacity. And yet, when he looks at me, I feel as if I’m the only woman in the world and that he wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. It’s so magical. I mean, my first husband is basically a child in all the worst ways and hedonistic to a fault. But Ransom is a true man’s man. And he’s a firmly grounded adult. And to be honest, after meeting him, it made me wonder why I stayed with Stanton all those years.”

“Wow, he does sound dreamy. He doesn’t have a brother, does he?” she teases and we share another laugh.

A shrill scream comes from our left out in open waters as a crowd quickly gathers around someone and more shrill cries go off.

Jennifer and I dive in the direction and navigate through a tangle of limbs just to find Bess and Nettie at the heart of the matter.

Oddly enough, Nettie is causally lounging on her back amidst the melee. Come to think of it, that's pretty much par for the course.

"What's going on?" I howl over the sound of screams and shouts for help.

"It's Nettie!" Bess shouts back. "She's got five different sea turtles clamped onto her toes and they won't let go!"

"What?" I squawk as I make my way over. Before I can get there, both Ransom and Wes appear as they swim up in haste.

"What the heck is going on?" Wes shouts.

"Everyone back up," Ransom calls out and about six different women give an audible sigh because of it.

I'll admit, a shirtless Ransom Baxter barking out orders is sigh-worthy on a whole other level.

But I manage to tear my gaze from my soon-to-be husband's perfectly chiseled chest over to Nettie's feet where, sure enough, five sea turtles of varying sizes seem to be clamped down over her toes as Nettie floats serenely in the water.

"I'll get them off," Wes calls out.

“Leave them alone,” Nettie shouts back. “They know a good time when they see one.”

Bess balks at the thought, “More like they know a good snack when they see one. You’ll be lucky to have any toes left once they’re through with you.”

“You’re just jealous you weren’t chosen to be their queen,” Nettie shoots back.

“You’re right.” Bess tosses her hand in exasperation. “I don’t know how I’ll sleep tonight because of it. I guess I’ll count myself lucky—while I count all ten of my toes!”

It takes both Wes and Ransom to wrestle those turtles off of Nettie—and I do mean wrestle. Thankfully, all of Nettie’s toes are still intact and her skin isn’t broken.

We get her back to shore and Wes procures a cabana for us right on the water’s edge.

Ransom buys us lunch—spicy chicken tacos—and an ice-cold crazy coconut for all of us—per Nettie’s request. Virgins, per my request.

And as I’m just about to fall asleep in Ransom’s arms, I take one last look in the direction of Jennifer and her friends. But something catches my eye just past them, a man in a T-shirt and shorts with a baseball cap pulled low over his forehead. It’s the same man from the ship who I’ve spotted before and a shiver runs up my spine.

“What’s the matter?” Ransom asks as he gives a casual glance over his shoulder.

“Nothing,” I say, snuggling back into his arms.

I don’t want to ruin the moment. But I darn sure make note of the fact that the man in the baseball cap is watching Jennifer and her friends. The first two instances could

have been a coincidence, but something tells me we're well past that now. Whoever he is, he just landed on my suspect list.

And speaking of my investigation, according to Jennifer, Hetty was close enough to know Lucy's family.

I know exactly who I'm talking to next.

Here's hoping Hetty King has a lot to say.

CHAPTER 14

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Dear Trixie,

It's Sandy here, and I need your help again. Well, I took your advice and met a few kind people on the cruise. I even went on a snorkeling adventure and met a handsome man named Jim! We've been hanging out quite a bit since then and I even thought I had met my soul mate.

But guess what?! He's here as a part of a bachelor party and I just overheard some news between him and his friends. It turns out he has a wife!

Why are some men such duds? I feel so betrayed and foolish. Here I am on a solo cruise looking to pick up the pieces and now I've broken my heart all over again. Any advice on how to move on from this mess?

Sincerely, Soulmate-Scammed Sandy

Dear Soulmate-Scammed Sandy,

Oh, Sandy, what a heartbreaking twist! Some men can indeed be duds, but let's focus on how to turn this unfortunate chapter into a new beginning.

First off, let's ditch the guilt and self-blame. You're not foolish—you're trusting and open-hearted, which are qualities to cherish, not regret. The dud in this story is him,

not you.

Next, channel that frustration into something empowering. Plan a day just for you. Pamper yourself with a spa day, indulge in your favorite hobbies, or go on a mini adventure. Remind yourself of all the wonderful things you bring to the table, independent of any man.

And if all else fails, enjoy a refreshing drink at the bar.

Wishing you smoother seas and brighter days ahead,

XOXO Trixie

Wes texted me after I finished up two of my three art classes for the day.

Once we got back from swimming with sea turtles, still thankful that all of Nettie's toes were accounted for, Tinsley, ever the taskmaster, insisted that I teach one class after the other, stating that the passengers were hungry to create a replica of the stunning oceanic vistas that were afoot. So, of course, I quickly obliged. As much as I hate to admit it, Tinsley is more or less my boss in this floating paradise on the sea.

I had the crew help me lug out all of the supplies we'd need to appropriately capture the sunset as it turned the sky luscious shades of tangerine, cotton candy pink, and ethereal hues of lavender.

We painted dolphins prancing on azure waters and a few even painted man-eating turtles—apparently rumors have begun. Nonetheless, most all of it was done with acrylics, with the exception of one woman who insisted on using watercolor. Unfortunately, she learned the hard way that watercolor is the most unforgiving medium. Come to think of it, if Tinsley was an art medium, she would most certainly be watercolor.

But I digress. Toward the end of the second class, Wes sent both Ransom and me a text saying that he's opened the Captain's Buffet up a little early in the cruise as a sort of engagement gift to Ransom and me.

The Captain's Buffet is a regal and elegant affair that takes place in the Starlight Lounge on one of the uppermost decks, in a circular room with a three hundred and sixty degree stunning view. And boy, was I ever excited to hear it. If ever there was one thing that can make me eschew dinner in the Main Dining room, it's the Captain's Buffet.

The Captain's Buffet has gone by many names in the past—The Grand Feast, Elysian Eats, Gourmet Galore, and the Lavish Spread. But tonight it simply goes by The Captain's Culinary Gift. A sort of a wink and nod to Ransom and me.

The buffet itself is invite-only—usually to the people who the captain feels he needs to impress on behalf of the cruise lines, or anyone who he feels he has something to make up for. And seeing that this lavish meal usually only takes place on the final dress your best night, it's a treat knowing we'll have it at least twice this week.

Heck, if Wes really wanted to woo me while I was still available to be wooed, all he had to do was open up the Captain's Buffet on a nightly basis and I would have been his—bought solely by way of cheddar biscuits, king crab legs, and perfectly boiled lobster. Don't get me started on the prime rib and the lamb chops—both of which are perfectly rare just the way I like them.

Ransom let me know he'd meet me up there but asked me not to wait because he had a call back from the coroner's office and it seemed rather important. I didn't fight him on it.

In fact, the only person I fought a battle royale to get here was Tinsley who threw a fit only a toddler could admire when I told her my third art class was canceled

posthaste due to personal reasons. Those personal reasons were hunger—and a lust born of my love of all-you-can-eat oversized prawns.

Tinsley tried to reason with me, stating that I had to earn my keep. To which I kindly, and okay, perhaps not-so-kindly informed her that I, in fact, do not have to earn my keep. Even though I do get paid to teach—an embarrassingly paltry amount—I purchase my own cruise each time the ship sails. I mostly do that because the cabin I would have received as an employee is sunk in the bowels of the ship and not a single part of me wanted to share a room with three other women, all fighting for the use of a bathroom that would make the facilities on any airline feel like a luxurious palace.

No, thank you. Besides, I buy my cabin on the same deck where Bess and Nettie reside—because that makes it easy to carry Nettie back to her room when needed. And it's almost always needed. Really, Bess and I should think about staging an intervention for both booze and men.

Anyway, I didn't even change my clothes. I came straight from the lido deck after unintelligibly begging about six different staff members to help haul my art supplies back to the craft cave because I couldn't miss a single second of all-you-can-eat king crab legs. But I suppose a bright blue A-line dress is probably one of the most practical things you can wear to a buffet next to elastic pants so I'm all set to go.

The Starlight Lounge is dimly lit with enough twinkle lights overhead that it actually looks like a blanket of stars. The windows glow peach from the sunset, which makes the water look like red grenadine. But I'm not looking at the ceiling or the blood-red waters. My eyes are strictly fastened on the culinary offerings before me.

Like a warrior going off to battle, I take a moment to soak in the lay of the land, strategizing where and when to begin because heaven knows exactly where I'll finish—the lava cake is in abundance here as well.

The Captain's Culinary Gift Buffet has a dessert lineup that reads like a roll call from every five-star restaurant that has ever existed. Each and every sweet treat before me is truly to die for, to kill for, and perhaps worthy enough to do a little time in the Big House for, too.

Speaking of death, a spray of hot pink stars begin to twinkle by my side and I'm more than happy to see Beatrice Fiddlefae appear, looking just as anxiously at the culinary offerings as I am.

"Oh my," she muses. "I guess we know what happens next."

"You bet we do," I say, grabbing a tray, then a warm plate from the queue, then another warm plate, then another until my tray can't handle another piece of porcelain.

Investigation be darned because right now I'm too focused on getting my hands on all the surf and turf options I can eat rather than shaking down this ghost for all the clues I can wrangle.

I'm sure Ransom would be glad to know that even when justice hangs in the balance I still put my primal needs first—as he is forever telling me to do.

I'll agree with him on that, but only when it comes to food. Not even sleep is sacred enough for me to turn a blind eye to the investigation.

Priorities, I suppose. It's nice to know I've got them.

I toss crustaceans and questionably cooked slices of meat alike onto my tray with reckless abandon. And oddly enough, Beatrice keeps saying things like more lobster , more king crab legs in the ironic ways that some people say more cowbell these days.

As a culinary cheerleader, she's a natural. And it almost makes me feel sorry that she can't have a single bite.

But as soon as we take a seat by the floor-to-ceiling window, she's not exactly looking at the view either. Instead, once I dive in, she dives in herself. No wonder she was insisting that I pile it high—the more for her to inhale.

“If I knew you were going to eat, I would have grabbed another tray,” I say, casting a sideways glance at my fellow passengers who are too busy inhaling their own lobsters and crabs to notice that half my food is disappearing, seemingly of its own volition.

“You obviously weren't paying attention to my diatribe back at the seafood station,” she says, sucking a luscious bit of white meat right out of the king crab leg with a tenacity I can only admire.

“You know it makes me jealous when you do that,” I say, wagging my useless crab crackers at her. “I'm still relegated to these. I guess, sometimes it pays to be dead.”

“It always pays to be dead,” she counters with a wink. “Although this spread pales in compassion to what we have access to—as you would say twenty-four seven. But seeing that paradise is outside of time, it's neither here nor there.”

A guttural sound emits from me as I momentarily pause from shoving an oversized prawn into my mouth.

“You're making me long for paradise,” I say with a sigh.

“Your time will come. And you know how to get there. The rules are in the Good Book.” She toasts me with yet another one of my crab legs.

“Speaking of books, whoever stabbed Lucy Taylor to death deserves to have a legal tome or two thrown at them. And for as much as you don’t care for the woman, you’re stuck with this subpar buffet until her killer is caught.”

A round of gasps breaks out from my right and I look to see a couple looking aghast my way.

“ Ooh , sorry.” I wrinkle my nose their way before repositioning myself slightly so that I’m facing the window and no one can overtly see my mouth moving. Clearly, I’ll have to keep it down since I’m seated around a bunch of eavesdroppers.

“I hated the woman.” Beatrice’s face flushes the same hue as that hot pink wool coat she seems eternally stuck in. “She was a morally repugnant gnat who lied her way to the top.”

I squint over at the woman, midbite. “The top of what?” I quickly shove that prawn into my mouth as I await her answer.

“The top of the food chain.” She’s back to wagging that crab leg in my face.

I’m about to ask what food chain just as a body—a rather obnoxious body—plops down across from me and bounces Beatrice right out of her proverbial seat.

And just like that, my appetite up and disappears.

CHAPTER 15

“Tinsley”—I gasp as I thrust my hand forward and grab the king crab leg that was dangling midair just seconds before, right here in the Starlight Lounge where I was—as in past tense—enjoying the feast of a lifetime.

“Ugh.” Tinsley flips her chestnut locks with a look of thorough disgust. “Double-fisting seafood, Trixie? Have you no couth? I still don’t know what either Wes or Ransom sees in you. And yes, I’m still counting the Captain in the number of buffoons smitten by your presence.” She waves a hand at the scrumptious offerings behind us. “You have no idea how much this costs to put on. The stakeholders of Royal Lineage are going to be royally pissed. I wouldn’t be surprised at all to learn they’ve deducted it from the Captain’s salary. They’re stingy that way.”

I drop my crab onto my plate—both of them.

If anyone can figure out a way to make me lose my appetite—albeit only momentarily—it’s Tinsley.

“What are you doing here?” I snip without meaning to.

Okay, fine. I so meant to. But can you blame me? She hasn’t even bothered to hit the buffet. It makes me wonder what kind of monster she truly is.

She leans in with a mean look in her eyes. “I need something from you.”

The picture becomes clearer. She’s the greedy kind of monster.

“Ooh, I like her.” Beatrice giggles to herself. “I was sort of a forceful witch myself back in the day when I was stuck in my size sevens. Geez, how I miss shoes.”

Honestly, shoes are so overrated.

I turn my full focus back to the witch before me.

“What do you need?” I snip again. I can’t help it, my filet mignon is getting cold. I knew I should have started there first. I still consider myself an amateur at these things.

Tinsley’s lips twitch as if she were hesitating. “I need your help to save this disaster of a bachelorette party. The head hen cornered me earlier and she’s charged me with turning their collective frown upside down. And you know I can’t stand a challenge I’m not equipped to take on.”

“What exactly can’t you take on?”

I’m pretty sure it’s happiness. That seems to be a foreign subject to her, by and large.

“I need you and those biddies of yours to rub elbows with the Bride Tribe and liven things up.”

“The Bride Tribe? Are we starting a reality show?”

“Ooh, that sounds fun,” Beatrice says, reaching for a plate and I tap her on the hand. It’s always amazed me at how solid the dead can feel when they want to.

Tinsley scoffs my way. “Yes, we will start a reality show if it makes our passengers happy.” Her eyes bug out as she says that last word. And come to think of it, Tinsley might actually be allergic to happiness. “And if you think that’s funny, wait until you

meet the Maids of Dishonor and the Bride Wars.”

“Sounds riveting,” I muse. At least she’s entertaining, which when it comes down to it, is all the ship asks her to be as the cruise director. “Okay, fine. We’re in,” I say, speaking for both Bess and Nettie—and probably the ghost to my left.

“Good.” Tinsley gives a curt nod. “I’m sure the newly crowned Queen of Foot-in-Turtle-Mouth-Disease will have them smiling until their cheeks hurt.”

I nod because it’s true. And I’m sure Nettie would accept the mocking title with pride.

“What’s this?” a female voice practically sings as my blonde bestie slips into the seat next to Tinsley with a cat-who-is-about-to-eat-the-canary look on her face. She’s clad in her uniform, as is Tinsley—both looking like the seafaring Bobbsey Twins with their tight white blouses and navy pencil skirts. “This tea looks piping hot. Do spill.”

No one loves gossip more than Elodie. In fact, gossip might actually be her middle name for all I know.

“Tinsley wants me to cheer up Jennifer and the Bridal Bunch,” I say, shoving another shrimp into my mouth just as fast as I say it.

Tinsley’s lips round out in horror. “I did not ask you to cheer anyone up. I asked you to take over and become the life of the party. They came to enjoy some raunchy bachelorette bash and stomp around the ship like a bunch of drunk sailors, not mourn the loss of one of their own. Besides, Hetty assured me that everyone agreed to put off all grief until we dock back in Florida.”

“She said that?” both Beatrice and I ask in unison, although they only heard me.

Tinsley nods. "They even sealed it with some sort of country bumpkin howl of approval."

"The crow of the rooster." Elodie gives a guttural chuckle as she looks my way. "You heard the woman." She hitches her blonde locks toward Tinsley. "You're to parade around this ship like a drunken sailor. If it helps, I'll lead the charge."

"Really?" I give a hopeful nod. "I could probably use your help. I mean, I'm not even sure if Bess and Nettie have thrown a bachelorette party in this century, let alone in their lifetimes. And my idea of a good time consists of this." I pick up a crab leg for effect. "Please help. That is, if you're up for the task."

Elodie's lips curl into a malevolent smile. "Oh my sweet, sweet Trixie. I am more than up for the task." She rubs her hands together as if she relished the task and I have no doubt she does. "I'm going to whip up a bachelorette party to end all bachelorette parties. Last night of the trip, expect fireworks. I'm going to throw both you and Jennifer the bachelorette send-off of a lifetime." She checks her watch. "In fact, you know those dirty lessons in love I was set on teaching you? I think I'll extend my services to the other bride-to-be on the ship and the rest of her feisty friends. Ooh, if I act fast, I can order supplies to be picked up at our next port." She takes off just as quick as she came.

"I'm off, too," Beatrice announces. "I'm not waiting around for the offerings to dwindle. There's a feast to be had. It does make me miss home." She floats off for the buffet in a fury.

"We're not done by a long shot," I call after her in hopes people will assume I'm shouting at Elodie who also seems to have a knack for disappearing like an apparition.

"We're not done by a long shot either," Tinsley hisses my way. "Elodie's perverted

party isn't until the final day. I need those women's spirits lifted posthaste. You're to glue yourself to their side and make the magic happen. Do you hear me?"

A sly smile begs to come to my lips. "Orders are orders."

Tinsley stalks off—for the buffet. Clearly, she doesn't have any pressing shopping needs to fulfill.

And just as I'm about shove another prawn into my piehole, someone else lands in the seat across from me.

Someone far sexier and far more delicious than anything on this ship. Okay, fine. This solar system .

"Hey, beautiful," Ransom says with his bedroom eyes in full force before leaning in and landing a kiss to my cheek. "What was that about?" He hitches his head toward Tinsley with a mild look of irritation on his face. She does seem to have that effect on people.

"She commanded me to glue myself to the bachelorette party on board and try to cheer them up a bit. Oh, and Elodie offered to throw a proper bachelorette party for us all on our final night—and pass along a few naughty tips and tricks for the bedroom."

"I'll alert security."

"I have no doubt we'll need it. Why do I have a feeling penis straws and strippers are in my future?"

He frowns my way and looks heart-stoppingly handsome. "Have a good time."

“That’s it? Have a good time?”

“I trust your judgment. And it’s all in good fun. Besides, Tinsley gave an order.” He casts a frown her way.

“What did the coroner say?”

“He said there might be two different prints on the knife, none of which belong to the victim. They’re sending it out to a more sophisticated lab on the mainland.” He leans in a notch and his lips curve at the tips. “What did Jennifer say this afternoon?”

“How did you know I spoke with her?” I give an open-mouthed smile.

“I’m everywhere.” He’s back to frowning. “Trixie?—”

“I wasn’t speaking to her as a suspect.” I cringe because I sort of was. “Technically, I was speaking to her as a friend.” Truth.

And then I tell him everything I gleaned from Jennifer, regarding both our friendly yet half-starved ghost and our unfortunate victim, Lucy Taylor.

“Beatrice hates Lucy?” Ransom looks equally puzzled by Beatrice’s harsh stance. “You know what that means. We have a ghost to grill.”

I look over just as he says it and Beatrice evaporates in a sea of hot pink stars as if she heard. And I have no doubt she did.

I nod over at Ransom. “We will grill the ghost. And I will stick to Jennifer and her pals like glue per the request of my superior.” I bite down a smile as I say it. “I am under orders.”

Ransom is back to growling. “And I’ll be right there with you,” he says as he lets out a breath and picks up my hand. “If only to keep you safe.”

Ransom and I spend the next few hours grazing our way through one of the best and most scrumptious gifts that Wes could have given us. And we finish it off with a taste of just about every dessert that’s present and accounted for. I eat my weight twice over in crème brûlée and molten chocolate lava cakes, and Ransom does as well.

Ransom is determined to keep me out of danger, to keep me safe.

Although no one was able to keep Lucy Taylor safe from a knife-wielding maniac.

But someone can ensure she gets justice. And I have a feeling that someone is me.

Bridal Tribe, here I come. And they won’t know what hit them.

CHAPTER 16

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Dear Trixie,

It's Sandy again! I was drowning my sorrows at the bar when a stranger struck up a conversation. His name is Tom, and we really hit it off! Even more surprising, he lives just twenty minutes from me! He swears he's single, and we've already planned our first off-ship date. Could this be my real shot at happiness?

Sincerely, Hopeful Again Sandy

Dear Hopeful Again Sandy,

Oh, Sandy, what a delightful turn of events! Life certainly has a way of surprising us when we least expect it.

First off, kudos to you for getting back out there and opening your heart again. It takes courage to embrace new opportunities, especially after a letdown.

As for Tom, he sounds like a breath of fresh air. But let's proceed with a touch of caution. After all, we don't want another dud situation. Take your time to get to know him and verify his single status. Maybe a little social media sleuthing or a casual chat about his past will put your mind at ease.

Plan that off-ship date somewhere fun and relaxed. A coffee shop, a casual lunch

spot, or a walk in the park are all great choices for getting to know each other better. Enjoy the moment, laugh, and see where the conversation takes you.

Remember to trust your instincts. If something feels off, don't hesitate to ask questions. But if everything checks out and your connection grows, then go ahead and enjoy the blossoming romance.

Life is all about second chances and new beginnings, Sandy. Here's to hoping Tom is the genuine, charming guy you deserve.

Wishing you all the best on your new adventure,

XOXO Trixie

Stanton: Trixie, I insist that you cease and desist in your new marital endeavors, or else.

Trixie: ??

Okay, so last night may not have yielded much as far as shaking down that friendly ghost of mine, but as soon as Ransom and I finished up—or should I say vacuumed up The Captain's Culinary Gift—we headed off for a sunset stroll on the upper deck where the track is.

And seeing that most people steer clear of that gym-inspired torment, we practically had the entire deck to ourselves. Let's just say that the dreamy yellow and peach-swirled sunset sky inspired a few steamy kisses between us.

For one brief moment, Ransom and I forgot all about the case, all about Stanton and his ever increasingly hostile text messages, and we even forgot about Quinn and her quest to drive me mad—and perhaps right off the ship. I didn't even ask for an update

in that department last night.

But this bright, beautiful morning, Bess, Nettie, and I are voluntarily stepping off the Emerald Queen and onto the sun-soaked docks of Freeport, Grand Bahama.

With one look at this paradise, I'm immediately hit with a sensory overload that's all too welcome. The warm, salty breeze tickles my skin, carrying with it the scents of tropical flowers and freshly grilled seafood. The sky is a perfect shade of azure and dotted with puffy white clouds that look like they've been plucked straight out of a painting. Speaking of which, I do my best to memorize the beauty of this place so I can do just that when I get back to the ship—paint to my heart's content.

Speaking of the ship, Ransom had paperwork to tend to this morning, but both he and Wes said they'd catch up with us in just a few hours.

I had no idea that when I set foot onto the Emerald Queen, all by myself that day so long ago, that I would never be alone again.

The Emerald Queen of the Seas has given me so much, but the biggest gift of all has been the friendships I've acquired, and, of course, the hot ex-FBI behavioral analyst soon to be my husband.

Freeport harbor buzzes with activity, from vendors hawking their colorful wares to locals greeting us with cheery smiles. There's an industrial area to the harbor on our right, but to the left, I can see palm trees swaying gently in the breeze. Just beyond that, the glowing green hues of the lush vegetation contrast beautifully with the deep blue of the ocean. The bouncy sound of reggae music drifts through the air, mingling with the chatter of fellow passengers and the distant calls of seagulls.

"Hello, Freeport." I sigh, adjusting my sunglasses and taking in the view. "There's nothing like that first step onto Bahamian soil to make you feel alive."

“I’ll drink to that,” Bess says, adjusting that wide-brimmed hat on her head as she surveys the bustling port. “This place already feels like paradise.”

Nettie grunts while scanning the crowd, “You know what would make this even better? Finding ourselves some local hotties to show us a good time.”

Bess rolls her eyes. “Sure, if you’re into cave dwellers with wings who like to suck your blood—because I’m guessing those are the only hotties we’re going to see today.”

Nettie gives a wicked grin. “You know my type, Toots.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Bess mutters and we share a quick laugh.

It’s true for the most part on both counts. Nettie does have a thing for men that bite, and we are headed to a cave today. We’ll be exploring the Lucayan National Park, and I can’t wait to see what secrets it holds.

Last night, after my smooching session with Ransom came to an abrupt end due to a scuffle he needed to break up, I met up with Bess and Nettie and we boot-scooted ourselves over to the casino. That’s where we overheard Jennifer and her friends talking about their excursion to Lucayan National Park this afternoon, so Bess, Nettie, and I booked the same excursion.

We make our way through the port and spot Jennifer and her entourage boarding the same bus we’re headed to.

“Looks like we’re on the right track,” I murmur to myself.

We climb aboard, and the bus is already buzzing with excited chatter before we travel for about forty minutes and arrive at our destination.

No sooner do we step off the bus than the park's beauty envelops us, like swallowing us into a dream. Towering pine trees stretch toward the sky as their needles whisper in the gentle breeze. Mangrove trees create intricate patterns along the water's edge with their bushy green foliage skirting the sky as their roots dance well above the sand at least six feet, and they look like natural sculptures that make me want to linger and stare.

The air is filled with the sweet, earthy scent of nature, mingled with the faint brine of the sea. Colorful birds flit among the branches, chirping away as they dart off to explore the island themselves.

Jennifer and her friends head off toward the trails, and we do our best to follow at a somewhat discreet distance. I'm about to suggest we pick up the pace just as a spray of hot pink stars appears, swirling and sparkling before us. And, sure enough, the ghost with the most secrets materializes as her familiar hot pink wool coat shimmers in the sunlight.

She really should consider a wardrobe change. It's hotter than Hades out here today.

"Bea," I say with a little wave, thrilled to see her. I quickly grab Bess and Nettie's hands so they can listen in, too. "All right, ladies, our ghostly guest of honor has decided to grace us with her poltergeist presence."

"Hey there, Toots," Nettie doesn't waste any time in greeting the dead. "How about you float around the vicinity and lead the way to a couple of hot-to-trot gentlemen looking to have a good time? Trixie here is covered in that department, so maybe you could drum up another dead body to keep her busy."

"Would you stop?" Bess hisses at her bestie. "Beatrice, please feel free to ignore her. She's determined to land us in a Bahamian prison cell, most likely on prostitution charges."

“Now we’re talking,” Nettie grouses with a mischievous gleam in her eye.

I nod toward Beatrice. “It’s fair to say something of that nature would be right up Nettie’s naughty alley—especially the prison part. But I’d much rather you help solve Lucy Taylor’s murder. This cruise isn’t getting any longer. In fact, I’m hoping to speak with Hetty King this afternoon. Why don’t you come with me?”

“That’s a good idea,” Bess conquers. “I’ll let you ladies shake the woman down while I try to keep Nettie from shaking up trouble. In fact”—Bess lets go of my hand and links arms with Nettie as she starts to drag her off toward one of the trails—“we’ll go get lost in the jungle for a bit and get some fresh air. We’ll catch up with you ladies soon enough.” She grips her wide-brimmed hat with her free hand as she does her best to drag Nettie off.

“Good thinking,” Nettie tells her. “Ditch the fuddy-duddies and find ourselves a couple of beefcakes to give us a private tour. Hey? I bet we’ll find pirates, and we’ll lead them right to the real treasure.”

“Heaven help.” Bess sighs as they disappear onto the trail.

“Beatrice”—I turn back to the specter before me who just so happens to be shimmering like a puddle of pink glitter, most likely because she’s melting—“I wanted to ask if you could elaborate on what you meant last night,” I say, cutting to the chase. “You mentioned that Lucy was on top of the food chain?”

Her expression darkens and so do those shimmering stars that create a fuchsia aura around her.

“Lucy was a man-eater,” she growls. “And she certainly didn’t care whose man she was gobbling up. She thrived on seducing men, married or otherwise. It was all just a game to her.”

I nod, remembering my conversation with Jennifer. “Jennifer told me all about how Lucy slept with your ex. I’m so sorry.”

Beatrice’s face twists with anger. “She sure did. She seduced him right after I confided in her about our breakup.” She shudders. “Actually, we were just on a little break, but we were going to get back together. Lucy knew that. I confided in her, I trusted her, and she ran straight over and pulled him into the nearest dark corner. She ruined everything between Teddy and me.” Her ghostly form flickers with fury and the pink stars surrounding her burn bright as flares.

“I’m so sorry she hurt you so deeply. The strange thing is, that whoever gets sent down to help solve a murder is typically someone that the deceased loved the most. I think that means that Lucy really did care for you on some level.”

Her hot pink lips fall open. “I suppose she did in her own twisted way. That’s just like Lucy.” She growls as she glares out at the waterline. “She was a nice person way down deep—and I do mean deep. But it’s as if she was raised by wolves. She wanted the attention of any and every man, which is ironic because she was forever trying to warn us about which men were to be avoided.”

“Maybe because she vetted them all out for you?” I cringe a little as I say it because, well, it doesn’t paint the deceased in any better light. Not that she didn’t do enough to cloud her own reputation.

“I don’t think so. I always got the feeling that someone in Lucy’s past hurt her deeply. And I got the feeling it was a man. If she thought you were dating a lemon, she’d be the first to tell you to run. But if she thought you were dating a peach, she’d be the first to take a bite out of him.”

“Some friend,” I say, shaking my head as the crowd in front of us all seems to speed in the same direction at once. “But Bea, despite all of Lucy’s indiscretions, I really

need to figure out who killed her,” I say gently. “And I think you’re a vital key in helping me out.”

Beatrice takes a deep breath and she blows out a stream of tiny stars. “All right, Trixie. I’ll help, but I’m doing this for you. Just know this—Lucy had a lot of enemies. Anyone could have done the witch in.”

I look over and spot Hetty King having a rather animated yet friendly chat with Jennifer and their redheaded friend, Amber.

“Anyone?” I hitch my head in Hetty’s direction. “Let’s just see about that.”

CHAPTER 17

The ghost of Beatrice Fiddlefae and I follow along with the group just as the tour guide announces we're heading to Ben's Cave, right here on sunny Grand Bahamas.

The cavern looms ahead with its dark maw set into the lush landscape while promising us mysteries that are both ancient and recent. As we near it, the guide begins his spiel with enthusiasm and a touch of reverence.

"Ben's Cave is one of the longest underwater cave systems in the world," the guide, a lanky older man with a deep complexion and gorgeous teeth, explains as he gestures toward the entrance. "It was named after Ben Rose, a legendary diver. The cave features a unique halocline, a layer where freshwater and saltwater meet. These caves are home to rare crustaceans, and dare I say the fossilized remains of the Lucayan people, who were the original inhabitants of these islands."

A collective gasp culminates in our small group as we take a steep staircase down and end up on a wooden platform with just enough room for the lot of us. I note Bess and Nettie have made their way down here as well—with Bess' wide-brimmed straw hat they were easy to spot—but that doesn't stop me and my friendly ghost by proxy from moseying on over to where Hetty stands admiring the view from the front row.

The smell of mustiness takes over, but that doesn't take away from the crystal aqua waters below that seem to have mesmerized us all.

"Legend has it"—the guide continues as his voice booms inside the cave and gives a slight echo—"that these caves were used by the Lucayans for shelter and, some say,

for sacred rituals. The combination of the freshwater lens and the saltwater makes it a unique ecosystem, attracting divers from all over the world. But those are the pros. We bid you to look at the waters but not enter them. Swimming is strictly prohibited, as the tunnels which go on for miles can be dark and disorienting. Please take your time and enjoy the natural beauty of the wonder before you.”

Everyone pulls out their phones at once, and soon the cave is lit up with enough bolts of faux lightning you’d think the paparazzi were on the hunt for a famous celebrity.

The crowd breaks out into murmurs as I sidle up next to Hetty.

“Enjoying the tour?” I ask, trying to sound cheerful as if I’m not about to threaten to toss her over the railing and send her to the water below if she doesn’t confess everything she knows about Lucy Taylor and her would-be killer.

Hetty jumps slightly, her eyes darting to mine before she forces a smile. “Oh, Trixie, hi!”

She gives a little laugh and it looks painful with her face so bloated and full of fillers. Her lips are pretty puffy, too—and not in a good way. It’s what Stanton used to call the deflated balloon look. He said it was a sure sign that they had too much plumper injected into their lips at some point, and continued to do it for years. In other words, she stretched them out like overblown tires. But despite the fact, Hetty is a beautiful woman. Her short dark locks are pulled back with a bright green visor sitting over her head and she’s donned a matching dress with the pattern of palm fronds decorating it.

“Oh wow,” Beatrice muses as she leans and inspects the woman closely. “She looks awful. Why does she insist on doing this to herself? I swear, when she first came to town, she looked like an entirely different person. Ironically, she looked much younger.”

I give the hint of a nod her way.

It's true. Stanton even admitted that some procedures meant to give the patient the dew of youth could have the opposite effect if overdone. Case in point.

"Yes, I'm really enjoying this," Hetty says, nodding back to the crystal waters below, and looking rather angry at them as she struggles to smile. "Stuff like this has always fascinated me. Believe me, when I was younger, I had dreams of wanting to run off to a tropical place like this and just start over." She shakes her head wistfully as she stares below, mesmerized. "And not too long ago, I almost pulled the trigger." She laughs at the thought. "Of course, I had to end up in boring ol' Connecticut, but if I hadn't, I wouldn't have met such great friends as these." She glances toward her cohorts as they busy themselves with taking an abundant amount of selfies. "And I had no idea there was so much history here."

"Me neither," I say, glancing down at the water. "And the thought of fossilized bodies being down there somewhere? Who knew this cave could hide such secrets? I suppose caves have something in common with people in that respect."

Her smile falters for a split second. "I suppose so," she says lightly. "I guess you never know what people are hiding."

"Ask her about Jennifer," Beatrice whispers as if anyone else could hear her, and since no one is touching me, she's more than safe in that department.

I clear my throat a touch.

"Hetty," I lean in, "how are you guys holding up? Especially Jennifer? It can't be easy for her, going on with everything after all of you lost a friend."

"Oh, it's been hell." She sighs hard. "And with Jennifer, she's managing the best she

can. But you're right, she's taking this the hardest because she feels, well, responsible ,” she says slowly. Someone breaks out into a high-pitched laugh across the way and we look over to see it's Jennifer herself. “But then, Jennifer has always been good at putting on a brave face, even when things get tough.”

“Sounds like you know her pretty well,” I say.

“Oh, she does,” Bea confirms. “Those two have been thick as thieves right from the beginning.”

Thick as thieves? She may not have said they were thick as killers , but my interest is piqued nonetheless.

“Hetty,” I say the woman's name below a whisper. “I saw Jennifer and Lucy share some sharp words the first night on the trip. Do you have any idea what that could be about?”

Beatrice gasps and swallows about six stars in the process. “Do you always come on so strong? I like you more by the minute.”

I wince at the thought and immediately regret the question.

“You don't have to answer that,” I say quickly to Hetty. “I'm so sorry. That was way out of line.”

Hetty scoffs. “It sure wasn't. I mean, someone killed my friend in cold blood. Out of all of these witches, I was closest to Lucy. She was like my sister.”

Beatrice nods. “It's true. Closer than sisters if you can believe it.”

“Oh, Hetty,” I say. “I'm so sorry.”

“Believe me, I’m even sorrier. Once I get home, I just know the floodgates are going to open. We’re all trying to stay strong and enjoy what’s left of the trip—for Jennifer’s sake mostly. And, of course, I know that Lucy would have wanted it that way.”

“I’m sure she would have.”

“But back to your question.” She shoots an icy glance in Jennifer’s direction. “Yes, Jen and Lucy had some sort of argument brewing these last few weeks. I think it centered around Marcus—that’s Jennifer’s fiancé. I’m not sure exactly what was going on, and to be truthful, I was afraid if I dug around I’d find out that Lucy had slept with him, too. She was such a little slut when it came to men. Let’s just say the poor girl had daddy issues and an entire string of abusive boyfriends before she landed in Connecticut. Anyway, in some way, shape, or form Lucy had wrangled an opinion about Marcus and that’s what was brewing between those two women.”

“That’s too bad.” I rock back on my heels and consider it. “You know, the night I saw Lucy and Jen going at it, the strange part is that Lucy looked like the one who was outraged. And Jennifer looked as if she wanted nothing to do with the conversation. I would think if Lucy seduced Marcus that Jennifer would be the one reading her the riot act.”

“I guess you’re right.” Hetty shrugs. “Poor Jennifer has had a rough time when it comes to matters of the heart. Her ex-husband really did a number on her. She’s got trust issues, and I can’t say I blame her. She so badly wants things to work out with her and Marcus. She’s the type of woman who hasn’t been single since she was sixteen. She wouldn’t know how to breathe if she didn’t have a man by her side telling her how to do it.”

I grimace at the thought. “I’ll admit, it sounds familiar,” I say, pointing to myself. “Although I couldn’t pass up my chance with my fiancé. He’s the perfect man as far

as I'm concerned."

"Oh, honey"—Hetty belts out a laugh—"I've seen your man. He's the total package."

"Amen to that," Bea says, fanning herself and blowing an entire solar system of miniature stars into her face.

I can't help but smile. "I did get pretty lucky. But I'm sure Jennifer got lucky, too, or she wouldn't be marrying this new guy."

Hetty is back to shrugging. "I guess so. Anyway, I don't really know too much about her ex, though. All I do know is she's forever worried he would come after her for more money. Jennifer has a thriving interior decorating business. And Dan, that's her ex, well, he's just a loser who was suckling off her financially for years. But as far as Lucy and her enemies go..." She glances out at the crowd. "Of course, then there's Amber."

Now this I've got to hear.

CHAPTER 18

“Amber Walker?” Beatrice’s voice echoes in my ear. “What’s she got to do with this?” she asks as she looks my way as we stand with Hetty King in Ben’s Cave as aqua waters shimmer below us.

I cast a quick glance over my shoulder at the redhead and wonder the very same thing.

“Amber’s always been a bit of a wild card,” Hetty continues. “You never know what version of her you’re going to get. When she’s nice, she’s as sweet as honey, but when she’s got a chip on her shoulder, she’s a volcano waiting to erupt.”

My eyes widen a notch. I distinctly remember her from that first night as well! She, too, looked as if she wanted to strangle Lucy. And maybe she did—or at the least stabbed her in the back.

“She’s been acting strange lately, too.” Hetty ticks her head to the side as she says it. “I’m talking about before we set foot on the ship. In fact, I’d say she was more aloof than usual. She was always on good terms with Lucy, but about a week before the trip, things soured and quickly. I saw them arguing at the welcome party. I was going to ask Lucy what that was all about the next day, but well, for Lucy there was no next day.”

I raise a brow. “Do you think Amber could be involved?”

Hetty sighs as she cranes her neck past me. “I’m just saying, she’s been acting odd.

She had a bit of a falling-out with Lucy a while back. Something about a guy, I think. Maybe that was revitalized. Lucy was a one-hit wonder when it came to angering the legions, as you can see.”

“What did Lucy do for a living again?”

“She was a grifter,” Bea says while rolling her eyes.

Hetty leans in. “She would have told you she was a retired teacher, but the truth is, she was an aide. She never got paid much and they let her go with all the budget cuts affecting our state.”

“How did she manage financially? I bet she was looking for work,” I say.

“Lucy?” Hetty squawks out a laugh. “Apparently, she had a little saved and was whittling that down to nothing. She was broke. But I’m sure when we got back to Connecticut she would have found something to do. The woman was one rent check away from living on the streets. She never could manage her money.” She pats her chest. “Not all of us are trained certified accountants.” She bellows out a laugh.

“Oh, that’s great,” I say as a puzzled look crosses my face. “Do you do that in addition to your event planning business?”

The whites of her eyes flash. “Oh, gosh no. I wasn’t being literal. I meant that accountants are my spirit animal. I’ve been in the event planning biz all my life.” She waves an arm around at the cave. “Who do you think hauled all of these women here? Need a good time? I’m your girl. I’m a natural at it, too. In fact, I made sure we kept the peace from the get-go. I made Jennifer give every one of these women a big giant hug during her welcome party. I mean, let’s face it, they shelled out some serious cash to be here. I wanted Jen to show them all how grateful she was.”

“I’m sure they all appreciated it,” I say.

“Except for Lucy.” Beatrice makes a face. “That woman didn’t appreciate anything.”

“Well, thank you for sharing all of that.” I offer a mournful smile to Hetty. “How about you? Did you happen to have any rough patches with Lucy?”

“It’s an easy thing to do,” Bea grumbles.

“Me?” Hetty laughs with a brittle sound that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “I get along with everyone. I’m an open book, Trixie. What you see is what you get.”

“Well, you sure are a great friend,” I tell her. “Jennifer is lucky to have you and the rest of these women, too. In fact, you’re all lucky to have each other.” I’m about to end it when a thought comes to me. “Say, do you remember a woman by the name of Beatrice Fiddlefae?”

Bea sucks in a breath—one I’m sure she didn’t need.

“Hey”—she elbows me—“don’t tell me you’re out to get the dirt on me, too.”

Before I can answer, Hetty leans back as if to inspect me better.

“You mean Beatrice Fiddle-faddle?” She rolls her eyes. “That’s another troublemaker who was a part of this group.”

“Troublemaker?” Beatrice riots. “Who is she calling a troublemaker? Lucy was the troublemaker.”

Hetty shakes her head as if she heard. “Lucy did her dirty, too, but Beatrice was a little gossip. Our group has been so much more even-keeled without her. Anyway, the

poor thing passed away about a year ago. I'm not sure why I can't find two nice things to say about her." She bites her lip and gets a distant look in her eyes. "A part of me wonders if she set into motion what happened to poor Lucy."

"What?" both Beatrice and I squawk in unison.

"How in the world?" Bea scoffs at the woman.

"How in the world?" I echo.

Hetty just shakes her head. "I didn't want to say it. I didn't want to sully poor Lucy's reputation more than she already sullied it herself, but she was after Amber's husband. And there have been whispers that Amber is on the brink of a divorce all of a sudden."

My fingers rise to my lips. "I'm so sorry to hear it."

"Loose Lucy strikes again," Bea sings.

Hetty nods as if she agrees. "Anyway, if you want to hear more about that, you'll have to speak to Amber about it. I'm not taking part in the rumor mill."

"What's the connection between Beatrice and Amber, though? I mean, as far as Bea setting Lucy's downfall into motion?"

"Beatrice worked at some department store downtown, and apparently Amber's husband was a manager there as well. Rumor has it, Bea introduced them—in hopes of getting Lucy to take her claws out of that rotten rat Beatrice was dating. Why she wanted him back is a wonder."

"It's a wonder to me, too," Bea says. "But I did not and would not ever introduce

Amber's husband to Lucy in hopes she'd eat him for breakfast. Johnathan is a married man." She lifts a finger and looks momentarily bewildered. "Wait a minute, I did introduce those two." She gasps and covers her hot pink lips. "Oh my goodness. They really hit it off and I had to leave because my lunch was over—and they left together. Oh no, I am a homewrecker." She lets out a horrific growl. "I can't live with myself. I can't live ." She shrugs as she lifts a hand and disappears in a puff of hot pink smoke and stars.

Hetty waves at someone behind me as the crowd in the cave begins to thin out.

"I'd better go," she says. "It looks as if we're through here. I'll see you back on the ship, Trixie." She takes a step away before freezing. "Oh, and I almost forgot, I spoke with Elodie Abernathy this morning and we're coordinating our party-throwing efforts. Just know that both you and Jennifer are going to have the biggest and the best bachelorette bash in history. Brace yourself, Trixie Troublefield. This party is going to rock the boat like an earthquake." She lets out a hoot before dancing off.

The boat was already rocked the day Lucy Taylor was stabbed in the back.

And something tells me, I just inched my way to the epicenter of this disaster.

I watch as Amber Walker leaves the area with the rest of her group.

She's next on my suspect list, and I have a feeling I'm about to have a seismic shift in clues because of it.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:00 pm

CHAPTER 19

Stanton: Trixie, I've been thinking. Maybe we made a mistake. We were good together once.

Trixie: A mistake? You think? That's rich coming from you.

Stanton: I mean it. I'm willing to try again. I'll even toss aside the hot blonde I'm seeing just for you.

Trixie: Wow, how generous of you. Sorry, but I'm not interested in being your second choice.

Stanton: Come on, Trix. We had something real. We can get that back.

Trixie: The only thing we had was you constantly looking for something better. I've found better with Ransom.

Stanton: You know he's not good enough for you. We can fix things.

Trixie: We're beyond fixing anything, Stanton. I deserve someone who values me, not someone who throws me away for the next shiny thing.

Stanton: You're going to regret this, Trixie.

Trixie: I regret something, all right, and it's not Ransom.

The crowd inside the cave has thinned considerably, save for a couple of familiar faces as they move this way, Bess and Nettie.

“Well?” Bess says, clasping her wide-brimmed hat as she moves my way. “What happened? Did Hetty make the picture any clearer?”

“Did she confess?” Nettie squawks so loud ten different people turn this way.

“No.” I lift my finger to my lips. “Although she did point my feet in another direction. And she sort of called Beatrice a gossip. They both took off after that.”

“Don’t keep us in suspense,” Bess says. “Who’s the next suspect?”

I’m about to mouth the woman’s name just as a pair of strong arms wrap around me from behind.

“Hello, gorgeous.” Ransom’s voice warms me from behind, and his arms give me a gentle squeeze, pulling me into a tender embrace. He plants a kiss on my cheek and his stubble brushes against my skin, making every last part of me shiver and quiver in the right places. “So who is it?” he rumbles in my ear and it tickles me right down to the bottom of my spine. “Who’s the next suspect?”

A laugh bubbles from me just as Wes saunters over with a wry smile plastered across his face.

“Watch it, Romeo,” he says. “Or I might have to throw you into the water to cool you off.” Wes gives Ransom a friendly shove, and in the process, he accidentally knocks Bess’ hat right off her head and straight into the water below.

“Oh no,” Bess moans into the abyss as she reaches for it a second too late.

“Don’t you worry, Bessie,” Nettie calls out. And before anyone can stop her, she leaps into the water.

“Get back here,” the guide shouts, and by the sound of his voice he’s more than a little alarmed. “Swimming in the water is strictly off-limits!”

We all rush to the edge of the wooden landing just as Nettie begins to flail down below.

“Something’s got me,” she shouts up at us. “The Grim Reaper has grabbed my ankles and he’s sucking me under!”

The crowd around us breaks out into screams. Although Bess and I aren’t screaming, at least not with panic. To be honest, I’m sort of kicking myself right now. I should have seen this coming a mile away. The woman lives for jumping into forbidden waters.

Nettie starts to go under, and soon all that’s above water is one of her hands. And to make matters worse, she’s drifting quickly toward the black maw to the left that leads to umpteen miles of a dark, watery labyrinth.

Without hesitation, Ransom dives in after her, followed by Wes.

More shouting ensues—this time by our rather irate tour guide.

The poor man’s voice continues to rise in a panic, but I can hardly hear him over the pounding of my heart.

Nettie’s head bobs above the surface as she floats off into the dark abyss and dips below the surface, and a second later, Ransom and Wes disappear into the murky depths after her.

“ Ransom ,” I shout, my voice breaking.

The moments stretch out painfully as Bess and I watch the water, waiting for any sign of them. Meanwhile, the spastic guide shouts into his phone at whoever he thinks might save the day.

Ransom and Wes are here, and if they can’t save the day, then we are all royally screwed.

The waters below grow eerily calm as if the turmoil has been swallowed by the depths. My heart hammers in my chest and each beat echoes the fear that grips me. It feels like hours, weeks , but it’s probably just seconds.

Bess wraps her arms around me tight and buries her face in my shoulder as the surface of the water remains undisturbed. All the while, my mind races with terrifying images of Ransom, Wes, and Nettie lost in the matrix of underwater tunnels.

Just when I can’t take another second, a ripple breaks the stillness. Someone is swimming back, emerging from the murky depths.

“ Wes ,” I call out as I see him and Bess is quick to grip the railing.

“Captain,” she shouts. “What’s happening?”

Wes surfaces, gasping for air, and looks up at me, shaking his head.

“I’m sorry,” he says it low. “I lost track of them. They’re gone.”

CHAPTER 20

“Gone?” My voice echoes around the cave we’re standing in like a horror story we can’t step out of.

The Captain’s words hit me like a punch to the gut, and suddenly it feels as if the world has tilted on its axis. Bess lets out a strangled cry as her hands fly to her mouth.

I can’t breathe, can’t think.

The possibility that Ransom, my Ransom, and Nettie, one of my best friends, might be lost forever is too much to bear.

Just as the despair starts to swallow me whole, I see movement in the water.

“It’s Ransom,” Bess shrieks with something just this side of joy? but mostly horror.

And sure enough, it is. Not only is he swimming this way, but he’s got Nettie clinging to his back.

A surge of relief fills me just as Wes and the tour guide quickly help them back onto the platform. Ransom looks exhausted yet determined, while Nettie is pale and shaking.

“We’re okay,” Ransom says, his voice hoarse but steady. “We’re okay.”

Nettie lifts her head a notch. “And more important, we’ve got your hat.” She lifts the

soggy wicker wonder out of the water and Bess and I share a weak laugh.

Just like that, the excursion is over. Half the group decides to head back to the ship, shaken by the near-tragedy, while the rest of us—Bess, Nettie, Wes, Ransom, and I—opt to continue to Gold Rock Beach, hoping the beauty and tranquility of the sea will help us recover from the ordeal. Or, in the least, cool us off.

The trip to Gold Rock Beach is quick, the bus ride taking us through lush landscapes and over quaint bridges. When we arrive, the sight before us is nothing short of breathtaking. The beach stretches out in a perfect arc of white sand, meeting the turquoise water in a gentle kiss. The sunlight dances on the waves, making the entire scene look like something out of a dream, especially since we're still coming out of that nightmare.

We set up under a large palm tree, its fronds providing a welcome shade and the sound of the waves is enough to lull me to sleep.

Bess and Nettie collapse onto their lounge chairs, clearly exhausted from all the excitement.

“Please don’t wake me,” Bess says as she closes her eyes. “Unless there’s an icy drink involved.”

“And hard liquor,” Nettie says, closing her eyes as well. “Or a hot cabana boy.”

Bess snorts. “I thought you preferred cave dwellers with wings who like to suck your blood.”

Nettie chuckles at the thought. “You know my type, Toots.”

I shake my head at the two of them before turning to Ransom.

“Speaking of types, Hetty sure painted Amber Walker in a suspicious light.” I quickly fill him in on all the things that Hetty told me about Jennifer, Amber, and our resident specter, Beatrice.

Ransom’s brows knit together for a moment. “This Lucy gal really got around, didn’t she?”

I give his ribs a quick tweak, “Rumor has it, so did you before I stepped onto the ship.”

His lips flex in a short-lived smile. “And my life has markedly improved since I’ve met you.” He lands a quick kiss to my lips. “Although Lucy seemed to have targeted ineligible men. I would never look twice at a woman if I knew she was in a relationship.”

“Technically, I was married when we met.” I bite down on my lip and hold back a giggle.

Okay, so I had already dumped my dumpster fire of a husband by that point, but it does make for a fun conversation piece, especially at a moment like this.

“Speaking of your ex-husband”—he winces as if the thought of Stanton pained him, and it’s more or less a typical response when it comes to my ex—“I didn’t want to burden you earlier, but I think I should mention it now. He’s been sending me irate text messages. And let’s just say he’s playing fast and loose with the King’s English, and he’s not shy with the expletives either.”

“Oh my goodness,” I hiss as I sit straight up. “I’m going to kill him.”

“I’d like to punch his lights out first if you don’t mind,” he says, reeling me back in.

“But he’s all the way in Maine,” I seethe. “Safe from two would-be physical assaults.”

“Two felony convictions between us.” He sighs and his chest rises and falls, taking me along for the ride. And what a delicious ride it is. Eat your heart out, Stanton.

A low growl emits from his throat. “And since we’re on the topic of disgruntled people, there’s something else you should know.”

I lean up to get a better look at him. “You haven’t changed your mind about the engagement, have you?”

“Do I look insane?” he teases. “It’s Quinn. She’s still got you at the top of her suspect list. She’s trying to figure out why you’re such a prolific serial killer and how you’ve possibly cast your spell on me.”

“Trixie is a powerful witch,” Nettie moans it low as if she were dreaming.

“I’m no such thing,” I say. “I might see a ghost or two, but that’s only because the Man Upstairs has decided to put me in some sort of crime-fighting program with a poltergeist as my sidekick. I didn’t sign up for any of this. I don’t want any of this. But this is what I’ve got. And if the Man Upstairs thinks I’m the one that should find the bodies and solve the crime, then who am I to argue with him?”

Ransom opens his mouth to say something, then thinks better of it, or at least I think he’s thinking better of it.

“I’m sorry, Trixie, but it’s my job, not yours, to track down the killers. As for finding the bodies, I wish you wouldn’t do that either, but that’s more or less out of everyone’s control. Quinn thinks we should start monitoring your every move. Just know that I’ve already volunteered for the effort. But I’m not going to do it,” he says

softly. “I trust you. I know for a fact that you had nothing to do with any of the homicides we’ve dealt with on this ship.”

“Quinn doesn’t agree. She thinks I’m a menace to the ship’s society. I bet if I told her I was leaving for good, she’d help me pack my bags.”

“That and she might escort you off the ship at gunpoint.”

My mood sours at the thought. Come to think of it, my mood always sours when Quinn is in the equation.

Ransom squeezes my hand reassuringly. “I know you’re not guilty of anything, Trix. I’ll figure this out.”

Wes heads this way, and if I’m not mistaken, it looks as if he’s doing his best to hold back a smile.

“I have some news,” he says, landing on the lounge chair across from us. “I just got off the phone with Royal Lineage Cruise Lines. They said the ship is scheduled to make one more trip through the Caribbean on the next voyage, but after that, we’re heading up the East Coast for a leaf peeper, fall foliage cruise. That includes Maine.”

Ransom and I exchange a look.

“Maine?” I say, barely able to contain my excitement. “That’s our home state! We can get married on that cruise and our families can be there.”

Ransom’s face lights up and he sheds a genuine smile. Ransom’s smiles are always hard-won, but oh-so worth it.

“That sounds perfect.” He pulls me close. “It’ll be the perfect place for our families to

come together and celebrate with us.”

“And I can kill Stanton,” I say a touch too brightly.

“Just let me deck him. No need for both of us to step into legal trouble.”

Wes shakes his head. “How about no deaths and no assault charges, just a joyous wedding with friends and family.”

“I look forward to it,” I say and I’m back to biting down on my lip again as I look at Ransom. “We’re getting married on the cruise after next. That’s going to be here in five minutes!”

“Not soon enough,” Ransom counters, touching his lips to mine. “Thanks, Wes. Best news I’ve heard in a long time.”

Wes nods his way. “I’m glad to hear that. We’ll make sure it’s an unforgettable voyage for the both of you.”

Ransom and I are just weeks away from our wedding.

I’m going to be a bride, and Ransom is going to be my groom.

It’s real. It’s happening. And our families and friends will be there to help us celebrate.

It feels right, sacred, unstoppably perfect.

And even my ex can’t spoil the moment for me.

But a killer can. In fact, a killer on this very cruise spoiled every future moment for

Lucy Taylor.

Quinn Riddle may not want me to meddle in her case, but if the Man Upstairs has a different opinion, who am I to fight it?

Besides, the sooner I find the killer, the sooner I can fully focus on my upcoming nuptials.

And seeing that my wedding is just weeks away, I don't have a second to waste.

Amber Walker is about to talk, and I'm going to make sure she tells me exactly what I need to hear.

CHAPTER 21

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Dear Trixie,

Alright, Trixie, it's Stanton again. Here's the deal—I'm about to even the score. If you don't change your mind about us and do it soon, I'm proposing to my much younger, much hotter girlfriend. How do you like that for a twist of fate?

Sincerely, Stanton the Ultimatum

Dear Stanton the Ultimatum,

Wow, Stanton, you certainly know how to bring the drama. Here's a reality check for you.

First off, ultimatums rarely work out well, especially when they're delivered like a plot twist from some soap opera. If your idea of "evening the score" is proposing to someone just to get a reaction from me, you might want to rethink your strategy.

Next, let's address the elephant in the room. You're clearly still hung up on the past. Instead of using a new relationship as a pawn in this game, how about focusing on genuine happiness? Proposals should be about love, not leverage.

And as for changing my mind, let's be clear. I moved on the moment you decided to break my trust. You should focus on building a future with someone who truly makes

you happy, not someone you're using to get back at your ex.

It's time to grow up.

Trixie

Stanton: You know what, Trixie? I dare you to marry that meathead. Let's see if he can handle the real you.

Trixie: Oh, you'd love that, wouldn't you? You're just waiting on the sidelines to watch my life implode.

Stanton: No, I just want to see if he's man enough to deal with your crazy.

Trixie: Crazy? Do you mean the crazy you caused?

Stanton: Whatever helps you sleep at night. But seriously, I can't wait for him to see what he's really in for.

Trixie: Nice try, Stanton. But Ransom knows exactly who I am, and he loves me for it.

Stanton: Yeah, we'll see how long that lasts.

Trixie: Longer than you can imagine. Ransom is nothing like you.

Stanton: Maybe he's worse. Ever thought about that?

Trixie: Nope, because he's not. He's everything you're not and more.

Stanton: All right, Trix. Let's see if he measures up. I bet you a grand it doesn't last a

year.

Trixie: I don't need to prove anything to you, Stanton. Enjoy your life with the "hot blonde." We're done here.

Stanton: We're not done by a long shot.

The next morning, we find ourselves docked at Bimini Island, a glorious tropical paradise with white sandy beaches in just about every direction you look.

Bimini actually consists of two islands, North Bimini (where the Emerald Queen is currently docked) and South Bimini, each a tropical paradise in its own right.

The moment Bess, Nettie, and I step off the ship, we're greeted by the white-hot sun, the thick humidity that feels like a hug, and a salty sea breeze that both refreshes us and assures us we can survive the heat. The azure sky stretches endlessly above, and it seems to promise a day filled with sunshine and, hopefully, a few more clues.

"Okay." I sigh, adjusting my sunglasses as I take in the greenery and the crystal-clear waters that seem to beckon us. "Paradise officially found."

"I've said that about the last three places." Bess' wide-brimmed hat provides shade for her face as she surveys the bustling port. That hat is more or less like family now that Nettie risked her life—and that of Ransom's and the Captain's—to retrieve it. "I could get used to this kind of paradise," Bess continues. "And thanks to the fact I call the Emerald Queen my home, I have."

"You would say that," Nettie grunts. "Explain to me how paradise works without men?"

"It's twice as heavenly, and you never have to share the remote," Bess says without

missing a beat.

“I say it’s a little bit of hell.” Nettie sags as she says it and I can’t help but feel bad for her.

“All right.” I wrap an arm around her shoulders. “How about Bess and I help you meet some nice, single men on the ship before this trip is through?”

“You’d do that for me?” Nettie’s mouth rounds out with delight and she looks more than a little hopeful. “You’d help me find some hot silver foxes who are ready to get a real taste of paradise as we get down and dirty in a hot tub while slinging back shots of whiskey?”

“Let’s not go that far,” Bess says, rolling her eyes. “It’s just like you, Nettie. Trixie gives you an inch and you take a whiskey-drinking mile.”

Nettie tosses a hand in the air. “A girl’s gotta dream.”

It’s clear romance is always at the top of Nettie’s list. But our mission today isn’t about romance, it’s about tailing Jennifer and her entourage.

We bumped into Tinsley in the main dining room this morning and she let us know that Jennifer’s group had booked a “swim with wild dolphins adventure” this morning, so naturally, we signed up for the same excursion.

Ransom was going to join us, but halfway through breakfast—eggs benedict and red velvet waffles for each of us—he was alerted to a theft on the lido deck and said he’d meet up with us later in the afternoon, where he promised we’d do something equally exciting. Just being in the same airspace as Ransom is exciting enough for me.

Bess, Nettie, and I make our way through the port, keeping our eyes peeled for any

sign of Jennifer's bachelorette brigade. And soon enough, we spot them waiting to board a series of small white boats that are prepared to whisk them off into open waters.

One of the guides shouts for the women to break into groups of ten. I glance around and spot Amber Walker with her fiery red hair, looking unmistakable even from a distance. She's standing to the side with a somber expression as she stares out at the horizon. There's something no-nonsense about her, and it makes me like her already. Heaven knows I'm in need of some no-nonsense answers, and I pray she's willing to give them.

I steer Bess and Nettie in Amber Walker's direction, determined to get on the same boat as our next suspect. And lucky for us, we do just that.

The captain of our tiny vessel, a tall man with a sun-kissed complexion and a smile that can melt butter, greets us as we jump on the boat.

"Welcome aboard, ladies. We're heading out to swim with the wild dolphins this glorious afternoon. It's about a forty-five-minute ride to where they like to hang out, so sit back and enjoy the ride."

We settle into our seats and the boat's engine purrs to life as we pull away from the dock. Amber is sitting across the way and up near the bow. It's sort of a moot point to try to ask her anything now. I'll have to wait until we get on the other side of this feel-good outing. And that's exactly what I'm hoping will happen—Amber will feel so good after swimming with some of the cutest creatures in the sea that she'll want to spill her entire life story to me. Although let's face it, I'm much more interested in Lucy Taylor's life story at this point.

The boat bounces along. The water is mesmerizing in every shade of turquoise, and the gentle rocking of the vessel is oddly soothing.

Bess leans my way. “What do you think, Trixie? Could she be our killer?”

I make a face at the thought. “Well, according to certain sources, Lucy did sleep with her now ex-husband.”

Nettie scoffs. “That right there takes her off the suspect list. We’re wasting our time.”

“How do you figure?” I ask, curious as to how she came to that rather curious conclusion. Although I probably should have at least hesitated to ask. This is Nettie after all.

Nettie grunts. “The dead woman did her a favor by sleeping with her ex. If she were smart, she would have penned Lucy a thank you for exposing the cad for who he is.”

“Hear, hear,” I say. “That kind of clarity usually kicks in after you’ve run the gamut of emotions. But then, my clarity kicked in pretty quick.”

“That’s because you’re a smart cookie,” Bess is quick to say with a laugh.

“That’s right,” Nettie agrees. “And you took one look at Ransom Courtland Baxter and realized you were getting your bread buttered all wrong.” She leans in hard. “Speaking of getting your bread buttered, what’s it going to take for the two of you to fall into bed and connect like a couple of Lego pieces?”

Bess cocks her head to the side. “Well, the analogy could have been worse.” She shakes her head at Nettie. “And the answer is none of your beeswax.”

“Eh .” Nettie shrugs. “Beeswax isn’t my first choice to make things run smoothly, but it works in a pinch.”

“Ransom and I will be connecting a whole lot sooner than later,” I tell them, choosing

to ignore all talk about dicey lubricants. “Wes let us know that we have one more cruise in the Caribbean, then we’re off to do a leaf peeping cruise up the East Coast. And since we’ll be stopping by Maine, I think we’ll tie the knot while we’re there—or somewhere along the line.”

Both Bess and Nettie break out into a spontaneous applause.

“And oh, I just love fall foliage.” Bess presses a hand to her chest as she says it. “What an excellent time of year to get married.”

“What an excellent time of year to fall into bed with Ransom Baxter,” Nettie counters.

“Amen to that, sister,” I say and we all share a laugh.

Although anytime of the year would be good for that.

The rest of the boat ride is exhilarating as the wind whips through our hair—and Bess sitting safely on her hat—as we speed toward the open ocean. The sun glints off the water, creating a sparkling blue expanse that stretches as far as the eye can see.

After what feels like both a lifetime and no time at all, the captain slows the boat and announces, “We’ve arrived. And look who showed up to play with us today!”

Sure enough, a pod of dolphins appears with their sleek gray bodies gliding effortlessly through the water. The sight is more than breathtaking, and for a moment, all thoughts of murder and mayhem are pushed aside.

“All right, everyone”—the captain calls out—“it’s time to get your snorkeling gear on. We’ve got some fish food here to attract the dolphins, but remember, these are wild animals. Respect their space and enjoy the experience.”

We all start putting on our gear, and I take a moment to assess the group. Amber seems focused, efficiently donning her mask and fins as if she were a seasoned pro. And you can bet every last flipper in this boat I'm going to swim up beside her.

"You ready for this?" Bess asks, adjusting her mask.

"Why, yes, I am," I say, though my mind is still partially on our mission. "I'm going to swim with the suspects." I give a little wink as I don my mask.

"And I'm going to swim to China," Nettie says, doing the same. "I'm going to hitch a ride on one of these beautiful beasts and sail the ocean blue. Don't come looking for me, girls. Just raise a drink in my honor each night at dinner."

"Good grief." Bess finishes putting on her fins before looking up at me. "Don't blame me if I come back to the boat alone. You heard the woman. We're going to be celebrating tonight."

Nettie elbows her. "I didn't say I wanted you to celebrate."

"You didn't say we couldn't." Bess laughs before heading toward the back of the boat.

The captain hands out small containers of fish food, and we eagerly take them. The excitement is palpable, and soon we're all lined up at the edge of the boat, ready to dive in.

"Have fun and be safe," the captain calls out as we slip into the water.

The cool ocean envelops me, and immediately I feel refreshed. I crane my neck underwater, looking for the redhead I'm here to see, but instead, a giant gray cutie swims up with what looks like a genuine smile on his face. And just like that, my

investigation is on ice.

Who cares what Amber Walker knows? At least at this moment.

An entire pod of dolphins has swum over to greet us as if they were happy to see us—or in the least happy to see the fishy offerings we come bearing.

The dolphins are even more magnificent up close and personal. Their movements are graceful and fluid—and they're huge! They have to be at least five or six feet each. Why did I think they'd be a whole lot smaller?

They dart around us with ease, occasionally coming close enough to brush against our legs and we don't mind one bit.

Both Bess and Nettie are hypnotized as they do their best to lure the dolphins in by the masses, and lure them in they do.

One swims up close to me as if it wanted to kiss me, and I reach out and pat it on the head, thankful that my fingers don't get mistaken for a snack. Not only does it allow me to pat its head, but it swims in closer and bows its snout as if wanting me to keep on doing it.

And oh, what a treat!

Its flesh feels like rubber, tough yet sleek. And I pet away as if I were snuggling up with a cat. On second thought, I'm not sure I've ever met a cat this friendly.

I feed it every last bit of fish food I've got with me. It's no fool and neither am I. This sweet thing deserves to get the better end of this deal. Although that could be debated. This might just be the single most precious animal encounter I have ever had.

It's an experience unlike any other, and for a brief moment, I forget all about the case and the danger that seems to follow me everywhere.

As we continue to swim, I keep a close eye on Amber. After about an hour of interacting with the dolphins, she swims back toward the boat, so I reluctantly do the same.

I can't help but feel a pang of disappointment as I leave these seafaring cuties behind.

Amber climbs on board first and I climb up right after her. She flops down in the nearest seat and I land next to her, peeling off my snorkel and mask. My skin is still tingling from the saltwater and the thrill of the encounter.

Here we go. I'm ready to see what makes Amber Walker tick.

CHAPTER 22

“That was amazing,” I say breathlessly to Amber Walker as I sidle up next to her here on a small boat sitting in the middle of the Bahamas after the adventure of a lifetime. “I never thought I’d get to swim with dolphins in the wild.”

“Oh, me either,” Amber pants while wringing out her hair. “They were so close. I actually got to hug one! I could hardly wrap my arms around it. And I think one of them tried to kiss me.”

We share a quick laugh at the thought.

“Well, you know what they say, boys will be boys,” I retort and immediately regret my words, considering what I know about her husband.

“Tell me about it.” Amber laughs twice as loud as before and I feel better because of it.

A spray of hot pink stars appears, and rising out of the water like a hot pink phoenix is none other than Beatrice Fiddlefae herself.

“You have lousy timing, Trixie,” Bea says as she floats this way, and her hair actually looks soaking wet from the ocean. “Those dolphins could really see me!”

“I knew they were intuitive,” I mutter under my breath.

“You can say that again.” Amber grabs a towel and tosses one to me as well.

“All right.” Beatrice rubs her hands together and stars shoot from her fingertips like sparks. “Let’s see what kind of dirt we can dig up.”

“My name is Trixie Troublefield,” I say, holding out a hand to Amber. “I actually work on the Emerald Queen .”

“Oh, I saw you teaching an acrylic class on one of the upper decks,” she says, shaking my hand. “I wondered why you looked so familiar. By the way, I love painting. And if I wasn’t in such a funk I would have joined along.”

A mournful smile takes over my face. “I’m so sorry about your loss. Were you very close to the deceased?”

“Lucy?” Amber’s face tightens a notch. “Yes, I knew her. I mean, we weren’t all that close, at least not toward the end, but in the beginning it was me who brought her to our book club.”

“That’s true,” Beatrice affirms as she floats before us as if she were a referee ready to make a call.

“Oh really?” I say to Amber. “So you bonded over your love of books?”

She shakes her head and beads of water spray in the air. “No, actually. She was the aide in my classroom. She showed up in town about a couple of years ago, maybe two and a half, three years ago? She seemed sweet and innocent enough.” Her expression sours. “Anyway, I invited her to the book club and she invited Hetty. That’s when the party really started. Hetty loves to have the attention all to herself. Hetty has what I like to call Main Character Syndrome. The spotlight always has to be right on her. But trust me, it’s not a bad thing. She’s really livened up our little get-togethers in ways we would never have dreamed of. I mean, look at us now. We’re on a cruise, for Pete’s sake.”

“And how about Lucy? Did she liven things up? I’ve heard she was quite the character herself.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Beatrice snorts, floating up a notch with her hot pink aura shimmering in the sunlight.

Amber tilts her head as if considering this. “Lucy livened things up, all right, but not in any good way. Let’s just say she had a rather nasty habit of stealing other people’s men.” She growls at the sky for a moment. “If I knew she was going to use the book club as a sort of backward meat market for her next victim, I would have steered her to the nearest bar and left her out of the literary loop. A lot of us would have been better off—including me.”

“I’m so sorry to hear it.” My shoulders sag for a moment despite the fact I was already in the know. “I’m sorry you had to go through something like that. I know exactly how painful that can be.”

Amber blows out a breath. “I’m over it. As far as I’m concerned, Lucy came into our little circle and took out the trash.” There’s a wistfulness to her voice, and layered underneath that it’s smeared with spite. “Of course, it took her trashy self to do it. I guess trash begets trash.”

“There is no bigger truth,” Beatrice says with just as much zest.

“What in the world do you think made her tick like that?” I shake my head as if contemplating it even though Hetty already let me in on the fact there were daddy issues, and perhaps an entire string of abusive boyfriends before she landed in Connecticut.

“Who knows?” Amber grunts. “But I do know that whatever she was running from in Oklahoma was something she never wanted to return to.”

“That sounds scary.”

“I think it was. She would clam up pretty good if we ever asked her anything about her past. Come to think of it, she was always pretty guarded around us in general. Well, except for Hetty. They seemed to get along just fine.”

“Did they?” Beatrice shakes her head at me. “That wasn’t always true. They might have been as close as sisters, but they could fight like sisters, too.”

Amber inches back. “The funniest thing just happened.” A nervous laugh evicts from her. “I could swear I just heard a familiar voice of a woman I once knew and she reminded me of something that has to do with Lucy and Hetty.”

My mouth falls open as I glance down and spot my knee touching hers and I quickly pull back and scoot a few inches away from the woman.

“What did you remember?” I ask.

Bea laughs. “You mean, what did I remind her of.”

Amber nods my way as if what came next was the juiciest tidbit ever.

And I’m counting on it.

CHAPTER 23

“Lucy and Hetty had more than a few arguments,” Amber Walker says, drying off with a towel while we wait for the others to get back to the boat after our swimming with dolphins in the wild adventure. “They were rare, but they seemed pretty vitriolic. And those arguments always seemed to take place once we had wrapped up for the night and were about to get back into our cars. In fact, I remember one odd fight because both women happened to be standing just a few feet from where I parked. I rolled down my windows an inch to see what they could possibly be going at it for. I mean, Hetty never had a husband or a steady boyfriend that Lucy could steal, so I had no idea what she could have been angry about.”

“And what were they arguing about?” I ask, trying not to sound as if I’m about to shake the answer out of her. But I am so ready to shake the answer out of her.

“Honestly, I couldn’t put the pieces to that puzzle together. Something about spare change for Big Bite Burgers? Only Lucy was saying from Big Bite Burgers and not for. And it was strange because Lucy kept calling Hetty Lucy. I never could figure out what that was about.”

Beatrice’s eyes widen. “Why does that sound familiar? I must have been lurking around and heard that argument, too. I swear, I’ve heard Lucy do that as well.”

“Interesting,” I say with more than a jolt of curiosity coursing through me. “Amber, did Lucy ever mention anything specific about Hetty?”

Amber shrugs, her expression thoughtful. “Not really. Just that Hetty could be a bit

controlling. But then again, so could Lucy.”

Beatrice huffs. “The only thing Lucy wanted to control was men.”

“But I bet Lucy got along well with Jennifer,” I say, trying my best to bait Amber. “I mean, she shelled out a lot of money to come on this cruise.”

“I thought the same thing.” Amber ticks her head to the side. “I have no idea how she paid for this trip, but I can tell you right now, she didn’t have the means. In fact, I’m not proud of this, but once the ship left port, I teased her about it and asked if she robbed a bank. I mean, she was a pro at stealing. It wouldn’t surprise me at all to learn she was stealing cold, hard cash as well.”

“How’d she take that?” I wrinkle my nose because I have a feeling I know how.

“She made a snide remark about how stealing my husband was a whole lot easier.” She leans back and folds her arms as the boat gives a gentle rock. “We’ve been warring over that for weeks. It was a cheap shot, but then I suppose I took one, too. Honestly, I’m grateful Lucy found out the truth about my husband before I wasted another second of my life with him. She could have been a real...well, you know, but she did me a favor. I could have killed her with my bare hands sometimes, but in the end, she saved me.” Her lips press white as she gets a faraway look in her eyes. “Anyway, she was arguing with Jennifer as of late, too, and that’s why I was shocked when Hetty said she was coming along.”

“Arguing with Jennifer?” I tip my ear her way. “Whatever for?” I know for a fact it centered around Marcus, but I still don’t know why.

“Marcus Bennet.” She spits the man’s name out as if it were a rusty nail. “My guess is that Lucy was trying to take Marcus for a spin. Although I don’t know why. That guy gives off some serious creepy vibes—at least to me. I don’t know what Jennifer

sees in him. Honestly, I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him."

Beatrice nods vigorously. "He's a weasel. I never liked him either."

"Oh wow, I'm really sorry to hear that." The thought of Jennifer marrying another dud makes my stomach churn. "Jennifer seems to be pretty smitten."

Amber lifts her chin. "As I've learned the hard way, love can certainly be blind."

"It sure can." A growl works its way up my throat. "Although I'd like to think I've finally taken my blinders off." I wiggle my ring finger her way. "I'm set to get married soon."

"Congratulations!" Amber beams as if she's genuinely happy for me. "You must be the other bride-to-be that Hetty mentioned. She did say you worked for the ship. I guess she's putting together one heck of a party for the two of you tomorrow night."

"Is that tomorrow night?" I nearly fall off the seat. How is this cruise moving along so swiftly? And with no killer on the horizon. Gah!

"Oh, don't look so pained," Beatrice trills. "I, for one, love a good bachelorette party. And with Hetty at the helm, we're going to have a sexy soirée to die for." She winks my way. "Of course, I won't have to die. But you can bet your bridal britches I won't be missing it either! Speaking of which, are we done here? I want to tell my new dolphin friends all about it."

I frown her way and she laughs.

"See you on the ship," she says, floating back toward the water and sinking below the surface so fast you'd think a giant Kraken just sucked her under.

Before I can ask another question, the rest of the women climb back on board, sans one redhead that I dragged out this way with me.

“Nettie, where’s Bess?” I call out in a partial panic as the crew readies the boat to pull up their anchor.

“I don’t care where that hussy is,” Nettie grunts as her hair begins to dry and her gray curls rise up over her head like an ominous cloudbank. “Bess Chatterley is dead to me.”

I’m about to ask why just as the rest of the women break out into spontaneous applause at something out in the water, and both Nettie and I crane our necks to see what’s captured their attention.

And then I see it.

It’s a redhead holding onto the dorsal fin of a dolphin the size of this boat as he takes her for the ride of a lifetime.

Nettie jabs her fists into her hips and scowls out at the sight. “That lowlife, backstabbing, dolphin-stealing, no good old biddy took my idea and ran with it—or should I say, swam with it.”

“You know what they say, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery—especially when they’re stealing your ride.”

I glance over at Amber as she glares out at the water.

But it’s not so flattering when they’re stealing your husband. It would make anyone good and angry.

Angry enough to kill—and in fact stab the back-stabber in the back.

And I wonder if that's exactly what happened.

The mystery is unraveling, and I'm determined to see it through to the end.

Lucy Taylor's killer is out there, and I won't rest until justice is served.

CHAPTER 24

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Dear Trixie,

It's Sandy again! I'm home from the cruise, and I just had to share the latest. My first date with Tom on land was fantastic, and we've been seeing each other just about every night since. But wait, there's more! My ex came crawling back, begging for another chance. If I hadn't met Tom, I might have taken that louse back and fallen into the same destructive patterns. Instead, I thanked him for being such a donkey and sent him on his way.

Gotta run, got a hot date with my dream man, Tom!

Sincerely, Thrilled and Thriving Sandy

Dear Thrilled and Thriving Sandy,

Oh, Sandy, what a wonderful update! It sounds like things are sailing smoothly in your love life.

Kudos to you for recognizing your worth and not falling back into old, destructive patterns with your ex. It takes strength and self-awareness to break free and move forward, and you've done it beautifully.

Tom sounds like a dream, and I'm thrilled to hear that your connection has only

grown stronger since returning home. Enjoy every moment with your new man and cherish the fresh start you've both found together.

Life has a funny way of bringing us exactly what we need when we're open to it. Keep embracing this exciting chapter with Tom, and don't look back.

Wishing you continued happiness and many more wonderful dates with your dream beau!

XOXO Trixie

As soon as Bess, Nettie, and I get back to land, Wes and Ransom are waiting for us with grins that could rival the sun.

"You made it back in one piece," Wes says, folding his arms over his chest. "We had a bet going that at least one of you might be missing out in sea."

"My money was on you, Nettie." Ransom gives a quick wink her way.

"Sorry to let you down, boys," Nettie grouses. "But this one stole my thunder." She hitches a thumb toward Bess.

"I rode a dolphin's back for at least a half hour." Bess sighs with a dreamy look on her face. "And I was responsible enough not to let him lead me off to China." She shoots Nettie a look as she says it.

Nettie is quick to wave off the slight. "That's because you have no sense of adventure."

"Speaking of adventures—" Wes nods their way. "We thought you ladies might enjoy a trip to the lost island of Atlantis. How about some snorkeling?"

“Snorkeling?” Nettie perks up. “I was hoping for a nap, but I suppose another shot at hitching a ride to watery depths of the sea sounds better.” She turns and gives Bess the stink eye. “And I might get to do it on the back of a whale. Eat your tiny dolphin-loving heart out.”

“And here I thought you’d be hoping for a massage by a cabana boy,” Bess says, adjusting her hat.

Nettie smirks. “I can multitask when I have to.”

I turn to Ransom, who looks tall, dark, and brooding—and have I mentioned lethally handsome with his sun-kissed skin and sea-blue eyes. That would explain why six different groups of women are craning their necks this way and fanning themselves.

“Lost island of Atlantis, huh?” I hike up to steal a kiss off his lips, but he beats me to it. “Should I pull out my Indiana Jones hat and whip?”

Ransom’s lips curl a notch. “Just your snorkel and a sense of adventure. We can talk about the proverbial whip later.”

“Who said it was proverbial?” I tease.

His lips curve with a dark smile that lets me know he more than approves.

We make our way to a small boat they’ve hired, and soon enough, we’re skimming over the sparkling turquoise waters again. The ride is smooth, the sun is warm, and the company is perfect.

We approach our destination, and soon enough we’re escorted to what looks to be a secluded spot.

“Here we are, ladies and gents,” Wes says as he hands out the masks, snorkels, and fins. “Atlantis—or at least the part that didn’t sink. And for the record, the area we’re in now is also part of a resort, so all you see may not be as authentic as one would hope, but if we swim out a bit we’ll be able to see some large mysterious stone blocks—some as wide as ten to thirteen feet, whose origins are indeed a mystery to this day.”

Bess rolls her eyes. “Wes, every island we’ve been to this week has had a lost city of Atlantis on their itinerary of things to do.”

“That’s because it’s a marketing ploy,” Nettie says, not missing a beat. “Next, they’ll be selling us Atlantis-themed sunscreen.”

“I’d buy that,” I huff. “Especially if it keeps you safe from the sun and perhaps a few mythical creatures of the deep.”

“Mythical creatures of the deep?” Nettie’s entire countenance lights up. And in less than three seconds she jumps overboard and most likely begins the hunt for said mythical creatures.

“I’ll go after her,” Wes says with a sigh as he, too, jumps in.

Bess groans as she heads for the ladder, “And I’d better make sure Nettie doesn’t offer the captain up as a sacrifice to the creatures of the deep.” She turns my way. “We really need to watch what we say around her.”

I nod before turning to my handsome fiancé. “I read a little about this excursion this morning in the Seabreeze Newsletter and it sounded fascinating. I’m so glad we’re doing it,” I say as Ransom helps me get to the ladder before I lower myself into the water. And seconds later he’s right by my side.

“I’m glad you’re happy about it,” he says, pulling me in and I wrap my arms and legs around him for a second. “Initially, we were going to take you out to the wild dolphins ourselves, but once Tinsley let us know where you went, we went with plan B.”

“The crazy thing is, I wanted to do both. So technically, you’re making all of my dreams come true.”

“That’s what I’m in the business of from here on out.” His lips curve a notch and a naughty gleam takes over those baby blues of his.

“Why, Detective, you’ve already made all my dreams come true.” We share a steamy kiss before pulling down our masks and diving down toward all things mythological.

The spot we’ve landed in is about a forty-five-minute boat ride out in open waters where they’ve created an underwater playground designed to look like the mythical ruins of—well, you guessed it, Atlantis. It’s all ancient Greek statues and crumbling columns, surrounded by glorious coral reefs teeming with colorful fish.

From what little I know, the legend of Atlantis is about an advanced civilization that vanished into the sea, and while I’m pretty sure this version is courtesy of an ambitious tourism board, I’m game for a little underwater fantasy.

According to the Seabreeze Newsletter , we’ll get to snorkel around the submerged structures, feed the fish, and maybe even spot a dolphin friend of mine again. It sounds like the perfect way to end our stay in Bimini. Plus, any excuse to swoon over Ransom in swim trunks is fine by me.

The sound of bubbles fills my ears as the water gets a touch cooler the deeper we swim. Ransom takes me by the hand as we begin our adventure. No sooner do we swim out a few feet than it feels as if we’ve entered another world. Everywhere you

look there's something to see, something larger than life, covered in algae, but that still holds the shape of architecture from an era far away. The colors are bright and the coral reefs are filled with life. Fish of every shape, size, and hue dart around us, and I can't help but be mesmerized.

We catch up with Wes, Bess, and Nettie, and soon we're traveling as a group.

Wes and Ransom take turns diving down and pointing out various sea creatures while the four of us share more than a few thumbs up in appreciation.

Nettie pulls Bess toward a treasure chest opened with what looks like jewels spilling from it and Wes follows along, most likely to make sure Nettie doesn't pilfer the loot.

Ransom and I swim toward what looks like a field of large stone blocks lying over the ocean floor and I'm lost in the beauty of it all when I spot something out of the corner of my eye—a sleek, dark shape moving quickly. My heart skips a beat.

All I see is a long gray body, white belly, beady eyes, and a dorsal fin that I learned to fear when I saw the movie *Jaws* for the very first time—and it just so happens to be coming straight for me.

Before I can think, Ransom pulls me hard to his chest. And before I know it, he's kicking us away from the shark at hand with strokes so powerful he could propel us all the way to New Zealand if need be.

I spot Wes taking both Bess and Nettie and leading them toward the surface, away from the predator at hand as well.

Ransom and I surface near the boat with both of us pulling off our snorkels and gasping for air.

“It’s gone,” Ransom says as he pulls me close once again. “You’re safe.” His heart drums against mine and it’s clear we were more than jolted by the sight. “It was a reef shark,” he says as we pull off our masks. “Most sharks need to move to propel water through their gills as a means to breathe. But reef sharks can buccal pump through their gills—by way of opening their mouths and thrusting water over their gills. That way they can spring at you right from a resting position—and that’s exactly what happened.” He rubs my back as he says it and I’m thankful he didn’t choose this moment to give my ribs a slight pinch instead. I would have screamed my head off.

“Thank you for getting me out of Dodge because without your help I couldn’t have dodged a thing and would most likely be missing a limb right now. You can be my bodyguard anytime.”

A dull laugh rumbles through him. “At your service, forever.”

Wes, Bess, and Nettie swim this way, and soon we’re all swimming back to the boat. Suffice it to say, we’ve had enough excitement for one day.

“That was close!” Bess says, in a panic. “I thought we were going to lose you, Trixie.”

“Lose me? Never.” I try to sound calm, but my voice shakes despite my efforts. “Besides, I had my knight in shining swim trunks to save me.”

Nettie snorts. “If that’s the case, I’m snorkeling with Ransom next time. Wes, you’re officially demoted to sidekick.”

Wes laughs. “Sidekick? I’ll have you know, I’m the star of this show. Baxter here is my understudy.”

Ransom shakes his head. “I’ve wondered what delusions keep you going.”

Back on the boat, we all collapse into our seats, adrenaline still coursing through our veins. Ransom keeps his arm around me, and I lean against him, feeling grateful and more than a little swoony.

“Thanks for saving me,” I whisper, looking up at him.

“Always,” he says softly, brushing a stray lock of hair from my face. “Always.”

I steal a kiss from Ransom and he reciprocates with a kiss that makes me feel like the luckiest woman alive.

Atlantis may be a myth, but the way I feel about Ransom Baxter is as real as it gets. And I wouldn't trade it for all the treasure in the world.

CHAPTER 25

Once we get back to shore here in Bimini the sun is setting, casting a warm, golden glow over the beach as we relax under a few giant umbrellas.

Bess, Nettie, Wes, Ransom, and I are sprawled out on lounge chairs, the sound of the waves lulling us into a state of blissful contentment. It's the perfect end to a day full of adventure, and I can't help but feel grateful all of us came out of it with all of our limbs attached. And not only has Ransom treated us each to a fruity concoction to rehydrate the entire lot of us, but Wes bought some banana bread from a local vendor and we can't seem to wolf it down fast enough.

"This is really good banana bread," I say, genuinely stunned by how amazing it is.

Bess nods in agreement. "Did they have angels whipping this up? I think I taste heaven."

"More like they bribed the devil for the recipe." Nettie laughs. "This stuff is sinfully delicious."

"I couldn't agree more." Ransom takes another bite while looking my way with a wicked gleam in his eyes and I have a sneaking suspicion I know what he'd like to take a bite out of next. Me .

"All right, Trixie"—Wes props himself up on his elbow and looks my way—"how's the case going? Got any leads? Give us a rundown on your suspects, Detective Troublefield."

I sigh, adjusting my sunglasses. “It’s been a wild ride, to say the least. Jennifer Mitchell is certainly on my list. She’s got the fa?ade of the perfect friend, but there was some marked tension between her and the deceased. In fact, I witnessed it firsthand. I’m not sure what they were arguing about specifically, but I do know it had something to do with Jennifer’s fiancé, Marcus. And since Lucy had a habit of sleeping with her friends’ boyfriends and husbands, it doesn’t bode well for her reputation.”

Wes gives a wistful tick of his head. “Sounds as if our victim had been setting herself up for an eventual homicide.”

Nettie lifts her fruity red cocktail. “And who says wishes don’t come true?”

Bess groans and covers her face with that infamous hat of hers as she continues to work on her tan.

“Who’s next?” Ransom says with a marked scowl on his face, and I’ll be the first to admit it makes him that much more cutthroat handsome. He may not approve of my investigation, but I certainly approve of that wicked gleam in his eyes.

“I spoke to Hetty King,” I say. “She’s the event planner that landed them all on the ship to begin with. She’s the one that told me about the stuff with Jennifer. She also told me that Lucy was the reason Amber Walker divorced her husband—she’s another woman here with the bachelorette party. And well, Amber said she heard something strange between Lucy and Hetty. She said they had some bizarre arguments where Lucy kept calling Hetty by her own name.”

Bess pulls her hat back a notch to get a better look at me. “If it means anything, Nettie has called me by her name plenty of times when she’s drunk.”

“I do it when I’m sober, too,” Nettie admits with a nod. “Sometimes I like to invoke it

as an expletive. It has a nice ring to it.”

“Oh, Nettie .” Bess groans twice as hard before covering her face once again with her hat.

“Anyone else?” Ransom asks while touching his knee to mine.

“Yes, me.”

“You?” Wes sounds slightly amused and equally horrified.

“Don’t you dare confess without a cartographer present,” Nettie is quick to wag a crooked finger my way.

Bess sits straight up and tosses her hands in the air at the thought. “I give. What in the world would a cartographer have to do with this?”

Nettie scoffs at her bestie. “Everyone knows if you want to map out a getaway, you hire a pro.”

We share a sickly laugh at that one.

“She might be onto something,” I say with a sigh. “With Quinn on my tail, I feel the sudden need to hire both a lawyer and a cartographer.”

“That snooty, uptight redheaded witch has it out for you, Trix.” Nettie doesn’t bother mincing words.

“Who cares?” Bess cries. “The woman couldn’t find her own shadow while standing in the sun, let alone solve a homicide. Ransom, who do I see about filing a formal complaint against the woman for harassing my friend?”

“Me,” he says with a growl. “And as much as I’d like to file a complaint right alongside you, I need to understand the fact that she’s running off what she thinks is evidence. Trixie was at the scene of the crime.”

“So was I,” Nettie shrills and half the beach looks our way. “If Trixie does time for this crime, then I’m going down with her.”

“I’m sorry, Trix,” Bess says with a wave. “But I don’t look good in prison blues or orange or khaki, or whatever hues they’re wearing behind bars these days. I’ll bake you a cake with a knife in it.”

“As long as it’s a chocolate lava cake, you’re on,” I tease before offering a mournful smile to Ransom. “You’re right. Quinn is paid to investigate and I should probably be on her suspect list. But if she’s thorough, she’ll discover she’s wrong.”

Ransom closes his eyes for a moment. “And if you’re thorough, and I know you are, you’ll beat her to the punch and find the killer.” He tips his head to the side. “Mind if I join you on your way to the finish line?” He picks up my hand and kisses it.

I bite down on a laugh. “Bring your gun and we’ll call it a party.”

“Now we’re talking.” Nettie lifts her drink. “To guns, booze, and broads. Or as Elodie Abernathy informed me, it was properly called the fling before the ring.”

“Oh!” I cover my face with my hands for a second, and I know she’s referencing my impending bachelorette party. “She would call it that.”

“To a party to remember,” Bess says, getting up and joining the toast. “Let there be diamonds and dirty dancing!”

Ransom shakes his head. “Et tu, Bessie?”

“What the heck,” Wes says, lifting his drink. “Here’s hoping for a sassy yet classy soiree.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Ransom says and we toast up high before imbibing.

Jennifer and I might be headed for the altar, but Lucy Taylor is headed for the cemetery and it doesn’t seem fair.

It’s not fair.

Someone out there cut her life short, and I’m going to make sure to do the same to their freedom.

Quinn Riddle might inadvertently let them get away with murder.

But no one is getting away with anything on my watch.

Whoever killed Lucy is going to pay.

I’ll make sure of it myself—right after I have another bite of that sinfully delicious banana bread.

CHAPTER 26

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Dear Trixie,

It's Stanton again, and I'm doubling down on my threats. If you don't stop this nonsense with the rent-a-cop and come home to Maine right this minute, I'm going to make sure I get hitched to my drop-dead sexy replacement and win the race down the aisle. How do you like them apples?

Sincerely, Stanton Vexed with My Ex

Stanton Vexed with My Ex,

Oh, Stanton, for goodness' sake, you really are the king of drama.

First, I want to thank you, sincerely, for being such a donkey. Your antics have done nothing but reaffirm my decisions—and those decisions have, in turn, led me to true love. The “rent-a-cop,” as you so charmingly put it, has shown me what real respect and affection look like.

So, by all means, race down that aisle with your drop-dead sexy replacement. I wish you all the best. In the meantime, I'll be enjoying my newfound happiness and peace, far away from the chaos and turmoil that seems to surround you.

Remember, Stanton, real love isn't a competition. It's about genuine connection,

trust, and respect—qualities I’ve thankfully found.

Wishing you can find them, too,

Trixie

As soon as we got back to the ship, Wes announced he had another little surprise for Ransom and me—or more to the point, a not-so-little surprise.

He cordoned off the entire Sea View deck with a private table for two set out next to the railing with its expansive views from nineteen stories in the sky, along with a private hot tub just for the two of us.

Let’s just say we enjoyed a steak and lobster dinner as the sunset dipped into the water like a tangerine dream, then we utilized the amenities under a starlit sky until our lips threatened to fall off from all the kissing. The water in that hot tub wasn’t the only thing that was steaming.

But it’s the very next evening and the Emerald Queen is abuzz with excitement for the ship’s formal night, also known as dress your best night.

The Seabreeze Newsletter warned of a nearby hurricane brewing just south of us, and judging by the high winds and the dark, ominous clouds, I would say it’s quickly heading in this direction.

After a solid day of teaching my art classes, I feel more than ready for an evening of elegance and relaxation. But since it’s also the night of my shared bachelorette party in which Elodie has teamed up with Hetty King, I’m pretty sure elegance and relaxation have gone out the window and been replaced with raunchy and raucous.

I’m just hoping no one gets arrested. Although if Quinn has her way, it’s going to be

me in silver bracelets at the end of the night.

And if I have my way, it will be the killer with their hands tied behind their back.

Anyway, my classes were a joy, as always. Today, we painted the brilliant colors of the Bahama sunset, with dolphins leaping for joy from the azure waters. Yes, I realize it's what we painted during our last few classes, but honestly, it's hard to improve upon perfection. And that's the great thing about art, no two paintings are ever alike. The entire day was a peaceful, creative escape from the looming homicide that still hangs over us like a storm cloud.

But now, I'm standing in the middle of a mystery deck with my eyes blindfolded, wearing a gold beaded number that clings to my curves like a second skin, and ironically feels as if it weighs as much as I do.

Elodie sent this dress to my room with a note that read knock 'em dead!

And if any dress could prove to be lethal, I have full confidence it's this one. The sparkling frock is low-cut up top and cuts off just above the knee down below, making me feel more like a stripper than a bride-to-be. And with every step I took this evening, this dress shimmered and shined as the beads caught the light and sent little sparkles dancing across the walls.

If Elodie wanted me to shine, she achieved that in spades.

Bess, Nettie, and I just finished up dinner with Ransom, who according to those bedroom eyes of his, more than approved of this beaded wonder.

We dined on a feast of creamy lobster bisque that melted in our mouths, followed by a main course of filet mignon for me, while Ransom opted for the rack of lamb, Bess indulged in the grilled sea bass, and Nettie, true to form, devoured a plate of surf and

turf with gusto.

Each dish was more exquisite than the last, but the real treat was the way Ransom looked into my eyes and couldn't seem to look away. Twice he asked if the dress I was wearing was legal, and before we parted ways he encouraged me to have a great time and not hold back. I'm not sure he knew what he was saying. After all, Elodie is in charge. Holding back might just save me from a new strain of venereal disease.

But I digress—dessert was a heavenly crème brûlée for Ransom and me, while Bess and Nettie savored a raspberry tart. And then we all dived into a second dessert of molten chocolate lava cake. Each bite was pure bliss, and that's exactly why I'll be heading to the midnight buffet later. One can never have enough chocolate lava cake.

“Keep your eyes closed!” Nettie admonishes me as if I could possibly pry an eyelid open with how tightly Elodie wrapped this scarf around my head. I'm pretty sure the fabric is forever embedded in my scalp.

“That's right,” Bess says. “No peeking!”

I frown in the direction of her voice. She, of all people, knows I'm not a fan of this kind of thing.

“You just move your feet and go where I lead you,” Elodie says, guiding my every step with her arm slung around my back. “This is going to be a night to remember.”

“That's exactly what I'm afraid of,” I say as I stagger my way forward. Each step feels as if I'm about to fall right off a cliff. I was never a fan of those trust exercises they made you do in school. The last person I trusted blindly led me into a bedroom filled with naked women—it was my bedroom and my ex just finished having his way with the naked women.

The air grows cool as we head toward our destination. The thumping bass of loud rock music reverberates through the walls—and my skull. Something tells me I'll be feeling the backbeat of this night for weeks to come.

The scent of various perfumes along with something deep-fried ignites my senses. The music grows louder, and the sound of a whole gaggle of women crowing like a herd of roosters fills the air.

“What is happening?” I hear Jennifer shout with a laugh, and I know for a fact Hetty has her blindfolded as well. Whatever shenanigans are about to ensue, Jennifer and I are about to experience them together.

The excitement is palpable. The music grows deafening. Finally, Elodie stops me cold, assuring me that we've arrived at our destination.

“One, two, three! ” the women all shout at once, and Elodie pulls off my blindfold just as Jennifer removes hers.

We both blink into the dimly lit lounge which Tinsley evidently reserved for the melee about to unfold as purple and blue lights swirl all around the room.

I give several hard blinks as I try to identify exactly which lounge we're standing in. Although the ship is basically a small city, and even after living on board for months, I still haven't seen every last nook and cranny.

The lounge is decked out like a—well, strip club, and I'm sensing a definite strip club theme. There's a stage with what looks like a pole stabbed through it and a disco ball twirls overhead, casting an otherworldly glow on the scene.

A giant sign hangs over the dance floor, emblazoned with the words Welcome to the Fling Before the Ring! Congratulations to our Bridezillas-to-Be X 2! Jennifer &

Trixie!

“Just look at this place,” Bess says, jumping in front of me with a pink party hat on her head that reads Same Penis Forever .

“Oh my word.” I gasp as I take a good look at the rest of the guests at this saucy soiree and, sure enough, they’re all wearing party hats with equally questionable sayings like vows and vino, the bride’s last ride, bride’s babes, and hot mess express .

There are raunchy party favors scattered just about everywhere, from the phallic straws spiked into drinks to suggestively shaped confetti peppered across the tables. A dance floor takes up the center of the room, and to my surprise there are a couple of stripper poles gleaming under the neon lights, suggesting that the evening’s entertainment is just getting started.

Did Wes approve the installation of those poles?

I’m guessing he gave Elodie carte blanche to do as she pleased. That will teach him—and me by proxy.

I glance back at Elodie, aka the brains behind this bridal blitz—or at least one of them, who happens to be clad in a little red dress.

“Bess doesn’t know what her hat says, does she?” I shake my head at my bestie in an effort to get her to fess up.

“Of course not.” Elodie belts out a laugh. “She picked out one that read sip sip hooray and I switched it when I told her I’d help her put it on.”

“You are truly evil.”

She shrugs. “Nettie slipped me a Benjamin to do it.”

“Nice to know you can be bought,” I say. “How much to make this whole thing go away?”

“Before the strippers arrive?” Her ruby red lips shed a wicked grin and that can only mean one thing. She’s dead serious.

“Where in the world did you find strippers on board this ship?” I practically hiss.

Nettie jumps onto the stage and cups her hands around her mouth. “Did you hear that, ladies? THERE WILL BE STRIPPERS!”

A collective roar comes from the crowd and I grab my chest, half moved to run for my life—or head over to one of the four bartending stations.

Bess leans in and I can’t seem to unsee that hat. “And just look at the buffet.” She waves a hand at the grand spread to the right and it’s chock full of mini sliders, spicy wings, bacon-wrapped scallops, and a platter of loaded nachos. And that’s just a small part of the offerings.

And let’s not forget the array of decadent desserts—rich chocolate mousse cups, strawberry shortcake bites, mini key lime pies, triple fudge cake, molten lava cakes—my personal kryptonite—and an entire rainbow of colorful macarons. Yum .

Jennifer and I exchange a wide-eyed look. The lounge is packed with at least a hundred women, all of them ready to let loose, and their laughter and screams of delight have already created a tangible energy.

Tinsley steps this way, dressed to impress in a little white dress that shows off her stunning tan skin, and she just so happens to be wearing that perma scowl of hers,

too.

“It’s clear this night is going to be one for the books,” Tinsley sings as she slings an arm around Jennifer’s shoulders. “Elodie and Hetty have really outdone themselves. This is going to be an unforgettable bachelorette party, and I’m ready for whatever wild ride the night has in store.” She takes a moment to scowl my way. “You keep out of trouble. And you know what kind of trouble I’m talking about.”

A wild shriek bursts from behind, and I turn to see Hetty King with her dark hair teased to high heaven while wrapped in a silver gown so formfitting it looks as if she’s wrapped herself in tinfoil.

“Who’s ready to get the party started?” she shouts and the entire room belts out a howl of approval.

Amber Walker jumps forward, tips her head to the ceiling, and belts out a cock-a-doodle-doo—and the rest of the room follows suit.

Something tells me this is going to be a long, long night.

CHAPTER 27

Jennifer and I are quickly crowned with little plastic tiaras that read RIP Single Life across them in tiny little rhinestones.

The music is thumping, and the energy in the room is electric, and a bright pink sizzle of supernatural stars appears just as the dual bachelorette party kicks into high gear.

Beatrice Fiddlefae materializes in all of her hot pink wool coat glory. “Oh, oh, oh,” she muses with delight as she soaks it all in. “This is going to be fantastic! I’ve always wanted to go to a raunchy bachelorette party and I finally got my wish! Too bad I had to be dead to do it. But on the bright side, I can down all the booze I want. My liver certainly isn’t going to be worse for wear.”

I shrug her way. “Bottoms up.”

Hetty takes the stage, her silver gown shimmering under the neon lights. “All right, ladies, it’s time for some games! Let’s see who’s ready to play,” she shouts, and the crowd erupts in cheers.

Elodie hops on stage in that little red dress that looks more or less like a lace nightie. Come to think of it, I wouldn’t put it past my bestie to prance around in public while wearing lingerie.

“Game number one,” Elodie calls out. “Pin the Bow Tie on the Groom!”

The room erupts with cheers once again as Elodie pulls forth something tall with a

black tablecloth draped over it, and it looks rather light.

She sets it up in front of the stage and rips off the tablecloth, only to reveal a cardboard cutout of none other than a very shirtless, very handsome Ransom Baxter.

Screams light up the room as I bury my face in my hands for a moment.

“Ransom isn’t going to be amused,” I say to no one in particular.

“Are you kidding?” Nettie bumps her shoulder to mine. “The man clearly posed for the picture. Something tells me he knew what he was getting into.”

“He did.” Tinsley offers a snide smile my way. “I’m the one who did the photoshoot.”

Even better.

The first game is a raucous version of Pin the Tail on the Donkey, but with, you guessed it, a large cardboard cutout of my shirtless groom. Instead of tails, there are bow ties, and one by one we’ll be led to the stage, blindfolded, and spun around while each woman attempts to pin the bow tie as close to the groom’s neck as possible.

Jennifer and I give it a go first. We’re laughing so hard we can hardly walk a straight line. Jennifer pins the bow tie on his knee, and I manage to pin it on his bicep.

“Well, at least he looks dapper wherever it lands,” I tease as the crowd roars with laughter.

Nettie takes her turn, pinning the bow tie on the groom’s backside. “He’s got class, wherever you put it,” she declares, earning another round of laughter.

Next up is a lively round of Never Have I Ever. The rules are simple: someone makes a statement starting with “Never have I ever,” and anyone who has done it takes a sip of their drink.

Elodie and Tinsley make sure every woman in the room has a fruity cocktail in hand. And now I see what the need was for us to have four different bartending stations.

Hetty kicks it off with a smirk, “Never have I ever skinny-dipped in the ocean.” Half the room takes a sip, including Nettie, who takes a big gulp and winks at the crowd. “And you believed me.”

The room explodes with cackles at that one.

Soon enough, it’s my turn and I think for a moment before saying, “Never have I ever been proposed to on a cruise ship.” Going with a lie seemed practical, considering everyone here will most likely need a break from the liquor at least once. Of course, Ransom’s proposal is the sweetest memory, and I take a sip, feeling the energy of the cheers that just broke out.

Jennifer laughs and takes a sip as well. “Well, not on a cruise ship, but I was proposed to on a beach.”

Beatrice appears beside me, her translucent form shimmering. “Never have I ever haunted a house,” she says and I nearly choke on my drink, trying not to laugh out loud.

The final game is both hilarious and slightly inappropriate—the Banana Challenge. The objective is to eat a dangling banana from a string without using your hands. An entire row of bananas hangs from the ceiling up on the stage and a few of us are selected to participate in the naughty challenge.

I laugh so hard watching Bess try to maneuver the banana into her mouth without touching it, her hat slightly askew.

Nettie wolfed it down like a pro. And somehow I knew she would.

When it's my turn, I give it my best shot, managing to take a big bite while the rest of the banana swings wildly. "That was way harder than it looked!" I laugh as I wipe tears of laughter from my eyes.

Jennifer is up next, and she manages to take a bite without making a mess. "See, ladies, it's all about technique!" she says with a grin.

"Speaking of techniques—" Elodie holds up a hand and indulges the entire room with tricks and tips session that's enough to make a professional call girl blush.

Good gravy.

Are any of those things legal? Not that Elodie would let that stop her.

After the games, I spot Hetty at the makeshift bar ordering a drink.

"Hey, Hetty," I call out as I approach. "Thank you for all of this. You really didn't have to include me."

Hetty shakes her head my way. "It was my pleasure. Besides"—she sighs past me for a moment—"this was all Lucy's brainchild. She wanted to host it during book club, but our next book club was at my place so I suggested an impromptu cruise."

"Well, that's sweet that you're able to honor Lucy's memory in tonight's festivities as well."

“Oh, for sure. This is all for Lucy really. As soon as she passed away, we decided that everything was dedicated to Lucy on this trip.” She retrieves a purple cocktail from the bartender and takes a sip before thanking him.

“That’s so nice.” I bite down on my grief for the poor woman. “If there’s anything I can do, or any of the ship’s staff can do to help with honoring her, please just let us know.”

She takes another sip of her drink and shakes her head. “We’re already planning a little something back home as well. It’ll just be us. She didn’t have family.” She averts her eyes as if she were privy to what happened to that family. “Jennifer is actually putting it together. Odd since she said the words good riddance last night when we were talking about Lucy.”

I gasp at the thought. “Why in the world would she say that?”

Hetty’s face darkens slightly. “Oh, you know, typical girl drama. Lucy always had a knack for stirring the pot, especially when it came to Jennifer’s fiancé, Marcus. Lucy seemed to have some dirt on him, and Jennifer didn’t like it one bit.” Hetty cuts a glance across the room. “Lucy was doing everything in her power to get Jennifer not to go through with marrying Marcus.”

“Did she sleep with him? Is that why? She wanted him for herself?”

Hetty shakes her head. “Oh no, even Lucy had standards, although not many. She said she knew a controlling jerk when she saw one and she certainly saw one with Marcus.” She lifts her shoulders a notch. “Anyway, Jennifer is getting hitched in two weeks, and as far as I know, she’s thrilled not to have Lucy breathing down her neck about it.”

She takes off and my eyes settle across the room where Jennifer is standing by the

dessert table. I watch as she scoops up a black and white cookie and heads off to a dark corner, nibbling on it and watching the room as the women dance and mingle.

It sounds to me like Jennifer wanted Lucy out of the picture.

And I think maybe it's time to confront her about it.

CHAPTER 28

I'm about to make a beeline for my number one suspect when Beatrice floats up next to me.

"I haven't had this much fun since we played Pin the Junk on the Hunk at Amber's bachelorette party." She fans herself with her fingers and miniature stars flow from her hand. "That was years ago, way before either Lucy or Hetty arrived on the scene."

"Sounds like a killer party—without the killer, of course." I scan the crowd. "Although we do have a killer on board. And I happen to think I know who it is."

We head over to where Jennifer stands, in that dark corner, just shy of the dessert table, bobbing along to the music while gobbling down that black and white cookie. Her blonde hair gleams under the swirling spotlights, and that tight little blue number she's squeezed herself into makes her look like the tall glass of water she is.

I'll admit, Jennifer looks radiant tonight, but there's tension in her eyes. And I think I know why.

"Hey there," I say, sidling up next to her. "This party is insane," I say as we look up at the stage together where Nettie and Tinsley are playing a wildly inappropriate game of pass the cucumber without the use of their hands, and let's just say it's resulting in some awkward yet hilarious moments. "Hetty and Elodie really went all out."

"Tell me about it." Jennifer laughs, but there's an edge to it. "It's like they planned

the craziest night possible. I'm afraid of what might come next."

Same , I want to say but don't.

Bea harumphs while stealing a bite from Jennifer's cookie. "The only thing crazy here is her for stabbing Lucy in the back." She cocks her head a moment. "On second thought, knowing Lucy the way I did, it was a totally rational thing to do. I mean, let's call a spade a spade. Lucy stabbed people in the back all the time. And you know what they say. Turnabout is fair play."

I shoot her a look for even going there.

But maybe she has a point? Maybe Lucy stabbed Jennifer in the back—proverbially speaking.

I clear my throat. "I've been thinking a lot about Lucy. I know you two had some issues," I say gently.

Jennifer sighs and yet her expression tightens. "That girl was always in my business. She claimed she was looking out for me, but it felt more like she was trying to control my life. Especially when it came to Marcus. She never did like him."

"Why not?" I press.

Bea grunts, "Finally we're getting somewhere. I still have a hot date to get to. If I don't take Gannon Robinson off the market, I might just lose him forever. And forever in Paradise is a lot bigger deal than it is down here. Nothing lasts forever on this planet, certainly not people. But up there, well, eternity hangs in the bounds with just about every decision. You've really got to act fast when it comes to finding a good man. There's a Lucy Taylor around every corner just waiting to snap them up."

Life in Heaven sounds an awful lot like life down here. I'm not sure how appetizing that is.

Although spending forever with Ransom Baxter by my side sounds like a slice of paradise in every single way no matter where we are.

Jennifer shrugs. "She actually accused Marcus of hiding something. Not to his face. She said those words to me. But honestly, Lucy was the one with secrets."

"Like what?" I ask, my heart racing.

Jennifer shakes her head. "I don't know. She was always so cryptic. Whenever I would ask about her family, she got all jumbled like she couldn't keep the story straight. Half the time I didn't believe what she was telling me. The only thing I did believe was the fact she was from Oklahoma. She made a few references to living with tornadoes, and my father grew up in Oklahoma, so I knew those things were true." She pauses and lifts a finger. "The other thing that struck me about her is the way she was always helping Hetty with her event planning. It was almost as if she was coaching her in a sense. It was all odd to me. Everything about Lucy was odd."

"So I've heard," I say a touch too softly. "Jennifer, I know all about Lucy's torrid habits of stealing other people's men. You were afraid she was going to do the same thing with Marcus, weren't you?"

She inches back and gives a few quick blinks my way. "Stealing Marcus? I'm sorry, Trixie, but my man is unstealable." She ticks her head to the side. "Believe me when I say this, he's only got eyes for me. The man is obsessed."

"Obsessed?" Beatrice laughs. "Oh, Jennifer. You always did think everything was all about you. But I suppose it's nice that Marcus is focused on his soon-to-be bride."

I agree, but something about the way Jennifer said it all leaves me bristled.

Then something clicks.

“He gave you that My Girl necklace you were wearing the first night, didn’t he?” I say.

She nods. “Oh my goodness.” She feels for her neck. “I must have lost it! Oh geez, Marcus is going to kill me. It kept coming loose. Hetty even tried to help me tighten the clasp. It was the one thing Marcus made me promise when I left, that I’d never take it off. Well, that and the fact that I’d call him every night.” She glances at the ceiling for a moment. “And outside of that, we’ve been texting nonstop. He sort of likes to know where I’m going and with whom—and for how long—and maybe why I’m there to begin with.”

“Where she’s going and with whom?” Beatrice makes a face. “Eww . No, thank you.” She looks my way. “Although in Paradise, we have a sixth sense where to find everyone so none of that is needed. And it’s never weird.” She’s back to grimacing at Jennifer. “But that’s just weird.”

I agree. But then, she is far from home. Maybe he’s just being protective? And maybe the My Girl necklace was more of a loving wink than it was a possessive statement.

“Jennifer, your necklace was found in Lucy’s cabin the night she died. It was right next to the body.”

She gasps as she covers her mouth with her hand. “You don’t think the police think that I did it, do you? I mean, sure, I hated the fact that Lucy was constantly following me around trying to warn me about men like Marcus—telling me he was destined to abuse me—as if she had firsthand knowledge. I didn’t want to hear any of that, but I certainly would never hurt her because of it.” Her eyes glint with tears, and as much

as I don't like losing my prime suspect, I tend to believe she's being genuine.

"She seems to be telling the truth." Beatrice looks just as dejected by the fact as I do.

"But that doesn't explain how her necklace got there."

"Jennifer, how do you think your necklace ended up in her cabin? At the scene of the crime, no less? And to be honest, Lucy's dark blazer was covered with pink glitter when we found her. You were the only one wearing that pink glitter sash that night."

Her mouth squares out as if she were emitting a silent scream. "Oh, Trixie. I do look guilty." She groans hard. "Well, it's all Hetty's fault for insisting that I hug every single woman who came on the trip with us. I told her that was a perfect way for me to catch someone's cold or worse, but she insisted I do it because they spent their hard-earned money to come along. Honestly, these women are here for the beaches and the rum shots." Her lips clamp shut for a moment. "And that necklace. It kept falling off. Like I said, Hetty tried to tighten it for me, but I guess she wasn't able to. I honestly don't know how it ended up in Lucy's room."

Bea tosses her hands in the air. "Maybe it hooked onto Lucy's blazer?"

Or maybe somebody planted it there.

Jennifer's eyes fill with tears and she quickly wipes them away. "I'm sorry, Trixie. I need to go wash my face. I don't know why, but I'm just not feeling this whole charade. I'm not feeling any of it." She runs off and I'm left trying to piece together this fractured puzzle with what little I have.

I spot Amber Walker picking at the desserts and both Bea and I make our way over.

"Amber." I try to sound light as if I didn't just all but accuse her friend of murder.

"Can I ask you something?"

Amber looks fun and flirty in a bright blue dress that sucks in at the midsection and then fans out into a mermaid-inspired tail.

“Anything for the bride-to-be,” she sings. “Ask away.”

“Did Hetty ever mention her life prior to coming to Connecticut? I know she mentioned to me that she was from North Carolina.”

She squints out into the crowd as if looking for the answer. “You know what, I think she did. She once mentioned she used to work for a big fast-food corporation. Big Bite Burgers, I think. She did their billing or something of that nature.” Her eyes flit to the stage. “She mentioned it in passing once when I offered to bring Big Bite Burgers to one of our meetings. We’re just as much about food as we are books.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Bea says, holding her hand to her neck and pretending to choke. And seeing that’s the way she died, I suppose she’s making light of it.

Another thought comes to me.

“I always bring a fruit salad to those things,” I force a laugh with the lie. But I’ve got a hunch and I’m willing to roll the dice on this one.

“You and Hetty both.” Amber laughs before she winces. “But I bet yours haven’t accidentally killed anybody.” A new song starts up and it’s a throwback to the eighties, which makes every woman in the room scream with delight including Amber. “Excuse me,” she says, picking up a brownie and toasting me with it. “My feet are moving and I can’t stop them!”

She dances off and I look over at Beatrice.

“Amber seems to think Hetty worked for Big Bite Burgers before, but I swear when I

spoke to Hetty a few days ago, she said she's worked in event planning all her life."

"Well, maybe she did event planning for Big Bite Burger?"

"Maybe. Or maybe she didn't want to admit she worked for them back in North Carolina?" I say, pulling out my phone and typing in Big Bite Burger along with North Carolina. The screen populates but with nothing I want to see. "Huh, that's strange. They don't have any Big Bite Burger stores in North Carolina. They do have a few in Connecticut." Something catches my eye and I gasp. "Their corporate offices are in Maine!" I look and scan the room until I see Hetty bumping and grinding on the dance floor with the best of them. "She mentioned something about Bangor a few days ago." I rack my mind to come up with it. "Oh, she said she spent years in Bangor, and when I asked her about it, she backtracked and said it wasn't true."

"That's strange behavior if you ask me," Beatrice says while picking up a raspberry cheesecake bite and going to town on it. "She also backtracked on being a trained certified accountant."

"Strange indeed." I quickly look up Big Bite Burger corporate office and type in accountant as well, and then add the name Hetty King before hitting enter.

The page populates with a few irrelevant articles, so I switch over to the photos. Thankfully, whoever snaps pictures at all of the company events is quite prolific and they seem to go back quite a bit. I scroll down, but I don't see Hetty King highlighted at all, but in my scrolling efforts, I do come upon a younger redheaded version of Hetty sans the facial fillers and ultra-plump lips. I glance down at the ledger of names and gag as I see what's written there.

"What is it?" Bea leans in. "What's happening here? I see Hetty's picture?—"

I point down to the name beneath it and Bea gasps, too.

Below Hetty's smiling face, it doesn't say Hetty King at all.

It says Lucy Taylor .

CHAPTER 29

I spot the exact brunette I'm looking for just as she heads for the exit.

I lean toward my specter sidekick. "Come on, Bea," I say. "We've got our suspect."

"Finally!" Beatrice shimmers with excitement, her aura glowing brighter than a hot pink sun. "Let's nail her to a wall and send her straight to the hot place."

"I don't know about that. Committing a homicide isn't high on my list tonight."

We weave through the crowd, dodging Tinsley and Jennifer who seem to be attempting a karaoke version of "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" at the top of their lungs.

The scent of perfume mingling with booze hangs heavy in the air, and the disco lights swirl madly as we slip out onto the outdoor deck.

The cool night air hits us, and it's a refreshing contrast to the warm, chaotic atmosphere inside.

"There she is," I whisper.

Hetty King leans against the railing while staring out at the ocean as if she were spellbound by the dark clouds hovering low, and she seems to be ignoring the fact there's a wild wind pushing through as that hurricane gets closer.

I take a deep breath before stepping forward.

A few people are mingling around nearby. There's a couple of women chatting among themselves and a man standing near them in a dark suit with a baseball cap pulled low over his head.

It's him again!

It's that strange man I keep seeing, lurking around everywhere we go. I probably shouldn't be paranoid, but on a night like tonight, it's sort of a given.

For a second, I consider heading his way and confronting him, but soon the women next to him head back inside and he follows along.

And just like that, the deck is empty in this area. We're facing the bow and almost no one ever comes this way. Although there are a few requisite chairs set out and a couple of tables. Mostly it acts as a private area for the crew.

"Hetty," I call out as Bea and I make our way over with our hair blowing wild. Okay, so it's just my hair blowing wild. Beatrice's mane looks impeccable and it's so not fair.

The woman turns my way and her foil-colored dress reflects the moon above.

"Trixie," she says, elevating her voice a notch over the roaring wind. "How are you enjoying the party?" She attempts a smile, but her face hardly moves a notch. She really should look into dissolving those fillers. Although if I'm right about my hunch, she won't have to worry about fillers ever again. I'm pretty sure there's no day spa in prison.

"We need to talk." The words come from me a touch more somber than I meant them

to.

“Sure.” She blinks my way. “Is this about the party?” She presses a hand to her chest as if she were relieved. “I’m so sorry. I tried to tell Elodie that it didn’t need to be so raunchy, but she kept insisting that the raunchier the better.”

“I believe it,” I say as I toss a quick glance at the thrashing waves as they form angry whitecaps as far as the eye can see. The Emerald Queen is starting to sway with the rhythm of the stormy sea as well.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Beatrice says. “There’s food to be had, and I don’t want to spoil anything, but I overheard Nettie saying something about male strippers.”

She would.

I shake my head at Bea as if to tell her that there will be no strippers. I hate to burst her bubble, but Nettie talks about male strippers on a daily basis and she’s yet to manifest one. I mean, I know Elodie mentioned them, but she only did that to get under my skin. Didn’t she?

Oh my word, she better have.

“Hetty, I have to ask you a few questions,” I finally tell the woman.

She inches back. “What kind of questions? Don’t tell me the girls are trashing the lounge. They can be a rowdy bunch. I’ll put a stop to this myself.” She tries to make her way past me, but I quickly block her path.

“It has nothing to do with the party. But it does have to do with the cruise.” I wince because it’s never any fun asking someone if they’re responsible for taking another life.

“Get her, Trixie!” Beatrice floats up beside me, her eyes glowing like flames. “Let’s see if she can talk her way out of this one.”

I square my shoulders and take a step closer. “I know about your past, Hetty. Or should I say Lucy?”

Hetty’s eyes widen for a split second before she regains her composure. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I know you worked for Big Bite Burgers, and I know your real name is Lucy Taylor. You and the victim switched identities, didn’t you? That’s why no one knew about Lucy’s family or her past in Oklahoma. She was right about being from Oklahoma, though. I was able to look up Hetty King, and Lucy’s picture surfaced. It was in an article about domestic violence. She was an advocate, but she was also a victim.”

Hetty closes her eyes tight for a moment. “It was something Hetty— Lucy —insisted on doing,” she growls. “She wanted to keep herself safe, you know? She needed a new place far away from that monster that beat her.”

“That makes sense,” Bea says just as the ship rises beneath our feet due to the coming storm.

“It does make sense,” I say, never taking my eyes off Hetty. “But there was something in it for you, too. And if I’m right, you’re the one who initiated the idea. You see, Lucy’s ex is still in prison for what he did to her. He was never a threat once she moved to Connecticut to start a new life. In fact, I was able to easily ascertain that she had a thriving business as an event planner back in Oklahoma. You took that from her, right along with her identity.”

“I did her a favor,” she hisses, her eyes glowing like coals, and come to think of it, so are Bea’s.

“You were running from the police. She did you a favor.” I stab my finger her way as I make my point. “It turns out, Big Bite Burger Corporation had an internal breach right around the time a woman named Lucy Taylor was in charge of their accounts. You embezzled enough funds to throw them into turmoil, and I’m sure you did it expertly, but eventually, you were going to get caught. So you cut and run—all the way to Connecticut. You met up with Hetty and convinced her to switch lives. I bet you promised her the moon.”

“She didn’t want the moon.” Hetty folds her arms across her chest as her chest begins to rise and fall dramatically with each new breath. “She wanted money. Lots of it.”

“And you had buckets of it to give her,” I say. “The money you stole from Big Bite Burger. What I don’t get is why you killed Beatrice Fiddlefae.”

Both Beatrice and Hetty gasp with horror.

“Wait a minute.” Beatrice floats up a notch and the sky takes on a pink aura. “Hetty always brought the fruit salad. I ate it dozens of times. And it never had cantaloupe in it before. In fact, the first time I had it I asked for the ingredients. I asked if she ever put cantaloupe in it and she said she wouldn’t dare. She hated them.” She gasps again and covers her mouth with her fingers. “I had told Lucy about my allergy.” Her glowing eyes flit to Hetty. “But why would she kill me? How was I possibly a threat to her?”

Hetty glares over at me and shakes her head. “Beatrice had to go. She was threatening to ruin Lucy’s life because Lucy ruined hers. And I couldn’t risk her digging around for any dirt. Don’t you get it? Any enemy of Lucy’s was an enemy of mine. Beatrice Fiddle-faddle was nothing but collateral damage and it was all her hotheaded fault.”

“Hotheaded fault?” Beatrice’s voice lowers several octaves as she roars her words over the expanse and sounds as if her voice box morphed into a megaphone. “Trixie,

go ahead and say what you have to say to the woman. I'll finish her off."

"You lied to me consistently on this trip," I tell Hetty. "The day we were at the cave at Grand Bahama, you told me you were a certified accountant, but when I asked about it you walked back on it. You lied to me about not living in Bangor. Amber is the one who let me know you used to work for a big fast food corporation, Big Bite Burgers—that she thought you did their billing or something of that nature. This trip was your idea. Lucy couldn't afford a luxury like this. I bet if I dig a little deeper, I'll find out that you bought Lucy's ticket."

She turns her cheek as if I struck her.

"She couldn't afford to be here, but you knew this was the perfect venue to carry out your plan," I continue. "You told me yourself that she wanted to host this bachelorette party at your book club, but since it was meeting at your home, I'm guessing you didn't want any blood on the carpet. A cruise ship is much more convenient all the way around. And the evidence? Jennifer said that the necklace she wore that night kept coming loose. That you offered to tighten it, but you did the opposite, didn't you? As soon as it slipped off, you took it. You had other plans for it. You planted that necklace of Jennifer's in Lucy's cabin to make her look guilty. You bought that sash covered with glitter and made sure Jennifer embraced everyone at the welcome party—including Lucy. You told me so yourself."

The night of the welcome party comes back to me—that glorious confection.

"The cake!" I say a touch too gleeful. "Of course, Jennifer didn't want to cut into it. You handed her the knife by the blade. I thought it was odd at the time. Then when Jennifer put the knife down, I bet you pocketed it somehow. That's why the police found two sets of fingerprints on it that didn't belong to the victim. You went to Lucy's cabin and waited for her and then you took care of a problem you no longer cared to have. With so many people on this ship happy to see Lucy go, I bet you

thought you were home free.”

A moment of silence slices by as she glares daggers into me. “I was home free until you showed up. You and those nosey old ninnies you hang out with.” She takes a step my way and jabs a finger in my chest. “I saw you snooping around, asking everyone you could questions. You didn’t think I was onto you while you pretended to chitchat with me that day at the cave? I saw right through your little amateur sleuth routine. You didn’t fool anyone. Least of all me.” She sniffs hard. “Yes, I killed Lucy, and I killed that Fiddle-faddle fool, too!”

“Hey ,” Beatrice growls. “Who are you calling a fool?”

Hetty zooms forward and grabs me by the shoulders of my beaded dress, her puffy face just an inch from mine. “And I’m going to kill you, too.”

CHAPTER 30

Hetty King slams me to the ground so fast it feels as if gravity malfunctioned and is doing its best to suction me straight to middle earth.

The outdoor deck just above the Blue Water Café is barren with the exception of the killer and me.

The next thing I know, Hetty is sitting on top of my chest, and I look up just in time to see her fist ready to smash down over my temple. No sooner do I raise my hand in self-defense than a bright pink eruption of stars fills the sky as Beatrice roars to life.

Hetty tips her head to the sky. “What the heck was that?”

“That’s the ghost of Beatrice Fiddlefae ,” I say, trying my best to push the woman off of me, but she’s holding her own.

“What?” she squawks again, this time with a laugh caught in her throat. “Is it true?” She looks up at the sky as if searching for her. “Is it you, Fiddle-faddle? You stupid, silly cow. You never did know how annoying you were. The entire group was glad you were gone so we wouldn’t have to hear you whine anymore about how your husband traded you in for a new model.”

“Wow, you really are a horrible person,” I grunt. “So I won’t feel so bad when I do this.” I lift my knee to kick her in the chest, but she twists her body to avoid it. And just as she’s about to bring down her fist, a wild shriek ignites from poor Beatrice who was forced to hear such terrible things come from this witch’s mouth.

In seconds, Hetty is lifted off of me and is suctioned into the sky about ten feet high, suspended in a thicket of hot pink stars with her limbs spread wide as if she were caught in a spiderweb, an intergalactic spiderweb, that is.

A tussle breaks out to my right and I spot Bess and Nettie stepping outside.

“I said no strippers,” Bess admonishes her bestie.

“And I said it’s too late! ” Nettie grouses back. “They’re already on their way.”

I try to get up, or move, but my head feels glued to the deck. And if I’m being honest, it feels as if I’ve got a steel drum thumping in my skull. I guess I took that fall harder than I thought.

A jag of lightning goes off in the sky, followed by a mean growl of thunder.

“ Help ,” Hetty shouts, albeit rather weakly, and both Bess and Nettie look up and let out a shriek.

I’m about to flag them over when footfalls speed this way.

“I don’t care how many ladies you marry,” the voice of a rather irate woman spews. “If one of them is constantly in the middle of a homicide, then I’m going to assume foul play. It’s a numbers game, Baxter. And let’s face it, the odds are not in her favor.”

“ Ransom ,” Bess calls out in a panic as she points to that hot pink nebula that’s hovering just above the ship.

“What in the world?” Quinn shouts at the sight.

“Ransom,” I all but whisper as I struggle to rise. “She confessed.”

“Trixie?” Ransom bolts this way and pauses as he takes a moment to marvel at the woman suspended in space just overhead.

“She did it,” I call out over the raging wind as best as I can. “She confessed to killing Lucy and to killing Beatrice Fiddle-faddle, too.”

“ Fae ,” Beatrice shouts over the brewing tempest the ship seems to be moving through. “It’s Fiddlefae .”

Ransom pulls his weapon and points it up at the sky. “ Freeze ,” he bellows, although there is a slight hesitation in his voice because, let’s face it, whatever is happening to Hetty is definitely out of the realm of reality—but obviously not possibility.

“Good grief,” Quinn shouts as the wind picks up twice as hard. “What have you done now, Troublefield?” She turns to Ransom. “See this? It’s a prime example of what I’ve been trying to tell you. If something out of the norm is happening on this ship, you can bet dollars to deranged Troublefield donuts that your brand new fiancée is at the helm.”

Both Bess and Nettie help me to my feet just as those hot pink stars begin to fade.

“Oh no,” Beatrice moans as she hovers over that canopy of stars that Hetty is suspended in. “It seems my time on the planet is through once again. However, this time, it seems I was able to right a few wrongs. I’m sorry I didn’t help you sooner, Trixie. It was so nice to meet you, and Bess and Nettie, too! You girls take good care of one another, and I’ll see you all on the other side! Ta-ta for now! I’ve got a hot date to tend to. Wish me luck!”

“Goodbye, Bea,” I shout into the sky and both Bess and Nettie do the same. “Good

luck to you!”

Just like that, it’s as if the hot pink lights go out as Beatrice takes her stars and speeds back to Paradise.

And Hetty King’s body slams right back to the waiting deck below.

Quinn does the honors and arrests the woman. And as she’s pushing her along past me, she pauses for a moment to give me the stink eye.

“Good work, Troublefield,” Quinn pants out the words. “I don’t know how or why you did that little party trick, but maybe keep that one to yourself in the future. It’s bad enough you seem to magnetize to the dead.” She takes off and Bess, Nettie, and I exchange a glance.

“Boy, do I ever attract the dead,” I say and the three of us share a little laugh on behalf of all the supernatural shenanigans we’ve been a part of for this past year.

“Troublefield,” Ransom pulls me in and wraps his strong warm arms around me just as the rain starts in. “Are you all right?”

“I’m better than all right,” I say, hiking up and giving him a kiss. “I’m with you. Everything is perfect.”

The whipping wind comes in hard and brings with it a driving rain, both of which usher us back inside. And to my surprise, there are male strippers. An entire slew of them, in fact.

Ransom hops on stage, along with the men from his security team, as one by one they remove their shirts, much to the delight of the crowd. And as it happens, my handsome husband-to-be is doing the stripping deed dead last—and evoking a near

mass hysteria in the process.

Oh heck, it's a full-on mass hysteria that has even driven the Captain this way to see what's going on.

Ransom shakes his hips to the thumping music with the rest of his men before pointing my way and flicking his finger until Elodie all but pushes me onto the stage right along with him.

Soon, we're dancing the night away as the stage is flooded and the rest of the women hop on up to join the party.

“RIP single life,” I shout up over the music to Ransom as I reel him in by his tie. “I guess I'll have to change the name of my blog!”

He tips his head as he wraps his arms around me. “You don't have to change a single thing for me.”

“But I need to speak the truth. How about Suddenly Hitched—What a Trip?”

His lips curve with what looks to be malevolent intent and he gives a subtle nod.

“It's perfect.” He presses his body to mine and we just about cease all movement. “Perfect, just like you.”

“Like us,” I say as we share a steamy kiss right there on the stage at a party meant to celebrate my wildest dreams come true.

This man right here is it.

And I am living the dream.

Justice was had tonight, and so was a darn good party.

The killer is off to the brig for now, and as for me, I'm ready to enjoy the rest of this crazy bachelorette party and a future with Ransom that's brighter than any of Beatrice's stars.

CHAPTER 31

After a few more moves on the dance floor, the party starts to wind down. Ransom and I step over to the dessert table and partake in just about everything—the lava cake never stood a chance. And once we're through, he pulls me in, slightly out of breath, but looking recklessly handsome nonetheless.

He dots a kiss on my lips. "You stole the show tonight."

I laugh at the thought. "I think your shirtless performance might have had something to do with the mob of ravenous women screaming their heads off."

"Hey, I just follow orders," he teases, rubbing the scruff on this cheek over mine. "But seriously, are you okay? That was pretty intense out there. And I'm still not sure what happened as far as that whole levitation thing."

My shoulders rise a notch. "Let's just say Beatrice Fiddlefae wasn't too thrilled to learn that she'd been murdered. But when you think of all the possibilities of what could have happened, a little arial suspension is the least of it. Hetty is no worse for wear. Or should I say, Lucy?"

He nods. "I found out about the identity switch myself tonight."

"You did?" I give his ribs a tweak. "What happened?"

"I had the labs run prints for Hetty, Jennifer, and Amber. Quinn helped me collect them from the glasses they were using one night at dinner. I shipped it to the

mainland a few days back, when we got to port. Imagine how surprised I was to have picked up Lucy Taylor's prints long after her body left the ship. I did a little digging and found out about her time at Big Bite Burger and that?—"

"She embezzled from them."

He nods. "You're good, Troublefield."

"Soon-to-be Baxter," I muse, then a thought hits me. "Oh no. I'm not going to be a Troublefield?" I shake my head. "I mean, I don't want anything to do with Stanton. But the kids..." A whole river of words bubbles up in my throat, and suddenly I feel very conflicted about losing a surname that's been mine for a quarter of a century.

"Keep it," he says, and there's a sincerity in his eyes that lets me know he wouldn't mind one bit.

"But I want you and everything that comes along with you." The words strain from me as if they were crushing my vocal cords because no truer words have ever passed them. "And I mean it with every cell in my body."

"I would never ask you to erase any part of yourself. Besides, I've always thought that Trixie Troublefield has a nice ring to it."

A hard sigh expels from me, then another thought hits me. "How about Trixie Troublefield Baxter?" I cringe a bit because I feel as if I'm on shaky ground.

"I think it has an even better ring to it." He lands a soft kiss to my cheek. "I'm in full support of your decision."

Tears come to my eyes. "Thank you for that."

“Excuse me,” a light female voice chimes and I look to my right and it’s Jennifer.

“Hey.” I head over and offer her a firm embrace. “Are you okay? I didn’t see you in the room when I got back.”

“I went out to get some air and saw them arresting Hetty.” She shakes her head. “I just wanted to apologize for everything. My friends, the craziness—it’s been a lot. But you handled it all so well. Thank you. And thank you for helping track down Lucy’s killer. I just never thought... I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” I tell her. “It’s been a wild ride for all of us. Are you okay?”

“I’m going to be fine. It’s supposed to be a happy time for us, for both of us.” She offers Ransom a mournful smile. “On behalf of Lucy, thank you both for all that you’ve done.”

“Jennifer,” I lean in a notch, “I’m sorry to bring this up, but I heard certain things about Marcus. I just want to make sure you’re going into this with your eyes wide open.”

“This again?” She gives a little laugh. “Please don’t worry about me, Trixie.”

I’m about to respond when I notice a familiar figure in a ballcap, along with a wrinkled suit, lurking near the edge of the room. It’s the same man who’s been spying on us for the entire cruise.

“Excuse me for a second, Jennifer.” My instincts kick in, and I turn to Ransom. “That man has been practically stalking Jennifer and her friends this whole cruise. Maybe it’s innocent, but I’m tired, and I don’t think his creepy behavior is appropriate. Can you please go and speak to him?”

Ransom straightens immediately, ready to confront the man, but before he can, Jennifer turns and gasps.

“Marcus?” Her face contorts with an entire range of emotions.

The man in the ballcap hesitates for a moment before stepping out of the shadows and giving a sheepish wave as he heads this way.

“Yeah, it’s me.” He gives Jennifer a cheesy wink. “Surprise, babe.” He holds out his hands as if he were a prize.

Jennifer’s eyes widen in shock. “What are you doing here? Have you been following me?”

Marcus shifts from foot to foot. “I just needed to make sure my girl wasn’t doing things she wasn’t supposed to do.”

Jennifer’s expression hardens. “Oh, for goodness’ sake.” She tosses her hands in the air. “If you two will excuse us, I’ve got a fiancé to question, and more importantly, school.”

She leads Marcus away, and as I watch them go, I can’t help but feel both concerned and relieved.

The lights flicker in the lounge and the ship gives a soft bounce as the storm outside seems to grow with intensity.

“And on that note,” I say. “I think it’s time we call it a night.”

As we leave the lounge, I glance back at the party and actually feel a sense of closure. The mystery is solved, justice is served, and now it’s time to look forward to the

future.

With Ransom by my side, I know that whatever comes next, we'll face it together—and probably with Quinn Riddle breathing down our necks.

I give Ransom's hand a squeeze. "Thanks for always having my back."

He smiles, pulling me closer. "Always, Trixie. I will have your back forever."

And I know this much is true.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:00 pm

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Dear sweet readers,

As we reach the end of this incredible journey, I want to take a moment to thank each and every one of you for joining me on this adventure. From the high seas to the harrowing drama and all the tips and tales in between, it's been one heck of a ride.

We've laughed together, solved dilemmas, and shared in the joy of newfound love and friendships. Your letters and stories have made this journey so special—with the exception of a certain ex who tried to utilize them as a means of manipulation. But that aside, I feel honored to have been a part of your cruising experience.

As we close out this chapter, remember that every ending is just the beginning of a new adventure. Keep exploring, keep discovering, and always keep a sense of wonder in your heart. Life is a grand voyage, and there are so many more horizons to explore.

Until we meet again on another exciting journey, may your sails be full, your seas be calm, and your hearts be happy.

Happy cruising,

XOXO Trixie

The Emerald Queen has docked back in Florida and the bustling energy of disembarkation fills the air.

“We made it,” Nettie says as we approach the gangway where a few members of the crew are bidding farewell to our fellow passengers with their trademark charm.

Wes, Ransom, Elodie, and Tinsley are waving like mad and taking a few spontaneous selfies with the best of them.

Since Bess, Nettie, and I purchase our cabins, we need to embark and disembark right along with the rest of the guests. We usually kill a few hours on land, then are right back on the ship, ready and raring to go on our next adventure.

“We made it, indeed,” Wes says as he gives a slight bow our way, all done up in his white captain’s regalia. “And what a cruise it was.”

“Hello, ladies.” Ransom offers an amicable nod as well, looking as sharp as ever in his requisite inky dark suit. He pulls me close and lands a searing kiss on my lips.

“I can’t believe it’s over,” Bess says, adjusting her hat, which she miraculously kept safe throughout the wild ride. “This cruise was something else.”

“Speak for yourself,” Nettie grumbles. “I still haven’t found my silver fox, but there’s always the next time.” She glances at her watch. “And next time starts in just under five hours.”

A large mob moves between us and Wes waves their way. “Safe travels, everyone. We hope to see you all again soon.”

Ransom nods past me and I turn that way just in time to see Amber Walker pulling her luggage. Her expression is somber, but she manages a mournful smile my way.

“I guess this is goodbye,” she says as she opens her arms and I offer her a quick embrace.

“Take care, Amber,” I say, giving her a hug. “I hope things get better from here.”

“Thanks, Trixie,” Amber says. “This trip was a roller coaster. It’s going to take me and the rest of my friends quite some time to process.”

“I can imagine,” I say. “I wish you only the best.”

As soon as she steps onto the gangway, Jennifer Mitchell takes her place and surprisingly she looks more relaxed than I’ve seen her in days.

“Trixie”—the blonde offers me a quick embrace—“there’s something I want to tell you.” She looks serious but hopeful. “I’ve decided to take things slower with Marcus. I don’t foresee marriage in the cards for us anytime soon. I think I’m going to enjoy being single for a while.”

A wave of relief rolls through me. Everything about her fiancé sent red flags my way. I hate to say it, but I’m thrilled to hear about her decision.

“That sounds like a good plan,” I tell her, pulling her into another quick hug. “You deserve to focus on yourself for a change. Take your time with things and please put yourself first.”

“I will. Thank you, Trixie. Thank you for everything.” Jennifer waves goodbye to the rest of the crew before striding off the ship.

The crowd dies down and Wes steps forward, giving a slight bow my way as he clears his throat. “I have an announcement that concerns all of you.”

I glance at Ransom as if to ask if he’s in the know and he simply shrugs in response.

“Due to a hurricane headed for the Caribbean”—Wes begins—“Royal Lineage Cruise Lines has decided to redirect the Emerald Queen . We’ll be heading up the Eastern

Seaboard next for our fall foliage cruise.”

Ransom and I exchange a stunned glance.

“That means...?” I look at Wes and take a quick breath.

“That’s right, Trixie.” Wes ticks his head to the side. “You’ll have the chance to get married a whole lot sooner than expected.”

“Yes!” Elodie claps her hands and belts out a whoop. “Trixie, you can finally put all that lingerie I’ve been plying you with to good use!”

We break out into a collective laugh.

“Congratulations.” Bess offers both Ransom and me a firm embrace. “I’m so happy for you both!”

Nettie belts out a cock-a-doodle-doo and from somewhere down on the other end of the gangway a group of women reciprocates.

We share another laugh at that one.

“Bring on the champagne,” Nettie calls out. “We need to toast to your new life.”

“I guess we’ll toast at the wedding soon enough, too,” I say as a sudden burst of excitement hits me. “A wedding that’s just days away!” A whole other rush of adrenaline hits me. “Oh my goodness, I need to get my hair done. And what about my nails? I need to call my kids asap. I need a dress! ”

Tinsley shakes her head my way. “You really do think every cruise is about you.”

“The next one will be,” Ransom says without missing a beat.

“It will be about us ,” I say wrapping my arms around my handsome, strong, unshakeable fiancé.

Wes chuckles at the two of us. “It looks as if your single days are numbered.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Ransom says as he steals a kiss from my lips.

I nod up at him. “And I am counting down the hours.”

The best is yet to come, and in just a few short days our destinies will be changed forever—for the better.

And with that, we step into the future, ready for whatever adventures lie ahead.

And something tells me, it will be trouble.

Family Group Chat:

Trixie:Hey, everyone! Exciting news—the ship is headed up the Eastern Seaboard next, and guess what? That means we’ll be stopping off in Maine!

Stanton:Well, isn’t that just the cherry on top. Planning another nonsense trip with your rent-a-cop?

Abbey:Dad! That is so rude! Please apologize ASAP! Ransom and Emerson, don’t pay him any mind. Parker and I are thrilled! And Mom? Does this mean what I think it means?

Parker:Wait, are you saying you’re moving up the wedding date?

Trixie:Yes, you guessed it! We’re moving up the wedding date. With the ship stopping in Maine, it felt like the perfect opportunity. I’ll get the details to you as

soon as we can figure them out. I couldn't be happier!

Ransom: That goes double for me.

Emerson: Aww! Congrats, guys! Can't wait to celebrate! Let me know how I can help with the preparations.

Abbey: Yup! Parker and I are ready to help, too!

Stanton: Well, this should be interesting. Don't expect me to throw confetti.

Abbey: Dad, honestly, just be happy for her. Mom, this is wonderful news. Can't wait to see you walk down the aisle!

Parker: All this is happening next week? We'll make it work!

Emerson: We're here for whatever you guys need. Let's make this the wedding of your dreams.

Trixie: Thank you all! Your support means the world to me. And Stanton, you're welcome to come and see what real love looks like. ?? Can't wait to celebrate with all of you soon!

Ransom: One thing is for sure, it will be a wedding to remember.

Stanton: Oh, it will be. I'll make sure of that.

*Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed the trip! Be sure to pick up Fatal Fall Foliage Cruise , coming up next!