



Jingle Bells and Shotgun Shells (Pain in the Assassin Cozy Mysteries #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: It's Christmas time in Honey Hollow and Santa might have a list, but I've got one of my own—a hit list.

Okay, fine. Santa's got a list, but I've got a body—and if I don't solve this case before Christmas morning, I might just end up on the naughty side of a jail cell. As for that naughty list of mine, well I'll take care of that. I always (almost) do.

When Santa drops dead, I'm making a list and checking it twice for suspects.

Look, I never planned to spend my Christmas investigating murder instead of committing it. But when Santa face-plants into my festively decorated elf attire and drops dead during the Jingle Bell Jubilee, what's a reluctant hitwoman to do?

I'm Effie Canelli, and my holiday to-do list just got complicated: bake gingerbread, wrap presents, figure out who offed Santa, and oh yeah—avoid assassinating someone who is near and dear to my boyfriend (direct orders from my Uncle Jimmy, the family's resident crime lord).

My hot detective boyfriend Cooper is officially investigating, but between my meddling Nona Jo orchestrating surprise weddings, Aunt Cat and Carlotta wreaking havoc at every turn, and a growing list of suspects with murder on their Christmas wish lists, I'm knee-deep in yuletide chaos.

So grab your spiked eggnog and join me in Honey Hollow, where the cookies are sweet, the family dynamics are sweeter, and someone is decking more than just the halls this Christmas season. Trust me—this holiday murder spree is the gift that keeps on giving!

It's a race against time—before the real Santa slides down the chimney and someone else ends up on the wrong side of a sleigh.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

The scent of cinnamon, pine, and most likely desperation fills the air of Honey Hollow's newly refurbished community center.

It's a week until Christmas and it looks as if all of Vermont has filed into the community center for the Jingle Bell Jubilee, a holiday extravaganza open to both people and pets that showcases the town's shop vendors.

Christmas carols blare from speakers that make Mariah Carey's high notes feel as if they're drilling directly into my skull.

Crowds of holiday-crazed townsfolk shuffle between craft booths while their pets sniff each other in that awkward getting-to-know-you dance that thankfully only animals can get away with.

Dogs of all sizes strain at their leashes, and more than one person has decided that stuffing their cat into a bubble backpack is somehow less traumatic than leaving the poor creature at home.

"I look like a Christmas stripper," I mutter to my sister while tugging at the see-through green bodysuit that barely covers the essentials. "I'm pretty sure these outfits violate some kind of public decency law."

The Honey Hollow Community Center has recently undergone a renovation and its transformation is almost as shocking as our elf costumes.

Gone is the musty, dated meeting hall, replaced by what looks like a ritzy country club that Santa himself might frequent if he won the lottery.

Crystal chandeliers—dozens of them—cast a warm glow over the dark wood floors.

And at the front of the room, lush red velvet curtains frame the stage where an ornate gold throne sits, just waiting for the big man in red to park his jolly behind.

Of course, Santa is here, too, which only partially explains why my sister Niki and our coworkers Suze and Lily were coerced into wearing glorified lingerie to pretend we're elves—naughty elves at that. Although with the four of us, the naughty part isn't such a stretch.

"I don't know what you're complaining about." Niki gives a little shimmy that makes her strategically placed peppermint pinwheels spin.

Both Niki and I have dark hair, coffee-colored eyes, and the inability to keep our mouths shut when we want to let a sarcastic zinger fly.

We can't help it. We come from a large Italian family where sarcasm and food are basically our love languages.

"I think Mayor Nash has excellent taste," she goes on. "These outfits are going to put Honey Hollow on the map."

"As what? The Christmas Gentlemen's Club?" I adjust my outfit for the fiftieth time, trying to pull fabric out of places fabric should never venture. The giant peppermint pinwheels covering my chest are as subtle as a gun in a convent.

Suze scowls, yanking at her bodysuit. "We look like floozies. Christmas floozies. I'm sixty-two years old.

The only spinning pinwheels I should be looking at are in a retirement brochure.

” Suze has short blonde hair—more gray than blonde, but don’t tell her I said that—and a stocky frame that she maintains through a steady diet of cupcakes.

“Well, I’m keeping my outfit on later for Alex.” Lily winks, referring to her boyfriend—who also happens to be Suze’s son. “He’s always had a thing for Christmas candy.”

“That’s my baby boy you’re talking about,” Suze groans, covering her ears. “I didn’t need that mental image. I’m going to need therapy. Or whiskey. Preferably both.”

Lily Swanson is a brunette looker who works alongside us at the bakery, too. She’s not-so-sweet, overly sassy, and can appreciate a good zinger like nobody’s business.

I crane my neck, scanning the crowd for any sign of Cooper. Cupertino Lazzari, aka Homicide Detective Cooper Knox, would be my official plus-one. He’s hot, he’s armed, and he’s mine.

He’s also supposed to be bringing Watson tonight, our shared custody oh-so-adorable golden shepherd mix. I hope Coop put the red ribbon on his leash that I gave him this morning.

Watson is going to look so stinking cute. I have no doubt he’s going to steal the show from Santa himself. Every single child in this room will beg to find Watson in their stocking come Christmas morning.

And, well, Coop is so hot that every single woman in this room will beg to find Cooper Knox in their stocking come Christmas morning, too.

“Looking for Detective Hot Stuff?” Niki nudges me with her pointy elf shoe. “If he sees you in that getup, he might forget all about your little career hiccup.”

By career hiccup, she means the tiny fact that I happen to moonlight as an assassin for our Uncle Jimmy, head of the Canelli crime family, while Cooper works as the aforementioned homicide detective.

And have I mentioned that his real last name is Lazzari?

As in the Lazzari crime family—number one enemies to the Canellis? Talk about relationship complications.

My name, however, is Eufrasia Margarita Canelli, but people just call me Effie.

I'm five feet five inches of fun, have dark, medium-length hair, dark eyes, and a knack for landing myself in the deadliest and some might say dumbest of situations—aka that whole hitwoman for the mob thing.

Oh, have I not mentioned it? After I lost my job in big tech, I ran to my Uncle Jimmy for a job.

He gave me two choices: either dance at his strip club or pump a few bullets into his enemies.

I chose the latter since I'm not so big on public nudity.

Oddly enough, I don't have a problem with bullets or bloodshed.

My job at the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery is mostly a front, though my boss, Lottie Lemon, is sweeter than her desserts. The gig at the bakery could realistically fund the lifestyle to which I've become accustomed—having a roof over my head and enough dough to spring for pizza every other night.

“Where is Lottie, anyway?” I ask, still scanning the crowd. “I still don't know how

she convinced us to dress like Christmas streetwalkers while she escaped the humiliation.”

“She’s running her booth.” Lily points toward the far corner where a line stretches halfway across the room—as it should. Lottie’s desserts really are that good.

The Cutie Pie booth is decked out with enough twinkle lights and candy canes to be seen from the space station, while Lottie presides like the queen of Christmas confections that she is.

Her platters are packed with holiday treats—snowman cake pops with tiny scarves, reindeer brownies with pretzel antlers, gingerbread cookies that look suspiciously like certain town residents, and her famous peppermint hot chocolate cupcakes topped with miniature marshmallows.

There’s also a mountain of Christmas tree Rice Krispies treats covered in green frosting and decorated with tiny candy ornaments.

Those last treats are heavily addictive.

I should know, I ate two dozen myself before leaving the shop.

“Of course, she’s running her booth.” I sigh. “She gets to look professional while we’re out here auditioning for Santa’s Naughty Helpers—The North Pole After Dark edition.”

“Oh my goodness.” Suze’s jaw drops as she points to the stage. “Speaking of naughty helpers...”

A commotion erupts at Santa’s throne where my Aunt Cat and her BFF Carlotta Sawyer are decked out in Mrs. Claus outfits that seem to be missing about seventy

percent of their fabric.

Carlotta is busy straddling Santa's lap while Aunt Cat appears to be trying to swallow his face whole.

Mothers gasp in horror, covering their children's eyes while making a beeline for either the exit—or more to the point, Lottie's cookie display—because let's face it, nothing soothes trauma like a good dose of sugar.

“Is that your aunt?” Lily asks with her eyes wide.

“No relation,” I say, though we both know that's a lie.

Aunt Cat takes that moment to adjust her position, and Santa lets out a jolly “Ho, ho, whoa! ” that echoes through the community center.

“Should we...?” Lily gestures vaguely toward the Christmas catastrophe unfolding on stage.

“Extract my aunt and Carlotta from Santa before they scar these children for life?” I finish for her. “Probably.”

Suze groans. “Effie, I think we should go collect those two now before they give Santa a heart attack,” she suggests, just as I spot Aunt Cat adjusting her costume in a way that makes me want to gouge my eyes out with a candy cane.

“Wait just a ho, ho, ho minute.” Niki grabs my arm, pointing toward the entrance. “Who are those guys?”

Two elderly men shuffle through the door, both dressed in partial Santa costumes minus their beards and hats—not that they need fake facial hair.

They're sporting the real deal—gray, scraggly beards that could house small woodland creatures.

Both are bald, wrinkled, and moving with the speed of molasses in January.

One of them happens to have a pretty young thing attached to his side. Obviously, those two old men aren't the only ones confused. Either that or they're loaded.

“Why are they dressed that way? They look like a couple of derelict Santas. I'm pretty sure they're going to scar a few kids for life,” Lily says, tilting her head like a confused puppy.

“They're old,” Suze says with a shrug. “At that age, half the time you put on whatever's at the front of the closet. My father once wore my mother's blouse to work for a month.”

I'm about to laugh when Niki leans closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Why does that young slut hanging off the old coot's arm look familiar?”

I squint to get a better look at the woman and my stomach drops like an elevator that just had its cables sliced clean.

Christmas just got a whole lot deadlier.

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I clamp my mouth closed to keep from screaming.

The two geriatric Santas hobble closer, but it's the woman between them who makes my blood pressure spike.

Loretta Salami—or whatever her full name is, I can never keep it straight—is Cooper's younger sister.

She's got dark auburn hair teased and piled high enough to require its own zip code, big brown eyes rimmed with enough eyeliner to supply a makeup counter at a department store, and has a dress on that probably costs more than my monthly rent.

She's also been married more times than I can count, and by the looks of it, she's interested in upping that number by one, or maybe two old coots.

I close the gap between us in seconds.

“Loretta Salmonella.” I plaster on a smile faker than the plastic icicles dangling from the ceiling. “What a... surprise to see you here.” I was tempted to say terror .

Her gaze travels down my skimpy elf costume with those giant peppermint pinwheels, and her lip curls like she's just smelled something particularly unpleasant.

“Effie,” she grunts. “Working as an elf now? How appropriate.”

“This old thing?” I pinch at one of the pinwheels covering my chest and send it spinning. “My boss at the bakery asked me to moonlight. I'm just spreading a little

holiday cheer,” I say through gritted teeth. “Speaking of which, who are your friends?”

The old, decrepit Santa-wannabes can hardly focus on me with their eyes. Obviously, their vision is going. And come to think of it, hers must be, too.

Loretta tightens her arm around one of the ancient Santas that she’s claimed as her own. “Mind your own beeswax,” she snaps with a huff that makes her look like a pouty teenager rather than a grown woman—which really explains a lot.

They take off just as Niki, Suze, and Lily sidle up beside me.

“Well, that’s settled, Effie.” My sister laughs. “She’s told you off. Let’s go eat cookies. Lottie brought along some of her Italian specials—pignoli, struffoli, and those amazing cuccidati with the fig filling.”

“No way.” I shake my head, watching Loretta parade her elderly companion through the crowd with her arm wrapped possessively around him. “That’s Cooper’s sister. I have a quasi-familial duty to get to the bottom of this.”

“Your quasi-familial duty is going to get us kicked out of this place for disorderly conduct,” Suze grumbles. “And that’s tantamount to being banned from free cookies.”

“Besides”—Lily adds— “these giant peppermint pinwheels covering our bare essentials aren’t exactly covert operation attire. We’re basically wearing Christmas-themed pasties and a prayer.”

She’s got a point. These outfits make us about as inconspicuous as a neon sign in a monastery. We’re one strong breeze away from giving everyone a very merry Christmas. The last thing I need to end up with tonight is a rap sheet.

Before I can respond, a woman in a proper Mrs. Claus outfit—someone who actually understood the assignment—trots our way.

Her costume is demure, with a modest red dress and a lace-trimmed cap covering tufts of hair from what looks like a gray wig.

She's holding a tray of eggnog in cute little mugs in the shape of Rudolph's head as her bright red glossy lips stretch into a smile.

“Ladies, would you care for some eggnog? Compliments of the Honey Hollow's very own Jolly Holly Tree Lot.” She looks somewhere in her forties, and I can see hints of dark auburn hair peeking out from under her wig.

“Bless you and your dairy-based kindness,” Niki says, snatching up a glass.

“You're quite welcome.” The woman chortles before moving on to the geriatric Santas and Loretta. “And here's a lactose-free version for you, kind sir,” she says, offering a glass to the man fortunate enough not to be Loretta's mark.

“Holly Bellini? Is that you?” Suze squints at the Mrs. Claus.

The woman turns, and her red lips part in recognition. “Suze! How wonderful to see you.”

They exchange pleasantries while I down half my eggnog. Not bad—cinnamon, nutmeg, and enough bourbon to make this elf costume seem like a better idea.

“Let me introduce my friends,” Suze says, gesturing to us. “This is Effie, Niki, and Lily. We all work at the Cutie Pie Bakery with Lottie the Tyrant.”

Suze's lack of affection for our sweet boss has more to do with the fact Lottie has

Suze's older son on a string than it does with Lottie's ability to boss us around. Sure, she can be bossy, but that's because she's the boss.

"Lovely to meet you all." Holly offers up a smile as warm as Christmas itself.

"Have you met the Bianchi brothers? They own one of the biggest toy manufacturing companies in the world. They're a couple of real St. Nicks.

" She giggles as she says it. "This is Nicholas and Lorenzo Bianchi." She points to them respectively.

"And I believe this is Lorenzo's girlfriend, Loretta Surami. "

Ha! I nearly choke on my eggnog. She can't get her name right either.

Wait a minute—did she say girlfriend ?

I'm about to interject when Nicholas "St. Nick" Bianchi clears his throat and narrows his eyes on Holly. "Still trying to run this town into the ground with your overpriced events, Bellini? I remember when festivals were actually affordable for families."

Everyone laughs except Holly, whose smile freezes as if doing her best rendition of Frosty the Snowman.

He was joking, right? But then again, he's old. And old people just say whatever it is they're thinking. Case in my point, my Nona Jo.

" Nicholas ." Holly smears his name as if it were an expletive. "It's good to see you still have your sense of humor." She cranes her neck into the crowd. "Stella, careful with that tray!"

She gestures to another older woman who's navigating through the crowd with a second tray of eggnog, teetering dangerously close to spilling it on Nicholas' Santa suit.

"And this is Stella Martinelli," Holly says to us all as the older woman steadies herself. "She runs our caroling group."

Stella is the picture of a warm grandmother, with silver-streaked dark hair and a festive sweater under her volunteer apron. Her sweet smile only seems to expand as she nods at Nicholas.

"Nice to see you again, Nick," she says it with a tone that implies otherwise before nodding at his brother as well.

Before I can process the tension bubbling before us, a series of screams erupt from the stage, followed by what sounds like the mayor pleading for mercy.

I whip around to see Aunt Cat and Carlotta doing their best to smother Mayor Nash with what my mother would delicately call two of their best "assets." Or in this case, four .

"Duty calls," I mutter, thrusting my empty glass at Niki. "Save me a struffoli."

I dash toward the stage with my elf shoes jingling with each step. By the time I reach them, Mayor Nash looks like a man who's seen both heaven and hell in the span of five minutes.

His Santa hat is askew, lipstick marks cover his face, and he's clutching the armrests of his throne as if they're the only thing anchoring him to reality.

"Ladies," I say, inserting myself between Aunt Cat, Carlotta, and our traumatized

mayor. “I think Santa needs a cookie break.”

“He can have a cookie,” Aunt Cat purrs, “but what he really wants is?—”

“Nothing that should be said out loud at a family friendly event,” I interrupt, shooting her a look.

It takes a full minute for me to wrestle them both off the poor man, and as I’m escorting them off the stage, I spot Nicholas Bianchi down below having what appears to be a heated argument with Stella Martinelli.

Her grandmotherly demeanor has vanished, replaced by tight lips and flushed cheeks.

Before I can get close enough to eavesdrop—a skill my family considers a valuable career asset—an older, dark-haired man plucks Stella away.

He turns back to Nicholas, jabs a finger in his chest, and says something that looks pretty threatening before storming off with Stella in tow.

Well, isn’t this interesting? Santa seems to have made someone’s naughty list.

The party atmosphere picks up as “Jingle Bell Rock” blasts over the speakers. Mayor Nash makes a hasty exit, taking his two naughty Mrs. Claus groupies with him.

Nicholas Bianchi climbs the steps to the stage, settling his considerable girth onto the throne. He’s finally attached a fake beard to match his Santa suit—and it’s about time he got with the program.

Suze, Lily, and I take our positions around Santa’s throne, passing out candy canes and plucking crying children from his lap once they inevitably realize this stranger in red isn’t as jolly as advertised.

“That man’s breath could strip paint,” Suze mutters after leaning in to help a toddler go over the finer points of his Christmas list. “I think he raided the eggnog— and the bourbon.”

“Maybe he’s trying to numb himself to all these sticky fingers,” Lily suggests as a particularly enthusiastic child yanks on Nicholas’s beard.

I’m about to respond when I notice Nicholas starting to sway in his seat. His eyelids droop, and he slurs something unintelligible to the child currently perched on his knee.

“Oh my word, he is drunk,” Lily hisses.

“Or maybe he’s just playing sick to get out of kid duty?” Suze wonders.

My guess is the sticky finger fiasco—and the booze.

Before we can solve that mystery, Nicholas lurches forward, almost toppling out of his throne. Without thinking, I jump onto his lap to steady him, blocking the view from the line of children and their smartphone-wielding parents.

“ Ho, ho, ho, ” I shout to the crowd like a crazed lunatic. “It looks like Santa is tired from all his toy-making!”

The photographer at the front of the stage continues to click his camera my way. “ Say cheese! ”

No sooner does the flash go off than Nicholas buries his face directly into my peppermint pinwheels with a groan.

“ Hey .” I shove him back and slap him silly for the effort. “Drop dead, you old

pervert!”

As if on cue, the community center goes silent save for my voice echoing off the walls.

Nicholas’s eyes roll back as he slides from the throne like a melting snowman, grabbing a candy cane on his way to the floor.

“Santa!” a couple of children scream from the line.

Lily rushes forward and presses two fingers to Nicholas’s wrinkled neck before her eyes meet mine and she shakes her head at me.

“Is he okay?” someone calls from the crowd as the room breaks out in murmurs.

“He’s...” I begin, but the words stick in my throat like dry fruitcake.

I look down at the dead man who took his last breath nestled between my festive chest decorations.

“To think the last joy ride he took just happened to be between my peppermint pinwheels,” I mutter. “Talk about going out with a bang.”

The room erupts in gasps and whispers. Some of the parents usher their children toward the exit while others pull out their phones to capture the holiday disaster for posterity—and probably TikTok.

The Jingle Bell Jubilee just became a silent night for Nicholas Bianchi, and I have a feeling the holiday season is only going to get deadlier from here.

Ho, ho, ho—Santa Claus is dead.

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Dead .

The scent of peppermint, pine, and now the unmistakable stench of death mingles in the air as I stare down at Santa's lifeless body.

My scream tears through the community center, followed immediately by Suze, Niki, and Lily joining in with their own high-pitched wails.

Within seconds, the entire place erupts into what can only be described as a choir of hellish Christmas carolers—if those carolers had just witnessed Santa Claus drop dead and were auditioning for parts in a holiday horror movie.

“Jingle bells, Santa smells, St. Nick just died!” some kid belts out from the back, proving that nothing creates a comedian faster than trauma.

“Silent night, holy—” the roving carolers attempt to finish the chorus before dissolving into sobs.

“Somebody call an ambulance!” shouts a woman dressed as a reindeer, complete with a blinking red nose.

Cooper and Noah sprint up the stage steps, badges already out as if they're competing to see who can look more official.

Noah Fox would be the lead homicide detective down in Ashford—and Suze's older son who has caused more than a little contention between the love of his life, Lottie Lemon, and his mother.

Cooper is newer on the force but just as ineffective at catching a killer. It's a long story and less of an insult and more of a social commentary on the state of the Ashford Sheriff's Department. I mean, half their cases get solved by bakers with too much time on their hands.

A sharp woof comes from stage left and the cutest little pooch this side of the North Pole bounds over, with the requisite red bow on his collar.

"Watson!" I shout with joy as the sassy pup jumps right into my arms, and you can bet that I don't let go.

He's soft, fluffy, and has fur the color of pee in the snow.

His warm body against my chest feels like the only solid thing in a room that's not spinning out of control.

He's too busy licking my face silly to notice the fact that his mommy was just Santa's last stop before the afterlife.

"Effie, what happened?" Cooper growls like a threat, and I'm pretty sure he's flirting on some deep, dark level.

I can't help it. He's menacingly sexy when he gets all revved up.

Those blue-green eyes of his turn stormy, his jaw clenches, and suddenly I'm wondering if making out next to a corpse is inappropriate. Spoiler alert: it so is.

"The guy dropped dead," I reply, adjusting Watson in my arms as he squirms to get a better view of the chaos.

"He sure did." Suze nods. "Right after she told him to." She tugs at her barely-there

dress. “It’s nice to know some men actually follow orders.” She cranes her neck in the crowd. “Noah, where is your father? I’d like to see if he’s capable of following orders himself.”

Suze and Wiley have been divorced for some time now, but that hasn’t stopped her from harassing him every now and again —and from creating that odd-looking doll in his likeness, the one with all the pins in it.

Noah’s face tightens at the mention of his father. “Mom, can we focus on the dead Santa rather than your little voodoo hobby?”

So he knows.

“It’s not voodoo,” Suze sniffs. “It’s therapeutic crafting.”

Noah sighs and asks Lily and his mother to draw the curtains. “The kids shouldn’t have to see this.”

“Too late,” I mutter, nodding toward the sea of smartphone-wielding parents in the audience. “Santa’s death is probably trending on social media already. I can see the hashtags now, #SantaDown or #JingleFails.”

Carlotta and Aunt Cat push their way through the gathering crowd and scramble onto the stage with their festive attire looking particularly garish next to Nicholas’s pale face.

“Another good one bites the dust!” Carlotta announces, as if we’re at a retirement party rather than a Grim Reaper meet and greet.

Aunt Cat nudges the corpse with her sparkly red heel. “I told him that a third helping of Christmas pudding would kill him, but did he listen?”

“That’s not—” I start, but Carlotta cuts me off.

“At least he died happy,” she says with a wink that makes me want to douse my eyes with hand sanitizer. “Face-first in a winter wonderland of peppermints.”

“Can we not?” I plead, shifting Watson who’s now trying to sniff the deceased.

Lottie rushes onto the stage with her caramel locks bouncing, and every inch of her radiating the kind of good looks that don’t diminish with age.

She’s got a body that just won’t quit—and that happens to have more to do with the stud of a judge that’s ever by her side, Judge Essex Everett Baxter.

He just goes by Sexy. It’s not a self-appointed nickname but still accurate, nonetheless.

And zooming to their side is Noah, who Carlotta happens to call Foxy.

She’s not wrong either. They both belong to Lottie, which makes her the envy of every woman in at least three counties and the subject of my occasional murderous thoughts on particularly lonely nights.

“Dear Lord,” Lottie gasps as she takes in the scene. “Effie, what happened? And why was Santa trying to wear your peppermints as eye patches?”

“He was not—” I adjust Watson again who’s now pawing at my elf hat. “He just collapsed. One minute he was ho, ho, ho-ing , the next he was no, no, no-ing right out of existence.”

Cooper steps closer with his notebook already out. “Walk me through it.”

I recount the whole thing—the swaying, the slurring, the face-dive into my festive chest decor—while Cooper takes notes with an intensity that suggests he’s either documenting a crime scene or planning to write a strongly worded letter to the North Pole about workplace safety.

When I finish, Cooper pulls me into his arms—with his wavy dark hair slightly mussed and those marbled blue-green eyes boring into mine with an intensity that should be illegal in at least forty-seven states.

Cooper also has that whole you’re-never-going-to-get-a-smile-out-of-me thing going for him. Have I mentioned he’s Italian? He checks all the boxes. All of them. Even the ones I didn’t know existed until I met the guy.

“What is it with you and dead bodies?” Cooper asks with his voice a mix of exasperation and concern.

“I don’t know,” I say, jostling Watson who gives a little yip of protest. “They just keep dropping around me. Maybe I’m cursed. Or blessed, depending on how you look at it.”

“Blessed?” One of his eyebrows shoots up.

“Well, I’m never bored at parties.”

“But did you have to off Santa?” he says. “And so late in the holiday season?”

“I didn’t—wait, are you accusing me of murdering Santa Claus?” I pull back, genuinely offended. “My work may land me on the naughty list, but I draw the line at taking out the big man himself.”

Cooper’s lips twitch in what might almost become a smile before he remembers he’s

a detective at a potential crime scene. “Force of habit.”

Before I can respond, Holly and Stella rush onto the stage, wailing like professional mourners at a funeral where the inheritance is substantial.

“Oh, Nicholas!” Holly sobs, though I notice her mascara remains perfectly intact. “His sponsorship was the heart and soul of this festival!”

Stella clutches her chest dramatically. “Such a tragedy! Who could have done such a thing?”

I narrow my eyes. Done such a thing? That’s an interesting assumption that Santa didn’t just have a holiday heart attack.

From the corner of my eye, I notice the older man who was arguing with Nicholas earlier.

He stands at the edge of the crowd, frowning as if he’s trying to solve a particularly difficult crossword puzzle, not watching a holiday disaster unfold.

Cooper squeezes my shoulder before being pulled away by Noah to secure the scene. Watson whines and snuggles closer to my neck as if he senses the tension crackling through the air like static electricity.

No sooner has Cooper stepped away than Carlotta and Aunt Cat pounce and scoot me to the darkened area of the stage while flanking me like tinsel-covered bodyguards.

“Uncle Jimmy left one of his special notes for you,” Aunt Cat whispers, her breath a potent mixture of eggnog and what I suspect is pure grain alcohol.

My eyes bulge. Those notes are delivered via carrier pigeon—Aunt Cat—and are to

be burned after reading. Uncle Jimmy doesn't believe in sending his hit list via text message or even a phone call. Nope. He likes to do things the old-fashioned way—via the town gossip.

“Not here, not now,” I practically scream at the two of them. They've clearly lost their minds. “Half the Ashford Sheriff's Department just entered the building. I can practically hear the handcuffs jingling from here.”

Aunt Cat nods as if she heard. “I took a peek at the note, sweetie. There's just one name on it.”

“It's not mine, is it?” I'm only half teasing and they shake their heads. “It's not one of yours, is it?” I ask and they both glare at me on cue.

Didn't think so. I'm not that lucky.

“You ready to hear it?” Aunt Cat asks and it's my turn to nod, albeit a heck of a lot slower. Watson's ears perk up as if he's waiting for the answer, too.

“It's Lorenzo ‘Enzo’ Bianchi.”

“What?” I gasp once again. “You mean the dead old coot's, old coot of a brother?”

They both nod in unison again and I look up to see the old coot in question not more than twenty feet away, holding his granddaughter—oops, I mean Loretta Saliva, his shiny new girlfriend. Her arm is wrapped around his slumped shoulders like a boa constrictor guarding its next meal.

Just wait until Coop hears the news. She'll be dead meat. And once I introduce Lorenzo “Enzo” Bianchi to the working end of my sweet gun, Buttercup, so will he.

Watson squirms in my arms, perhaps sensing that his mama's mind has just shifted from holiday cheer to holiday fear .

One thing's for certain—this Christmas season, someone is getting more than coal in their stocking. They're getting a one-way ticket to the afterlife, courtesy of yours truly.

The Jingle Bell Jubilee has just become a deadly silent night, and I've got a sneaking suspicion the body count has only just begun.

Oh, brother.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

The scent of cinnamon, nutmeg, and vanilla hangs in the air of the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery like the edible Christmas cloud it is.

It's nearly noon, and the morning rush has finally died down, leaving me to contemplate the frosting patterns on our Christmas cookie display while my mind replays last night's Santa catastrophe on an endless loop.

I wipe down the white marble counter for the tenth time, surveying our little sugar haven. The bakery is a pastel wonderland with its mix-and-match furniture in shades that would make a unicorn jealous—mint green chairs paired with baby blue tables and a lavender lounge tucked into the corner.

Twinkle lights crisscross the ceiling like a constellation, and Lottie has gone full Christmas elf with the decor this year.

Miniature trees sparkle on every table, a life-sized nutcracker guards the door, and enough tinsel dangles from above that I'm pretty sure we're one small static charge away from a holiday inferno.

Outside, fat snowflakes cartwheel to the ground, adding another inch to the six we already got overnight.

But snow and the holidays go hand-in-hand, which would explain why every customer who walks in looks as if they've been attacked by a craft store's Christmas clearance section—ugly sweaters in garish reds and greens, adorned with 3D reindeer noses and actual working lights.

It's as if the town collectively decided fashion takes a mandatory holiday during December. And let's face it, it sort of does.

"Did you see Mrs. Wilkinson's sweater this morning?" Lily asks, arranging gingerbread men in the display case. "That thing had actual jingle bells sewn into the reindeer's collar. She sounded like a one-woman sleigh ride every time she moved."

"I liked Mr. Peterson's better," Suze counters, refilling the napkin dispensers. "Nothing says festive like a sweater that proclaims, 'Santa Saw Your Facebook Posts' in blinking LED letters."

Now that would be a nightmare.

"Speaking of Santa"—Lily turns to me with a smirk—"I hear you and Lottie are taking turns finding the bodies now. What does the schedule look like? Does she get New Year's and you take Valentine's Day?"

"Ha-ha," I deadpan, flicking a dish towel in her direction. "For your information, I did not find Santa's body. I was merely adjacent to it when his soul decided to vacate the premises."

Lottie emerges from the kitchen, balancing a tray of fresh candy cane brownies. "At least I find my bodies in respectable locations, not sprawled across my lap in the middle of a children's event," she says with a wink.

"He wasn't sprawled across my lap," I'm quick to defend myself. "He was face-planted in my North Pole twin peaks. There's a difference."

"And what a way to go." Suze nods sagely. "It's obvious the poor man had a heart attack after you did your best to smother him with your Christmas comfort pillows."

“My what?” I sputter.

“Your jingle bell jugs,” Lily offers.

“Your mistletoe mountains,” Lottie adds, hardly able to contain her grin.

“Your yuletide—” Suze begins.

“I get it!” I hold up my hands in surrender just as the door chime rings, announcing another round of Christmas-clad customers.

Carlotta and Aunt Cat bustle in along with them, shaking snow from their matching fur-trimmed coats like two festive bears emerging from hibernation. Aunt Cat’s hair is teased higher than usual, maybe to accommodate the Santa hat perched precariously on top.

“Two peppermint mocha lattes with extra whip, a shot of caramel, chocolate sprinkles, and those little candy cane bits,” Carlotta announces without preamble.

“And whatever unholy creation you’ve got that packs the most calories into a single serving.

If I’m getting too cold, that means I’m getting too skinny. ”

“So, basically liquefied diabetes with a side of cardiac arrest.” I laugh as I start preparing their drinks.

“Says the woman who killed Santa with her cleavage,” Aunt Cat quips while settling onto a stool at the counter. “At least our indulgences only harm ourselves.”

“I did not—” I start, but it’s no use. The Santa jokes are clearly going to be my

personal holiday soundtrack this year—and maybe every year afterwards, too.

Niki strolls in from the adjoining Honey Pot Diner. Her apron looks dusted with enough powdered sugar to outfit two trays of cookies.

Carlotta lifts a crooked finger my way. “That Lorenzo Bianchi sure didn’t waste any time cozying up to that pretty young thing looking for an intimate level of comfort after his brother dropped dead.”

“You mean Cooper’s sister?” Niki says, perching on a stool. “Loretta What’s-Her-Face?”

“Salami,” I supply automatically. “Or Surami. Or possibly Tsunami. Something Italian-ish that ironically I can never quite nail down.”

The women cackle, but my mind drifts as they continue with their gossip. I can’t believe that my hit is Lorenzo “Enzo” Bianchi.

Uncle Jimmy wants me to take out an octogenarian who’s engaged to my boyfriend’s sister. Talk about awkward family dinners in my future—assuming I have a future after Cooper discovers I whacked his potential brother-in-law. But let’s be fair, he doesn’t have all that many years left to begin with.

Kidding . Sort of.

And speaking of families and awkward family dinners...

Just a couple of weeks ago, my own Nona Jo made some oddball toast to Cooper and me regarding our blossoming relationship and the fact she expects some Italian heirs in the very near future.

And once that dicey diatribe was over, she said , "I've got another surprise for the two of you at the Velvet Fox Hotel down in Leeds.

I'm not telling you what day or what time.

Just know I'm cooking up something so big, it might take months to prepare.

One thing is for sure, it's going to go off without a hitch.

I'll give you the heads-up twenty-four hours before the big day. Be there or be dead."

I'm not sure what that tiny Italian tornado has brewing, but it's definitely not her espresso. However, if I did have a cup of her espresso handy, I bet I could solve the mystery. Everyone knows you can see your future in the muck left over at the bottom of some good Italian coffee.

The bell chimes again, and this time a small crowd wanders in, shaking off snow and stamping their boots. Among them is a quasi-familiar-looking woman that I'm pretty sure I recognize from last night.

Stella Martinelli walks in looking every bit the warm grandmother type with her silver-streaked dark hair and a festive sweater featuring a Christmas tree with actual 3D ornaments dangling from the knit branches. She makes her way to the counter, her deceptively sweet demeanor firmly in place.

"Good morning, dear," she says to me. "Could I get a box of mixed donuts? I'm bringing them to the Jolly Holly Tree Lot this morning." Her eyes twinkle with grandmotherly charm that feels like Christmas personified. If someone told me she was the real deal Mrs. Claus, I'd believe them.

"Coming right up," I say, selecting an assortment from the case. "Rough night last

night, huh? Do you know what happened to poor Nicholas?”

Stella’s smile falters for a microsecond before reappearing. “Oh, that poor man. I guess it must have been a natural demise. At that age, anything can happen.”

Carlotta nods from her perch at the counter. “Having that many sugared-up kids in your midst could do just about anyone in. It’s a shocker more folks didn’t drop dead last night, what with all the little yippers running free.”

Lottie rolls her eyes. “Please, ignore her.” She slides another box of donuts across the counter to Stella. “Two baker’s dozen,” she says. “And since it’s for the Jolly Holly Tree Lot, it’s on the house.”

Stella thanks her profusely, clutching the box as if it was filled with gold rather than a bunch of fried dough.

Lottie leans toward the woman. “Did you happen to sense anything unusual with Nicholas last night?”

Stella exhales a sigh. “I wouldn’t know. But Holly Bellini might have an idea. She was pretty close to the man.”

I offer a covert nod to my sassy boss. She really is the expert when it comes to connecting the dots in a homicide case.

Niki tips an ear toward the woman, about as subtle as a reindeer with a spotlight. “Where, pray tell, could a certain someone find Holly Bellini? You know, if they wanted to question her about a certain dead Santa.”

I shoot her a look. Smooth, real smooth, sis.

Stella collects her box of treats and her brow furrows as she considers the question.

“Oh, I do know where you can find Holly. She’s an event planner, and she mentioned that she was also overseeing some Christmas festival out in Fallbrook.

She said something about having to be on her feet all day.

” She secures the donut boxes to her chest, wishes us all a merry Christmas, and shuffles out into the snow like a holiday-themed secret agent with a bakery payload.

The moment the door closes, Niki spins toward me and her eyes are bright with the kind of excitement usually reserved for clearance sales or free dessert.

“A Christmas festival in Fallbrook?” she practically gags on the words.

“We have to go! There might be an entire herd of hot Santas just waiting to be discovered!” She fans herself at the thought.

“After all, now that one Santa is out of commission, we need to make sure the Christmas spirit stays alive.”

“Honey, I’ll drink to that.” Carlotta raises her peppermint mocha. “Nothing says Merry Christmas like a man with a beard and a big bag full of goodies.”

“And we’re not talking about toys,” Aunt Cat adds with a wink that makes me wish brain bleach was a real thing.

Lottie shrugs. “Go on and get out of here, Effie. I think you have some Christmas shopping to catch up on.” She winks my way.

She’s not wrong. The big day is less than a week away, and I’ve been too busy

dodging bullet points on Uncle Jimmy's hit list to actually tackle my gift list.

"Fine," I concede, untying my apron. "But this is strictly a reconnaissance mission. We're looking for Holly Bellini, not auditioning replacements for last night's expired Santa."

"Of course." Niki nods solemnly before breaking into a grin. "But if we happen to find ourselves surrounded by men in red suits, well... I think we'll just call it a Christmas miracle."

I grab my coat and can't help but wonder what twisted holiday movie I've found myself starring in. 'Tis the season to be jolly—unless you're Santa Claus. Then 'tis the season to end up face-first in my peppermint pinwheels before taking your last candy cane ride to the great North Pole in the sky.

And now I'm supposed to help Lorenzo "Enzo" Bianchi book the same one-way sleigh ride. Ho, ho, homicide, indeed.

I button up my coat, mentally calculating how many suspects I'll need to cross off my list before I can unwrap the truth about Nicholas's death. Because one thing is becoming crystal clear—someone decided to give Santa an early retirement, and it wasn't me.

The bell jingles as I push open the bakery door and the cold air slaps me in the face like a wake-up call. Fallbrook Festival, here I come. Let's see if Holly Bellini has been naughty or nice—and whether she knows who crossed Saint Nick off their Christmas list permanently.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

The scent of roasted chestnuts, hot chocolate, and evergreen trees assaults my senses as we step through the frosted archway into Fallbrook's Frost & Frolic Festival.

Christmas carols blare from speakers cleverly disguised as oversized ornaments, competing with the cacophony of laughter, smarmy sales pitches, and children squealing with a holiday-induced sugar rush.

Snow crunches beneath my boots as I try to maintain some semblance of dignity while simultaneously preventing Niki, Carlotta, and Aunt Cat from transforming this investigative outing into their personal North Pole bachelor hunt. Although I'm a realist. That's exactly what this is quickly becoming.

"I spy with my little eye something that begins with H," Niki says, craning her neck every which way like a hummingbird.

"Hot chocolate?" I guess, trying to steer her focus toward something that won't get us arrested for public indecency.

"Hot Santa," Niki corrects, pointing toward a man in a modern, slim-fit Santa suit helping children onto a small train ride. "Look at those shoulders. He can slide down my chimney any night of the year."

"That's amateur hour," Carlotta scoffs as she continues to scan the festival like a heat-seeking missile. "You need to think outside the Santa box. Check out the elf over there hanging lights." She fans herself with her mitten. "Those tight green pants leave nothing to the imagination."

“Ladies, please,” I hiss, grabbing Niki’s arm before she can sashay over to Mr. Slim-Fit Santa. “We’re here on a mission, remember? Find Holly Bellini, ask about Nicholas Bianchi, and figure out who killed the dead Santa. Ring any bells?”

“Speaking of bells,” Aunt Cat interjects while adjusting her fur-trimmed coat, “did you see the size of that guy’s jingle?—”

“Stop!” I clap my hands over my ears. “No more Christmas euphemisms. I’m still recovering from the North Pole twin peaks incident.”

“Fine,” Aunt Cat pouts, despite the fact her eyes continue to rove the festival grounds. “But you can’t blame a girl for wanting a little holiday cheer in her stocking.”

“I’ll get you a bottle of whiskey,” I mutter.

The Frost & Frolic Festival transforms the usually modest Fallbrook town square into a winter wonderland of twinkle lights, evergreen garlands, and enough fake snow to supplement the real stuff falling gently from the sky.

Rows of wooden chalet-style booths line the pathways, selling everything from hand-knitted scarves to artisanal maple syrups to Christmas ornaments personalized with your pet’s paw print.

And I so want one of those ornaments. If only I had Watson with me.

He’s busy chasing the bad guys with Coop—or more to the point, eating donuts and napping at Coop’s feet. It’s not a bad life.

Food vendors hawk their temptations from every corner—apple cider donuts dusted with cinnamon sugar, roasted chestnuts that perfume the air with sweetness, and my

personal weakness—peppermint hot chocolate topped with homemade marshmallows.

The crafts tents to our left showcase local artisans peddling their wares—blown glass ornaments that catch the light in dazzling rainbow displays, wreaths made from repurposed book pages, and—I kid you not—hand-carved wooden toilet paper holders shaped like reindeer.

Because there's no Christmas spirit like Rudolph cheering you on while you do your business.

“Look at that.” Niki gasps, pointing toward a small clearing where a crowd has gathered. “It's a lumberjack Santa competition!”

Sure enough, a banner strung between two pine trees proudly announces the “First Annual Flannel-Clad Fir Felling Face-Off.” About a dozen men in varying degrees of seasonal flannel stand in a line, flexing muscles that suggest they spend more time at the gym than in the actual woods. Not a big surprise there.

“Sweet baby J in the manger,” Carlotta breathes with her eyes wide as saucers. “It's like someone read my Christmas list and wrapped it in plaid!”

“Ladies and gentlemen”—the announcer's voice booms over the loudspeaker— “our contestants will now demonstrate their prowess with an ax by chopping through a mountain of logs in record time!”

“I'd like to demonstrate my prowess with their logs,” Aunt Cat says loudly enough that a nearby mother covers her child's ears and shuffles away quickly.

“Aunt Cat!” I scold, although I can't help but laugh. “There are children present.”

“And they’ll thank me one day for their education,” she replies with a wink.

“Or their mothers will respond by way of a restraining order,” I shoot back and she and Carlotta take off without a care in the world.

My money is on the restraining order.

Niki starts edging toward the competition as well. “I’m just going to get a closer look at their, um, chopping techniques.”

I grab her coat sleeve. “Oh no, you don’t. You’re helping me find our suspect.”

“You mean mark,” Niki says with a gleam in her eye.

“No, I mean suspect,” I correct.

“Too bad, because there’s your mark.” She nods ahead, and my stomach drops faster than Santa down a chimney.

Through the crowd, I spot Loretta Spaghetti dripping all over the keeper of the crypt, Lorenzo “Enzo” Bianchi. She’s wearing a red coat that probably costs more than my car, while her arm is hooked possessively through his as if she’s afraid someone might steal her elderly meal ticket.

Enzo looks surprisingly spry for a man who’s been on this earth since the invention of the wheel, with his designer suit visible beneath a purple cashmere overcoat that screams, “I have more money than taste.”

“Well, that’s disturbing on multiple levels,” I mutter, watching Loretta plant a kiss on Enzo’s wrinkled cheek.

“It’s like watching a vulture cuddle with its dinner,” Niki observes.

“Maybe she just really likes prunes,” I suggest.

“Or simply needs a bank account to prune,” Niki counters.

“Cooper is going to lose his mind when he finds out I’ve been assigned to... retire his potential brother-in-law,” I whisper, making sure a passerby can’t hear.

“You could always claim temporary insanity brought on by excessive exposure to peppermint and tinsel,” Niki offers with a shrug.

I’m about to respond when I spot a woman with auburn hair moving purposefully through the festival, clipboard in hand, directing vendors with the efficiency you could only get with some serious practice.

“That’s her,” I whisper to Niki. “That’s Holly Bellini.”

Holly moves from booth to booth like a Christmas-themed drill sergeant.

But she pauses at The Waxing Poetic candle-making booth, where visitors are dipping string into colored wax to create layered tapers and it looks as if they’re pouring custom scents into festive molds.

Holly makes notes on her clipboard while instructing the vendor about proper display techniques.

“Let’s go introduce ourselves,” I say.

As we start toward the candle booth where Holly is now checking her watch with an impatient frown, I can’t help but notice her perfect posture and composed expression.

She's clearly someone who thrives on control—which makes me wonder just how far she'd go when someone threatens to derail one of her perfectly orchestrated festivals or her perfectly orchestrated life .

Maybe the Jingle Bell Jubilee's Santa wasn't the only thing about to get snuffed out that night.

And I'm about to find out.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

The scent of cinnamon apples, pine forest, and something called Santa's Secret wafts through the air as Niki and I approach The Waxing Poetic candle-making booth.

A canvas tent houses the entire operation, its interior glowing with golden light that spills onto the snowy ground around it. Tiny white twinkle lights intertwine around the entrance poles, creating a fairytale gateway to what appears to be a Christmas candle wonderland.

The booth is brimming with women, all of whom hunt and peck through the wares as if these were the most sought-after gifts on their lists. And seeing that they smell like heaven, they just might be.

Inside, Holly Bellini stands with her back perfectly straight and a clipboard clutched to her chest like a shield.

She looks like a perfectionist to a fault, impeccably dressed in over-the-top Christmas attire that makes her look like the lovechild of Mrs. Claus and a department store window display.

Her red and green plaid blazer is adorned with actual jingle bells at the cuffs, and a brooch shaped like a Christmas tree—complete with tiny working lights—winks from her lapel.

Her auburn hair is styled in a sleek bob that doesn't dare move in the winter breeze, and her sharp features remind me of one of those Instagram filters that makes everyone look like they could slice cheese with their cheekbones.

A woman near the front is speaking to a group, and it appears there's a candle-making class in full swing—which would explain the dozens of women gathered around wooden tables scattered with jars of wax, fragrance oils, and festive molds shaped like Christmas trees, stars, and Santa's face.

Red and green candles in various stages of completion litter the workspace, while finished products gleam from display shelves in the shape of candy cane striped tapers, gold-dusted pillars, and Mason jars filled with layers of holiday-scented wax.

The woman wearing a holly-patterned apron demonstrates how to properly center a wick in a snowman mold and her audience is rapt at attention as if she was revealing the secret location of Santa's workshop rather than basic candle-making techniques.

"Ooh, that looks fun. I'm making one, too," Niki says, already drifting toward an empty seat at the table. "Not only can I get a gift knocked off my list, but I can learn a thing or two about hot wax."

"Why do you care about hot wax?" I ask, genuinely curious—and let's face it—concerned.

Niki gives me a look that suggests I've been living under a rock—specifically, a rock without internet access. "Everyone knows hot wax and hot men go hand-in-hand. Didn't they teach you anything at that fancy school of yours?"

"Apparently not." That fancy school would be the hoity-toity university I still owe some serious cash to even though that job in the tech industry left me high and dry.

If I had known it was my destiny to sling both bullets and buttercream, I would have skipped higher education and jumped straight into stripping.

The tips would have covered at least a semester.

Niki nods at me. “Try to act surprised when you open one of these beauties come Christmas, would you?” She takes off for the demonstration and I boot-scoot my way to the lady of the hour.

Holly is busy checking something off on her clipboard as her red-lacquered nails tap against the paper with the precision of a metronome. She doesn’t even notice me until I’m practically breathing down her holiday-clad neck.

“Excuse me, Ms. Bellini?” I put on my best I’m-not-here-to-interrogate-you-about-murder smile.

Holly turns my way and a professional-looking mask slides effortlessly into place. “Yes? How can I help you? If you’re looking to join the candle class, all you have to do is find a seat at the table.”

“Actually, I just wanted to say hello. I think we met at the Jingle Bell Jubilee.” I extend my hand. “Effie Canelli. I was one of the elves.”

Her mouth rounds out as she squints to inspect me. “Ah, yes. The one wearing the very festive costume.”

“That’s a nice way of putting it.” I laugh. “Although barely-there bodysuits with strategically placed peppermints would be more accurate.”

We share a quick laugh before she remembers she’s a professional with an image to maintain. Or a killer with a murder to get away with.

“Well, it’s nice to see you again,” she says. “Although I would have preferred under different circumstances. That evening didn’t exactly end as planned.”

“I’m sorry about your old friend,” I say, watching her for a reaction. And emphasis

on the old , but I don't say that part out loud.

Holly's chest bucks as if someone had shot her, and it makes me glance down at my purse like a reflex in the event Buttercup, my handy-dandy Glock, didn't just misfire.

"We actually weren't close friends," she says as her lips press tight.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just assumed since you worked together on the Jubilee..." I trail off, attempting to look appropriately chagrined while mentally taking notes on the fact she's frowning like mad.

Holly sighs and manages to soften slightly. "Nicholas and I worked together on several projects. He was one of the major sponsors. In fact, he sponsored this festival, too." She gestures around at the crowd. "He had his fingers in every pie in this county."

"What was he like to work with?" I ask innocently enough—as if I didn't know where he wanted to put his face and why.

"He could be difficult," she says, then seems to catch herself. "But effective. His company, Bianchi Enterprises, has been behind most of the major events in this area for decades. The Jubilee, this festival, the upcoming summer fair—all would be impossible without the Bianchi money."

"Sounds like he had a lot of influence," I observe. And a thing for boobs, but I leave that part out.

Okay, so he probably didn't mean to deep-dive into my peppermints, but as it stands that's what happened.

"Too much influence, according to some people." Holly's gaze drifts toward the

candle-making table where Niki is enthusiastically raising her hand and bouncing in her seat.

Oh, good grief, what now?

The instructor nods her way and well, unwittingly unleashes the beast.

“How hot does the wax need to be to use on a hot hunk?” Niki asks loudly enough for the entire state of Vermont to hear.

The class breaks into laughter, and even the instructor—whose cheeks now glow like Rudolph’s nose—manages to crack a smile. “Well”—she says with a hesitant wink—“if I had a couple of hot hunks on hand, I could demonstrate.”

Niki gives a sharp whistle and, as if on cue, Aunt Cat and Carlotta run into the tent with not two but three young bucks dressed as hot Santas.

In no time at all, their red coats come off and tables are cleared with the frantic urgency of a Grey’s Anatomy season finale.

The hunky Santas lie on their backs while the instructor kneels beside one, demonstrating the proper temperature and technique for dripping wax in festive patterns across a muscular chest.

“Good gravy,” I mutter. “Is this a candle class or an audition for North Pole After Dark ?” A show I’ve already starred in, mind you.

Holly clears her throat and draws my attention back to her. “You were asking about Nicholas? If you’re wondering whether he had enemies—” She pauses, glancing around before continuing more quietly. “Well, that’s all he had.”

I remember Nicholas's cutting remark to Holly at the Jubilee . "Still trying to run this town into the ground with your overpriced events, Bellini? I remember when this festival was actually affordable for families."

"Did you and Nicholas have a disagreement before the Jubilee?" I ask, hoping she'll highlight why he was so nasty to her—and if she was one of those aforementioned enemies.

"Oh, we had our creative differences," she says carefully as if she were already treading on thin ice. "About the direction of the event, too."

"So, you mean that creative differences were what led to him threatening to pull his sponsorship?" I push a little harder, like trying to put Cinderella's glass slipper on one of her ugly stepsisters.

But hey, if the ugly fits. If these festivals lost their biggest corporate sponsor, I'm guessing Holly here would be out of a job.

And a lack of funds would most certainly create a need to kill. It did for me.

Holly's eyes narrow. "You seem very interested in my relationship with Nicholas. Tell me, are you investigating his death?"

I shrug. "Let's just say I have a vested interest in figuring out what happened. A man died while motorboating my peppermint pinwheels—that creates a certain bond, if you know what I mean."

She gives a conciliatory shrug at the thought because I'm not wrong.

"Look"—she says as she leans in— "I don't know what happened to Nicholas.

But if you're digging for information, I'd talk to Stella Martinelli.

She's known him longer than I have, and I saw her having a full-blown argument with him just minutes before he dropped dead.

If anyone knows something, my money is on her. ”

Interesting. I file that away for future reference because I happened to see the very same thing.

“Now, if you'll excuse me.” Holly is about to turn away when her gaze catches on the shirtless Santa situation unfolding at the candle table. She pauses, pulls out her phone, and snaps a quick picture.

“Really?” I hike an eyebrow her way.

“Strictly for research purposes,” she manages to say with a straight face. “Event planning requires thorough documentation of successful attractions.” With that, she glides away with that clipboard once again pressed to her chest like armor.

I'm about to head over to the hot wax spectacle taking place myself —purely for investigative purposes, of course—when something catches my eye. Actually, someone. Two someones .

Loretta Salami is pawing all over Lorenzo “Enzo” Bianchi near a booth selling ornate glass ornaments.

Her hands flutter over his expensive coat like she's searching for his wallet, while he gazes at her with the slightly vacant expression of a man who's either smitten or can't remember where he parked his car. Possibly both.

Not only that, but I spot Cooper just a few feet away as our happy-go-lucky pooch Watson races in my direction, already thrilled to see me. Must be the snacks I keep in my pocket—or possibly the lingering scent of peppermint pinwheels.

Cooper follows Watson's trajectory and spots me, then returns his gaze to his sister and her elderly fiancé. It's too late. He's already done the geriatric math, and I'm guessing it equals a premature death.

He holds a finger my way before heading straight for the May-December (or perhaps March-December) couple.

Oh boy.

I'm about to witness a family reunion colder than the North Pole and twice as explosive as Aunt Cat's infamous rum-spiked eggnog.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

The sound of Cooper's boots crunching angrily through the snow punctuates the festive Christmas carols blaring from nearby speakers. But not by much. Those carols are far too loud if you ask me.

I sprint after him, the scent of gingerbread and pine mingling with the sharp bite of winter air as I weave through the crowd.

His broad shoulders are squared with a determination that screams "detective on a mission"—or possibly "brother about to commit a homicide." At the moment, it's hard to tell the difference.

"Cooper, wait," I call out as my fingers grasp for his leather jacket.

Watson bounds past us both, his golden fur gleaming under the festival lights, and that cute little red bow of his bounces with each leap. He looks like the personification of Christmas morning himself, oblivious to the family drama about to erupt. At least someone is having a good time.

I catch up to Cooper just before he reaches Loretta and her geriatric Romeo. "Hold on," I say, tugging him back. "You can't just go storming over there like?"

"Like what?" His marbled blue eyes flash. "Like my sister is being pawed at by a man who was collecting Social Security when The Beatles were still together?"

"Maybe she's into him," I cringe as I say it. Those words felt wrong even as they leave my mouth. "Or maybe she's into his bank account? You know how it goes. Some women like their men the way they like their cheese—aged and wealthy."

“What are you talking about, Eff?” Cooper says my name like the expletive it was meant to be before charging ahead. “That geezer is clearly attacking her.”

And he’s not wrong about the geezer part either. Lorenzo “Enzo” Bianchi makes Father Time look like a spring chicken. His weathered face carries enough lines to map a small country, and his hands—currently wrapped around Loretta’s waist—are spotted like a leopard against her red coat.

Before I can stop him, Cooper closes the gap and yanks Lorenzo back rather abruptly. “Get your filthy paws off my baby sister!”

Loretta whirls around and, to my absolute shock, swats Cooper silly with that designer handbag she’s toting.

It’s a rapid-fire assault of Italian leather that I’m sure costs more than my parents’ house in Grimstone Heights.

Come to think of it, most things do. The old neighborhood hasn’t exactly appreciated.

Last time I checked, you could buy a three-bedroom there for what some people spend on a pair of shoes—namely the ones Loretta is currently wearing as she dances around her brother, swinging her bag as if she’s training for the Purse-Wielding Olympics.

“Cooper Carmichael Jackson Knox!” she screeches. “How dare you!”

Aww, he has two middle names. Did I know that?

A commotion erupts behind us as a parade of half-dressed men with wax dripping down their chests comes running out of the candle-making tent. They’re followed by Niki, Aunt Cat, and Carlotta, all looking slightly too pleased with themselves.

“Catch ’em, Coop!” Carlotta shouts, pointing at the fleeing, glittering torsos.
“They’re trying to escape!”

“Yeah, don’t let all that hard work go to waste!” Aunt Cat fans herself in their wake.
“We spent good money making those pecs look so festive!”

“I still have more wax.” Niki waves a dripping ladle. “And I’m not afraid to use it!”

Cooper chooses to ignore them completely as his gaze locks onto his sister.

“Loretta”—he says slowly, as if speaking to a child— “what the hell is going on here?”

Loretta Simpleton—or Salami, take your pick—straightens and tucks her weapon of a handbag under her arm while linking her elbow with Lorenzo’s. “What were you saying?”

“I said, what the hell?—”

“I meant him,” she cuts Cooper off, nodding toward Lorenzo. “He’s the love of my life, and he just landed this ice cube on my finger tonight.” She holds up her left hand, where a diamond the size of a small planet catches the light and nearly blinds everyone within a ten-foot radius.

Every woman on Earth gasps simultaneously. The rock is less a diamond and more like that glacier that sank the Titanic , only sparklier.

“ My eyes! My eyes! ” Aunt Cat cries, shielding her face.

“Why is it so shiny?” Carlotta squeezes her peepers shut. “Is that legal to wear in public without a permit?”

“Sweet mother of mercy,” Niki whispers like a tire expiring air. “You could signal ships with that thing.”

Lorenzo beams proudly, an expression that turns his wrinkled face into something resembling a pleased prune. “I was just saying, only the best for my Loretta,” he says with a slight Italian accent. “She deserves the stars, so I gave her one to wear.”

“Actually, it’s a D color, internally flawless, twelve-carat—” Loretta begins as she beams with both pride and greed.

“You can’t be serious,” Cooper interrupts. “This is... you’re... he’s...”

“Collecting dust?” I supply helpfully.

“Older than dirt?” Niki adds.

“The reigning champion of the ‘I Survived the Plague’ contest?” Aunt Cat offers.

Cooper shoots us all a look that could freeze Hell in one blast. “You’re not helping.”

“I’ll have you know”—Lorenzo starts with surprising dignity for a man who probably needs help tying his shoes— “that I am very much in love with your sister. And she with me.”

“It’s true,” Loretta says, nestling against his side like a cat who just found a particularly comfortable sunbeam to lounge in. “In fact, we’re getting married next month.”

“Next month?” Cooper’s voice rises to a pitch that probably has dogs across town perking their ears to attention. “And you’ve known him how long?”

“Time is irrelevant when it comes to true love,” Loretta sniffs.

“And an impending appointment with death,” Niki mutters under her breath.

Before Cooper can respond—likely with something that would get us all banned from the state of Vermont—a bizarre figure waddles into our little circle.

It’s a small, elderly woman dressed entirely in black from head to toe, including a tall, strange-looking black veil that billows around her face like a personal storm cloud.

A child nearby takes one look at her and bursts into tears. A small dog being walked on a leash yips in terror and tries to bolt. In fact, every last soul at the festival seems to be shrieking back in terror while simultaneously making the sign of the cross.

The woman dressed like Death approaches our group with the speed and grace of a tranquilized turtle, then proceeds to hand each of us a black envelope before attempting to waddle away again.

Wait just one Italian grandma pickin’ minute...

“Nona Jo?” I call out after her because, for one, I happen to recognize her unique shambling gait. “I know it’s you! I can tell by your shuffle-step-pause-complain combo. And you’re the only person I know who sighs loudly after every third step!”

She doesn’t bother to acknowledge me, so we each tear into our mysterious black envelopes to find formal invitations printed in elegant gold script on black cardstock. The message is simple—our presence is requested at the Velvet Fox Hotel down in Leeds tomorrow night at seven o’clock sharp.

“What’s happening tomorrow night at seven?” I shout after Nona Jo, who has

managed to travel approximately three full steps away in the time it took us to open the invites.

Nona Jo turns around and lifts her veil, revealing that she is indeed the woman doing her best impersonation of midnight. Her face, which happens to be lined with years of disapproving scowls and Italian curses, breaks into what might be a smile or possibly a grimace of indigestion.

“Be there and find out,” she shouts back, her voice carrying the distinctive rasp of someone who’s smoked cigarettes since they were invented. She looks my way with narrowed eyes. “Or I’ll put a hit out on all of you.” She winks at me and I gasp as she waddles toward the parking lot once again.

“Did your grandmother just threaten to have us all killed?” Cooper asks, momentarily distracted from the Loretta situation.

“In this family, it’s how we say please,” I explain.

Loretta seizes the opportunity and tugs at Lorenzo’s arm. “We should take off, honey. We have... plans.” She gives Cooper a glacial stare. “I expected better from you. I thought you’d be happy for me.”

“Happy that you’re marrying someone who could have been a character witness at the trial of Moses? Nothing suspicious about that archaeological find at all.”

Loretta gasps. “Cooper!”

Enzo’s bushy white brows hike into his forehead. “What are you implying, young man?”

“Nothing,” Loretta cuts in. “He’s implying nothing because he knows better.” She

gives her brother a look that could peel paint. “See you tomorrow night, Cooper. Try to be less of a donkey by then.”

With that, she sashays away with Lorenzo in tow, his elderly hobble working double-time to keep up with her irate strut.

“Tomorrow at seven at the Velvet Fox Hotel.” Cooper shakes his head at the invitation in his hand. “Whatever it is, it couldn’t be worse than that.” He looks up where his sister and Enzo are heading toward the parking lot.

Watson nudges my hand with his cold nose, and I absently scratch behind his ears as I watch the retreating odd couple.

Between my pending assassination assignment targeting Lorenzo, Cooper’s sister being engaged to said target, and Nona Jo’s mysterious summons, this holiday season is shaping up to be messier than my brother Nico’s attempt at wrapping presents while wearing boxing gloves.

I glance down at the black invitation again and the gold script gleams ominously in the festival lights.

Something tells me that tomorrow night at the Velvet Fox Hotel, something will be getting wrapped, all right—with crime scene tape.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

The heated tent here at the Frost & Frolic Festival smells like a collision between Nona Jo's kitchen and a carnival midway—a glorious cacophony of garlic, sugar, and deep-fried everything.

“This is the life,” I say as Cooper and I hunker down at a wooden picnic table with a feast spread before us as if we were planning to hibernate through winter. Nona Jo just left us with yet another mystery and somehow managed to unleash our appetites all at the same time.

Watson sits at my feet with his golden eyes tracking each morsel in front of me with the precision of a missile defense system.

“I’ve died and gone to food heaven,” I announce, surveying our haul once again.

Okay, so we may have gone slightly overboard at the festival vendors.

There’s a massive plate of arancini—fried risotto balls oozing with cheese and spicy Italian sausage—a steaming heap of zeppole dusted with powdered sugar, homemade cavatelli with vodka sauce, and some truly magnificent Italian meatball sliders on fresh-baked rolls.

The carnival side of our spread features hand-cut fries buried under a mountain of garlic and Parmesan, corn dogs that are mostly batter (the way the Good Lord intended), and funnel cakes that could be a part of Mrs. Claus’s doily collection.

For dessert, we’ve got chocolate-dipped candy cane cookies, gingerbread whoopie pies with eggnog filling, and peppermint bark so thick it could probably stop a bullet.

Not that I'm planning to test that theory.

Our beverages consist of peppermint hot chocolate for me and spiced mulled cider for Cooper—and the steam in the chilly air sends up ribbons of fragrant Christmas spices.

“I'm going to need a bigger gun holster after this,” I say, patting my stomach preemptively. Not that I wear one. Buttercup prefers to be cradled.

Cooper shakes his head, still looking shell-shocked from our encounter with his not-so-sweet baby sister. “I can't believe Loretta Surprise is engaged to Fossil Fred.”

“Fossil Fred?” I snort. “Is that what we're calling him now?”

“Among other things not appropriate to say in public.” Cooper tears into a meatball slider like it personally offended him. “Did you see that rock he put on her finger? It's bigger than her entire dating history.”

“Which is really saying something,” I mutter, remembering the trail of ex-husbands Loretta has left in her wake.

“I heard that.”

“You were meant to.”

Watson whines with his chin resting on my knee. He's giving it his best “I'm starving” performance which could win him an Oscar tonight—or a meatball sandwich.

“Don't fall for it,” Cooper warns. “He already conned three hot dog vendors into giving him samples.”

I break off a corner of a meatball and slip it to Watson while Cooper looks away. The dog's tail thumps against the ground with joy and it warms my heart while doing so.

"Happy dog, happy life," I'm quick to say and Cooper frowns twice as hard.

From the next table over, Niki's voice rises above the general festival hubbub. "I'm just saying, if you ever need help applying wax to those hard-to-reach places, I'm available for house calls."

Aunt Cat and Carlotta are also holding court with the shirtless wonders from the candle booth.

The men still have traces of colorful wax on their chests, which have now hardened into festive patterns.

One poor guy has what appears to be a candy cane running from his shoulder to his navel. And I'll admit, it does look tasty.

"Hey, I know him." Cooper squints at the guy. "That's Deputy Diggins. Are those my tax dollars at work?" Cooper nods toward the muscular man who is definitely a county deputy when he's not moonlighting as a human candle.

"Consider it community outreach," Carlotta calls over. "Loosen up, Foxy Knoxy. We're spreading a little Christmas cheer!"

"And hot wax!" Aunt Cat adds, raising her glass as if she were toasting.

"To body hair—may it rest in peace!" Niki joins in and I nearly choke on my hot chocolate as I hold back a laugh.

"What?" I say to Coop. "It's practically the battle cry of every woman under fifty.

They're the only ones who really investigate the hairy matter at hand."

Cooper shakes his head my way. "Speaking of investigations, I saw you talking to Holly Bellini earlier." He hikes a brow. "Care to tell me what that conversation was about?"

I take a strategic bite of arancini to buy time. "Just a little girl talk," I say around a mouthful of rice and cheese. "You know —fashion, makeup, the mysterious death of a wealthy old man during a Christmas festival. The usual."

"Effie ." There's that detective voice I know and occasionally fear.

"Fine." I swallow and give him a quick recap of my conversation with Holly. "She basically pointed the finger at Stella Martinelli. Said they had an argument right before he died."

"And you just happened to be asking about a potential homicide because...?"

"Because I'm curious by nature." I bat my eyelashes innocently.

Cooper shakes his head. "Effie, you cannot investigate this case."

"Why not? Is it officially a homicide?"

Watson barks sharply as if answering for Cooper and wags his tail like mad.

"I thought you were on my side?" Cooper frowns at the pooch.

"Watson knows talent when he sees it," I say, scratching behind the dog's ears. "He's backing the winning team. So what happened to the guy, Coop?" A thought comes to me and I gasp. "Don't tell me he was poisoned."

Cooper gives a wistful tick of his head. “You really are good, you know that?”

“Wait until you see what I can do under the sheets,” I tease, enjoying the smile begging to curve on his lips.

It’s the truth, too. Even though Coop and I have been hot and heavy for a while now, there’s still plenty of room to get hotter and heavier, if you know what I mean.

Some territories remain unexplored—which only makes the exploring more fun.

“Okay,” he says, as if accepting my proposal, and for a second I think he’s going to suggest we ditch the festival for more private activities. Instead, he leans in close. “I’ll fill you in on what toxicology discovered. Nicholas Bianchi had elevated levels of pentobarbital in his system.”

“Penta-what-now?”

“Pentobarbital. It’s a sedative, primarily used as an anesthetic, but if it’s strong enough it could euthanize just about anyone. It depresses the central nervous system, slows breathing, and in high enough doses?—”

“Sends you face-first into a hot elf’s peppermint pinwheels?” I finish for him. And yes, I just called myself hot. Someone has to. Besides, it’s good for my ego to hear it once in a while.

“Essentially,” he says.

“So, it’s a prescribed drug? Maybe he accidentally overdosed.”

“According to his physician, it wasn’t prescribed to him.”

“Curiouser and curiouser,” I murmur. “Sounds like this case is heating up faster than Aunt Cat’s love life after three mulled wines.”

Speaking of heating up, we’ve demolished our food mountain with impressive efficiency. Even Watson, who technically wasn’t supposed to get any table scraps, looks satisfied as he settles into a post-meatball nap under the table.

“What do you say we walk off some of those calories?” Cooper suggests, gathering our trash.

“Are you implying I ate too much?” I challenge.

“I’m implying that I ate too much, and if I sit here any longer, I’ll fall into a food coma.”

“Fair enough.”

We dispose of our trash and venture back into the festival grounds with Watson trotting happily at our heels.

The Frost & Frolic Festival has transformed into a magical wonderland in the twilight hours.

Strings of white twinkle lights flicker against the darkening sky, and vendors have lit small bonfires that cast a warm glow over the snow-covered grounds.

The carnival rides on the far side of the square have come alive with colored lights and so have the screams of those foolish enough to hop onto them.

“Now this”—Cooper says softly into my ear— “is worth the price of admission.”

“Careful, Detective. You’re starting to sound festive.”

“Blame the cider. It’s gone to my head.”

We wander through the crowded pathways hand-in-hand as we sneak barely there kisses every now and again. And it drives me crazy in the best possible way.

“Check that out.” Cooper points to a small clearing where couples are ice skating on a temporary rink. It looks like something out of a Christmas movie, strung with lights and surrounded by evergreen trees.

“Oh no.” I back up. “I don’t skate.”

“Everyone skates,” Cooper counters. “It’s just a fancy way of walking on knives.”

“That’s the part I’m concerned about.”

“Come on, Eff. Live dangerously.”

The irony of a hitwoman being afraid of ice skating isn’t lost on me, but some fears are rational. Like the fear of slicing off your own fingers with footwear.

“What about Watson?” I try.

“He can watch from the sidelines. Can’t you, buddy?”

Watson wags his tail like the little traitor he is.

“Fine.” I sigh. “But when I break something vital, you’re nursing me back to health.”

“Deal.”

We rent skates—Cooper somehow knowing my shoe size without asking, which is both sweet and vaguely concerning—and make our way to a bench near the rink. Watson sits obediently nearby with his red bow still festive against his golden fur.

“Why do I feel like I’m strapping guillotines to my feet?” I mutter, lacing up the once-white skates.

“It’ll be fun,” Cooper promises, standing with frustrating ease on his own blades. “I’ll hold your hand the whole time.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?”

I take his hand regardless, letting him guide me onto the ice. My ankles wobble immediately, and I clutch his arm with a death grip that would make Uncle Jimmy proud.

“Easy.” Cooper laughs, steadying me. “Bend your knees a little. That’s it.”

Slowly and perhaps far too cautiously, we make our way around the edge of the rink.

Cooper is annoyingly good at this, gliding with the kind of effortless grace that makes me wonder what other hidden talents he’s keeping from me.

I, on the other hand, move like a newborn giraffe trying to navigate a slip-and-slide.

“Now you’re getting it,” Cooper encourages as I manage a few strides without nearly toppling over.

“Don’t jinx me,” I warn. “I’m one compliment away from asking Santa for my two front teeth.”

As if on cue, my right skate catches on something—possibly air—and I pitch forward.

Cooper's arms wrap around my waist, pulling me against him before I can hit the ice.

We slide together, a tangle of limbs and momentum, until my back meets the rink wall and Cooper's body presses against mine, pinning me there.

Our breath forms a cloud in the cold air between us. His face is inches from mine, those blue-green eyes dark with something that has nothing to do with solving crimes.

"Nice save," I whisper.

"I'm full of surprises," he murmurs back, one hand coming up to brush a strand of hair from my face.

And then he kisses me, right there on the ice with Christmas lights twinkling overhead and "Baby, It's Cold Outside" playing from nearby speakers.

It's the kind of kiss that makes me forget all about murder investigations and hit assignments and dirty old men marrying Cooper's sister. The kind that makes my toes curl inside these death-trap skates. And that I fully approve of.

We pull apart and Coop nods my way. "My place or yours?"

"Yours," I decide quickly. "My heat's been acting up." Among other things.

He gives a little shrug. "I think we can bring the heat."

And we do just that—but not that . Get your head out of the gutter.

But between my uncle's hit list, a dead Bianchi, and whatever storm is brewing at the Velvet Fox tomorrow night, I have a feeling the real inferno hasn't even begun.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

The Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery smells like the entire Christmas season exploded inside it—cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, and vanilla hanging so thick in the air you could practically swim through it. The scent clings to my hair, my clothes, and probably my DNA at this point.

Lily's Christmas playlist jingles through the speakers for what must be the five-hundredth time this season. If I hear "All I Want For Christmas Is You" once more, I might stuff myself into the industrial mixer and hit puree.

"Order up," Lottie calls from the kitchen, pushing through the swinging doors with a tray of miniature gingerbread houses.

Each one is meticulously decorated with royal icing, candy canes for porch posts, and tiny wreaths made of green M&M's.

They're so perfect they make me want to cry—or gobble the entire tray down with a glass of ice-cold milk.

Hard to say which urge is stronger. Okay, fine, so we all know which is which.

"That's another dozen for the Westfield order," she announces, setting the tray on the counter. "And we still have twenty more to go before closing."

"Remind me again why I agreed to help with the holiday rush?" I mutter, piping a snowflake pattern onto what feels like my millionth sugar cookie of the day. My fingers have cramped into the shape of the piping bag. I'll probably need surgery to straighten them out.

“Because you love us?” Lily suggests, arranging peppermint bark in a display case.

“Because Lottie feeds you all the free dessert you can eat?” Suze offers from her station where she’s rolling out more gingerbread dough.

“Because it’s better than spending the day plotting murder?” Lottie adds with a wink that’s a little too knowing for comfort.

I point my icing bag at her threateningly. “Watch it, Lot, or I’ll start aiming this thing like a weapon.”

“As if you could hit anything,” Suze scoffs. “I’ve seen your aim. It’s not impressive.”

She’s not wrong.

“Those were intentional near-misses,” I defend myself. Uncle Jimmy might not agree, but what he doesn’t know won’t get me fired from the family business.

The bell above the door chimes as another customer enters, and we all look up and groan at the crowd.

Leading the pack is one of our regulars, Mrs. Finkelstein, bundled in a coat so puffy she resembles a walking marshmallow, and her Pomeranian, Cupcake, who’s sporting a red and green doggy sweater with actual working lights.

“Good morning, ladies!” she chirps. “I’m here to pick up my gingerbread mansion.”

Mansion is right. What Mrs. Finkelstein ordered isn’t so much a gingerbread house as it is a gingerbread estate, complete with multiple wings, a gazebo, and—I kid you not—a working drawbridge made of peppermint sticks.

“Coming right up,” Lottie says, disappearing into the back where we’ve been storing the architectural marvel in the walk-in fridge.

“I can’t believe how popular these houses have become,” Mrs. Finkelstein gushes. “My daughter in Seattle saw your Insta Pics account and insisted I get one for our Christmas party. She says you’re ‘totally crushing it’—whatever that means.”

“It means Lottie hasn’t slept in three weeks,” I say under my breath.

“It means we’re very grateful for the business,” Lily corrects, shooting me a look.

Lottie emerges from the back with a massive white box, which she sets on the counter with the care of someone handling a nuclear suitcase. “Here you are, Mrs. Finkelstein. One gingerbread mansion, ready for its close-up.”

She opens the box to reveal the sugary monstrosity, and even I have to admit it’s impressive.

The detail work is insane—tiny fondant curtains in the windows, delicate icicles hanging from the roofline, and a front yard populated with gingerbread people who look suspiciously like the Finkelstein family, right down to a tiny Cupcake with orange icing fur.

“Oh my goodness!” Mrs. Finkelstein claps at the massive masterpiece. “It’s perfect! You’ve outdone yourself, Lottie!”

“Thanks,” Lottie beams. “We’ve been shipping these babies all over the country since that video went viral. I had to hire two more bakers just to keep up with demand.”

“Speaking of keeping up—” Suze says, wiping flour from her forehead and leaving a ghostly streak in its wake.

“I’m so excited that the Evergreen Manor agreed to host the big Christmas gathering this year in lieu of the tragedy that happened at the community center.

That place is usually so exclusive they won’t let you in unless your family came over on the Mayflower . ”

“Or unless you slip the manager enough cash to buy her own boat,” Lily adds.

Lottie carefully closes the box with the gingerbread mansion while Mrs. Finkelstein holds Cupcake back from what would have been a very expensive snack. “Actually, they host the event nearly every year.”

“I love the Evergreen Manor,” I say. Even though I’m still a Honey Hollow rookie, despite having lived here long enough to develop a complicated relationship with the local law enforcement, baked goods, and murder, I have trotted out to that fancy establishment once or twice.

Lily nods to customers now rapt at attention.

“The Evergreen Manor is only the fanciest venue in three counties,” she says.

“It’s a gorgeous old estate on the outskirts of town.

Huge gardens, ballroom, the works. It was a private residence until a few decades ago when some rich developer bought it. ”

“That’s right,” Lottie says. “And the annual town Christmas gathering will be held there this year, and all of Honey Hollow is invited to indulge in dessert and refreshments along with a charity auction that always benefits needy families.”

“This year they’re calling it the Mistletoe & Merriment Gala,” Suze adds.

“Fancy,” I say, returning to my cookie decorating.

“Oh, it so is.” Lottie nods. “This year it’s taking place on Christmas Eve Eve .

Formal attire is not required but highly suggested.

It’s just a fun way for the residents of this cozy town to connect and celebrate and have a little holiday fun before everyone does their own thing for the big day,” she explains as she rings up Mrs. Finkelstein’s order.

“Plus, it’s a great excuse to dress up and drink free champagne,” Suze notes.

“Don’t forget all those opportunities to get under the mistletoe.” Lily winks.

Suze sighs. “I’ve got my eye on the new mailman. Have you seen his calves? The man must do calf raises in his sleep.”

“And I’ve got my eye on Alex,” Lily says with a wink her way.

No sooner does Mrs. Finkelstein leave with her architectural sugar bomb, carefully balanced in her arms like a newborn, than the bakery falls into a rhythm of rolling, cutting, baking, and decorating.

The holiday orders have been relentless, but there’s something satisfying about the production line we’ve established. We’re basically a well-oiled sweet treat machine around here.

“Speaking of events—” Suze says, sliding another tray of gingerbread into the oven.

“Guess who got an invite to some fancy-schmancy shindig in Leeds tonight?”

“You, too?” Lily looks up from her frosting bowl. “And here I thought I was special.”

“I got one,” Lottie admits while arranging Christmas cake pops in a display shaped like a tree. “Everett and Noah got one, too. Although I have no idea who that little old spooky lady was who was passing them out like Halloween candy.”

“That spooky old lady would be my Nona Jo,” I confess. “And you hit the spooky nail on the head.”

Lottie gasps. “So what’s it all about? The envelope had that creepy gold writing on black paper that screams either ‘exclusive party’ or ‘human sacrifice.’”

“Honestly? Nona Jo might be into both,” I tell them, setting down my piping bag before my hand permanently fuses to it. “And I have no idea what’s about to transpire. My money is on the human sacrifice.”

And that’s true as gospel.

“Well, I’m definitely going,” Suze declares. “Any party with invitations that fancy has to have good booze.”

“Count me in,” Lily agrees. “I told Alex to wear his nice suit. The one that makes his butt look like it belongs in a fitness magazine.”

“Everett, Noah, and I will be there, too,” Lottie adds. “We can’t miss what promises to be the most dramatic event of the season. Plus, I need to scope out the competition. Rumor has it, the Velvet Fox has hired a new pastry chef from New York.”

The bell chimes again, and a harried-looking woman hustles in, unwinding a scarf the length of a python from around her neck.

“Please tell me you have gingerbread houses left,” she pleads. “My sister-in-law just texted that she’s bringing one to Christmas dinner, and I refuse to be outdone again

this year.”

“Family competition is the true meaning of Christmas,” I say with a sigh as Lottie assures the woman we can accommodate her holiday one-upmanship needs.

As the day progresses, the bakery fills and empties like a holiday tide bringing in waves of customers hungry for Christmas treats.

We sell out of peppermint bark twice, restock, and sell out again.

The gingerbread house orders keep multiplying like rabbits on fertility drugs, and my hands are permanently stained with food coloring in festive shades of red and green.

I had a good run with that flesh tone anyway.

By closing time, I’m convinced that if I never see another gingerbread man again, it will be too soon. My back aches, and I’ve inhaled so much powdered sugar I’m pretty sure my lungs could sweeten a cup of coffee.

“That’s it,” Lottie announces, flipping the sign to Closed with a bang. “We survived another day of Christmas madness.”

“Hardly,” I groan, slumping onto a stool. “If one more person had asked for a rush order gingerbread house, I might have snapped and built them a gingerbread prison instead.”

“Save that energy for tonight,” Suze advises, untying her apron. “Something tells me that your Nona Jo’s little gathering is going to require all of your strength.”

“And possibly bail money,” Lily adds.

“See you all tonight at the Velvet Fox,” I say as I step outside into the frozen night air.

As I step out into the cold evening, a chill runs through my veins that has nothing to do with this frozen winter.

I can’t shake this feeling that someone at the Velvet Fox Hotel will be leaving in a body bag tonight—and for once it won’t have to do with me.

Or will it?

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

The Velvet Fox Hotel stands in the heart of Leeds—a town affectionately known as the armpit of the Green Mountain State.

Not because it smells—although the dump site on the outskirts doesn't exactly help—but because it's tucked into a crease of land where respectable Vermont gives way to its seedier underbelly.

While tourists flock to Honey Hollow for its quaint charm and picture-perfect main street, they come to Leeds for the bars, strip clubs, and underground gambling casinos, all of which happen to belong to my Uncle Jimmy.

The hotel's ballroom assaults my senses before I've fully stepped through the double doors. The smell hits first—a pungent mixture of cheap cologne, mothballs, and dangerous levels of greed.

Next comes the visual attack—a gaudy explosion of gold lamé, hot pink twinkle lights, and paper wedding bells hanging from a ceiling that I'm guessing hasn't been dusted since the first Bush administration.

Dark wood floors, scuffed from decades of questionable dancing, stretch across the room, punctuated by round tables draped in white linens that might have been elegant if they didn't bear the stains of a thousand spilled Chianti glasses.

Have I mentioned the disco ball?

The music—good grief, the music—blares from speakers as Dean Martin competes with modern Italian pop in a sonic battle that makes my ears beg for mercy. The

volume doesn't just enter your ears, it takes up residence in your chest cavity and starts rearranging your internal organs.

"Well, this is..." Niki trails off beside me, searching for a descriptor that doesn't include an expletive. Although something tells me it wouldn't be the first one uttered in this room.

"A crime scene waiting to happen?" I suggest, stepping farther into the room with Watson trotting obediently at my heels.

The golden shepherd sweetie looks around with more sophistication than most of the human attendees.

His red bow tie collar is practically the most tasteful accessory in the joint.

"I was going to say it's festive, but sure, let's go with imminent homicide." Niki adjusts her sequined dress that catches the light from that tacky disco ball overhead. "Oh look, there's the family."

Sure enough, gathered near one of the tables is the Canelli clan in all their Italian glory.

Serafina, my older sister by a year, stands primly in a conservative dress that somehow still manages to make her look like she stepped out of a magazine. Her chocolate dark hair falls in perfect waves around her face, framing coffee-brown eyes that match my own.

Unlike me, however, Serafina radiates a certain innocence that makes her look perpetually like she's auditioning for the role of convent nun gone slightly wild.

She's the golden child of the family, the Miss Priss, the one who got steady

employment at a bookstore called Between the Lines in Honey Hollow while I got recruited into the family assassination business. Life isn't fair.

Next to her stands Luciano, the baby of our little nuclear clique. Dark-haired and dark-eyed like the rest of us Canellis, he's also inherited our father's height and build, both useful in his masonry work.

Nico, Niki's twin brother, completes the sibling quartet.

His beard, which I swear should have its own zip code at this point, dominates his face.

The man has more facial fur than every man at that lumberjack competition combined.

He owns Last Call Lounge, right here in Leeds, which he inherited from our late Uncle Vito.

Nico looks right at home in this tacky ballroom, probably because his bar features the same dubious interior design sensibilities.

My gaze travels past my siblings to the man standing slightly apart from them, and I grunt involuntarily. Uncle Jimmy Canelli, head of the Canelli crime family and my reluctant employer, surveys the room like a king inspecting his kingdom.

His gray hair is slicked back, his dark eyes look as if they miss nothing, and his fine Italian suit probably costs more than it did to rent this room out.

And even though he's the scariest man I know, there's something comforting about his presence, in the same way that knowing where the great white shark is in the water is comforting. At least you know which direction the danger is coming from.

“ Effie! Niki! ” Serafina calls out while waving us over. “Can you believe this place?”

“I’m trying not to,” I reply, giving her a quick hug. “The decor looks like a Vegas wedding chapel got woozy after eating too much spaghetti.”

“Nona Jo really outdid herself,” Luciano says while bending down to give Watson a quick scratch behind the ears. “What do you think she’s up to?”

“With Nona? Could be anything from announcing she’s joining a convent to revealing she’s been running an international spy ring.” I shrug. “Though the wedding bells are giving me a concerning vibe.”

The door to the ballroom opens again, and a hush falls over our little family.

Cooper walks in, looking criminally handsome in a dark suit that highlights his broad shoulders and the kind of body that makes women forget their names.

His wavy brown hair is slightly tousled, and those marbled blue eyes scan the room with the precision of a detective trying to suss out a hitwoman—that would be me.

He’s flanked by his own family—and it’s a collection of Lazzaris that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Cooper’s parents lead the pack. Lavinia Lazzari, a woman whose cooking could be classified as a biohazard, clutches the arm of Santino “Scary Santino” Lazzari, whose nickname isn’t just for show.

The scar that stretches across half his face gives him the perpetual look of a menace, like he’s two seconds away from making you an offer you had better not refuse.

Behind them are Cooper's siblings, Bianca Lazzari-Ferrari, who could double as Courtney Cox's stunt double, with her husband Lou.

Rocco and Dante Lazzari, who inherited their father's intimidating presence if not his facial accessories.

And the star of the show—Loretta Semolina Lazzari, her red hair and freckles a burst of color next to the ancient form of Lorenzo “Enzo” Bianchi.

Loretta paws at the old man like he's a scratch-off ticket about to reveal the jackpot, and Cooper looks about ready to commit a family-based homicide as he growls their way.

Just as the tension reaches levels typically reserved for international peace negotiations, the ballroom doors bang open with the force of a gunshot.

And just like that, both Aunt Cat and Carlotta make their entrance, and good grief, they're dressed as if they're expecting to be photographed for the cover of *Mobster Wives Monthly* .

Aunt Cat's hot pink sequined dress catches the light from every bad angle, reflecting beams that could probably be seen on Sicily. Her beehive hairdo adds at least six inches to her height, and she's accessorized with enough gold jewelry to sink a small yacht.

Carlotta, not to be outdone, has opted for a leopard print jumpsuit that clings to her curves as if it's afraid of heights, paired with a pink feather boa that sheds with each step she takes, leaving a trail of plumage in her wake.

“We're here, witches ,” Carlotta shouts to the room at large. “The party can officially begin!”

“Or end, depending on how the next five minutes go,” I mutter to Niki.

In all fairness, she did just call both the Canellis and the Lazzaris witches . I’ve yet to see someone do some serious name-calling and live to tell the tale.

The doors open once more, and this time the hush that falls over the room is thick enough to cut with a switchblade. Luke Lazzari, the infamous enemy of the Canelli crime family and leader of the rival Lazzari outfit, strolls in like he owns the place—and honestly, for all I know, he just might.

His nearly bald head gleams under the tacky lighting, his gray eyes look cold as ice, and his pointed chin gives him the look of a predatory bird scanning for prey. He just so happens to be Cooper’s uncle, and it’s a fact that complicates my relationship with Cooper more than I care to admit.

Half the room goes quiet as just about every hand in here instinctively moves toward a concealed weapon. The Canelli-Lazzari feud has claimed more lives than I’ve had bad hair days, which is saying something.

“ Eff ”—Niki whispers— “I think Nona Jo might have finally lost her marbles. This is like hosting a peace summit between cats and dogs, except every last furry fiend is armed.”

I spot Nona Jo holding court near the makeshift stage at the front of the room and boot-scoot over to her with Watson trotting dutifully at my heels.

“Nona Jo”—I hiss— “what are you thinking throwing this shindig under the cover of darkness, anyway? Are you setting us up for a turf war or something?”

My grandmother, who happens to be dressed in a vintage 1960s black cocktail dress that’s seen better decades, with her hair styled in the exact same beehive she’s worn

since the Kennedy administration, offers me a smile that could either mean “I love you” or “I’m about to make your life a living hell. ” With Nona Jo, it’s usually both.

“Patience, Effie.” She pats my cheek with a hand adorned with rings on every finger. “All will be revealed.”

Before I can press her further, she sticks her fingers in her mouth and lets out a whistle sharp enough to shatter glass.

The room falls silent and the music warps to a stop as every head in the room turns toward the diminutive Italian woman who, despite her size, commands the attention of two rival crime families with nothing more than pursed lips and a raised brow.

Nona Jo is gangster like that.

“Now that I’ve got you all where I want you,” she announces with her voice carrying through the suddenly quiet ballroom. “It’s time to tell you exactly what this is about.”

She pauses dramatically, and I swear I can hear the collective intake of breath from both the Canellis and the Lazzaris.

My hand instinctively moves toward my purse where Buttercup nestles among breath mints and receipts.

If there’s going to be a shootout, I can guarantee you some of those bullets will be mine.

Nona Jo’s face breaks into a wide smile. “It’s a surprise wedding!”

The room erupts in confused murmurs, and all eyes turn to Lorenzo and Loretta, who suddenly become the center of attention.

Loretta, never one to miss a spotlight, screams with delight and launches herself onto Enzo, wrapping her legs around his waist like an octopus attacking a very old submarine.

Her little red dress rides up to reveal a G-string that leaves nothing to the imagination, and I'm pretty sure I hear several cameras click.

Meanwhile, poor Coop looks like he's calculating how many years he'd get for justifiable homicide. His jaw is clenched so tight that I'm half afraid for his dental work. Uncle Jimmy and Luke Lazzari lock eyes across the room in a staring contest that could very well ignite the tacky paper decor.

But something in Nona Jo's expression makes me think we've all jumped to the wrong conclusion. This isn't just about Loretta and her geriatric fiancé.

This is about something much worse.

And suddenly, I realize why I'm really here tonight.

It all clicks together like the sound of a bullet in the chamber.

Someone in this room isn't leaving alive, and I have a sinking feeling I'm supposed to be the one who punches their ticket to the afterlife.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

A surprise wedding?

The room spins with shocked gasps and gleeful cackling as Loretta clings to Enzo like a koala with abandonment issues. How the heck did Loretta Stiletto get Nona Jo to hand out the invites? Nona Jo must have really owed someone in the Lazzari family a favor the size of one of my mother's meatballs.

My brain is still processing Nona Jo's bombshell when she commands the room's attention once more with another shrill whistle.

"Loretta Semolina Lazzari!" Nona Jo barks, her voice cutting through the chaos.

"Get your caboose back on the ground and your dress back where it belongs! There are children present!" She pauses, scanning the room.

"Well, maybe not, but there might as well be with how some of you are known to behave."

Loretta reluctantly unwraps her legs from around Enzo's waist and slides down to the floor with all the grace of a cat being forced into a bathtub. Her lipstick is smeared across half her face and his, and they both have that sanity-is-optional look about them.

"Now"—Nona Jo continues, smoothing down her vintage dress— "everyone gather around. The night is young, and we have much to celebrate!"

A hand clamps down on my shoulder, and I nearly jump out of my skin as Uncle

Jimmy materializes beside me like a particularly well-dressed ghost. That cloud of cologne that follows him around announced his presence a split second before his grip did.

“Good thing your mark is here tonight,” he whispers with his eyes fixed on Enzo. “I’ll double your bonus if you arrange for him to drop dead here in front of everyone. It’s what the scumbag deserves.”

My stomach lurches. Not because Uncle Jimmy is asking me to commit murder—that’s practically a Tuesday in the Canelli family—but because he’s asking me to do it here, now, in front of Cooper and both our families.

Including Cooper’s sister, who, despite her questionable taste in men, probably doesn’t want to watch her fiancé keel over during what was supposed to be her engagement party.

Before I can formulate a response that won’t get me fitted for cement shoes, Nona Jo’s voice rises above the din again.

“Effie! Cooper! Come here, you two,” she calls, waving us over with the enthusiasm of someone who’s either had too much wine or is about to unleash chaos. With Nona Jo, I’m betting on both. After all, one often leads to the other.

Cooper and I exchange wide-eyed looks across the room. He’s wearing a charcoal suit that makes his shoulders look like they could bench-press a small car, his wavy dark hair just tousled enough to make my fingers itch to run through it.

Heck, I know I clean up pretty good, too, in my little black dress that hits all the right curves, but the expression on Cooper’s face suggests we’re both thinking the same thing: What fresh heck is this?

A light smattering of applause breaks out as we hesitantly make our way toward Nona Jo. Watson trots beside us and even he looks hesitant to do so. Something tells me he'd so let me take the fall in a hail of bullets.

“Friends! Family! Enemies who haven’t been whacked yet!” Nona Jo starts, and there’s a ripple of nervous laughter in response. “We are gathered here tonight to witness the beginning of a new chapter for our families.”

Cooper’s hand finds mine, his grip tight enough to suggest he’s preparing for battle.

I can’t blame him. The last time our families were in the same room for a “celebration,” someone ended up with a fork in their thigh—and that was considered a successful gathering.

And that was just a few weeks back at Thanksgiving.

“Eufrasia and Cupertino”—Nona Jo corrects herself, using our formal names that nobody ever uses unless we’re in trouble or about to be—“have shown us that love can bridge the gap between our warring families. They have demonstrated that what matters most isn’t which crime family you belong to, but the love that fills your heart.”

I blink rapidly. Is Nona Jo getting sentimental?

Has the invasion of the body snatchers finally found its first victim?

And why is this suddenly about us and not Loretta Snickerdoodle and The Ancient One?

“Dinner will be served after the lucky couple is joined as one,” she continues, “and while we dine, they’ll be off in the honeymoon suite I rented upstairs. Once they’ve

consummated the marriage, they'll come down and we'll all have some cake."

"What?" both Cooper and I say at once. We're already practically unified at something.

"The minister will be here momentarily." Nona Jo plows ahead, her smile widening to slightly maniacal proportions. "But until then, dance and make merry because the lucky couple getting hitched tonight is none other than Cupertino Lazzari and Eufrasia Canelli!"

My jaw roots to the floor, as does Cooper's.

The room erupts into booming applause as soon as Nona Jo shouts out our formal monikers. The music kicks back in at raucous decibels—some Italian dance number that sounds like a tarantella on steroids—and half the crowd swarms the dance floor while the other half rushes for the open bar.

Nona Jo, who just so happens to look suspiciously pleased with herself, trots off to join a group of elderly women who are undoubtedly her cronies from the senior center, leaving Cooper and me standing in stunned silence.

Watson looks up at the two of us and whines with a look that says, Don't look at me. I didn't plan this.

"What should we do?" I whisper to Coop as my brain struggles to process the fact that my grandmother has apparently arranged a surprise wedding.

For us.

Tonight.

Without asking.

Without hope for refuting the offer, too.

There are far too many guns in the room for me to ever consider it.

Cooper gives me a sly smile that sends my heart ricocheting around my ribcage.

“Maybe we should dance?” He picks up my hand and kisses the back of it. “I have a feeling we’ll have to figure this out as we go.”

I’m about to say something when Nona Jo belts out one of her ear-piercing whistles once again.

“And another thing,” she shouts. “I want lots and lots of Italian babies from the two of you,” she calls out from across the room, causing another round of hoots and lewd suggestions from the less than dignified crowd—which is a majority of it.

“She does realize we need to actually agree to get married first, right?” I mutter as Cooper guides me toward the dance floor with his hand warm against the small of my back.

“I think in Nona Jo’s world, the agreement is more of a formality than a requirement,” Cooper says as he dots a quick kiss to my cheek.

We’re halfway to the dance floor when Cooper suddenly veers off course, his body tensing beside me. I follow his gaze and spot the reason for his detour.

Not more than six feet away Loretta is pressed against the wall near the bar with her legs once again wrapped around Enzo’s waist as if she’s afraid he might escape. He has her hands pinned above her head while he kisses her senseless, oblivious to the

spectators they've attracted.

It's clear the man has a death wish—or a serious bout of dementia.

A small crowd quickly gathers—mostly Carlotta, Aunt Cat, Suze, Lily, and Lottie, all who seem to be admiring the heat they're giving off. And I'll admit, it is pretty steamy, in a National Geographic documentary about mating rituals of the desperate and elderly kind of way.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Cooper growls, stalking over and physically separating Enzo from his sister with the kind of move that belongs in a WWE ring.

Loretta the Slut—I mean, Loretta, Cooper's sister—falls to the ground with an undignified yelp. While Cooper helps her up, I seize the opportunity to grab Enzo by his frisky arm and drag him away about ten feet until we're on the dance floor ourselves.

“Listen up, Methuselah,” I hiss, getting right in his wrinkled face. “If you want to make it to ninety, you need to stay away from Loretta.” Although given his advanced age, that's less a threat and more of a miracle he'd need divine intervention to achieve.

And let's be honest, given my hit and Coop's homicidal intentions, this man would be better off dead anyway.

Enzo blinks at me with a foggy expression. He mumbles something unintelligible, then points vaguely to his left before his eyes roll up to stare at the ceiling. He clutches at his heart and gags in my face.

For a second, I think he's having a stroke, possibly induced by all the blood rushing from his head to his nether regions during that hot-to-trot make-out session with

Loretta.

He lifts a finger my way as if he's about to set me straight—then, without warning, he crumples like a marionette that's had its strings cut and face-plants directly at my feet.

Screams erupt around us as Enzo's body hits the floor with a thud that somehow manages to cut through the blaring music.

I stand frozen, staring down at the motionless form of Lorenzo Bianchi, the man I was just ordered to kill, who has apparently decided to save me the trouble.

The crowd surges toward us, and somewhere in the chaos, I catch Uncle Jimmy's eye. He gives me an approving nod, clearly impressed that I've just earned my double bonus.

But I didn't do this.

At least, I don't think I did.

Unless wishing someone dead has suddenly become an effective assassination technique—in which case, half the people I've stood behind in coffee shop lines should be dropping like flies.

This evening just went from “surprise wedding” to “surprise corpse” faster than Aunt Cat could down a glass of prosecco.

And somehow, I have a feeling that once again, I'm going to be the prime suspect.

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S screams explode in the ballroom here at the Velvet Fox Hotel, with the loudest being mine.

The tacky disco ball above spins wildly, scattering panicked light across Enzo's body at my feet.

Dean Martin croons about amore from the speakers and it all feels like a sick joke right about now with the words garbled and distant through the chaos.

“BACK! Everyone back up right now!” Cooper's voice cuts through the noise like a razor. His hand slices through the air, creating an invisible barrier between the crowd and Enzo's crumpled form. “Give him some space!”

The parting crowd creates the requisite circle around us—me, Cooper, and the man who was supposed to be my hit but apparently couldn't wait for me to get the job done.

Cooper drops to his knee and quickly presses two fingers against Enzo's neck. The crowd holds a collective breath. Even the ice in the drinks stops clinking.

Cooper's eyes meet mine before he looks up at the crowd. “He's gone.”

The wail that follows pierces my eardrums like an ice pick. Loretta barrels through the human barricade with her red hair flying behind her like flames. She flings herself onto Enzo's chest and her body convulses with sobs that are strong enough to shake the floorboards beneath my feet.

“ My Enzo! My sweet sugar prune! ” Her voice cracks as mascara-laced tears carve paths down her cheeks. “We were going to St. Tropez next week! I already bought a dozen bikinis!”

I take a half-step back and my heels wobble on the uneven floor. That’s when Loretta’s head snaps up, and her gaze locks onto me with such immediate hatred I can practically feel it searing my skin.

“ YOU! ” The word explodes from her lips, sending spittle flying. Her finger jabs the air between us, and her crimson nail is as efficient as pointing a weapon. “This is all YOUR fault!”

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out, as all around us the crowd gasps in unison.

“Everywhere you go, people drop dead!” Loretta’s voice rises with each word. And let’s face it, she’s not wrong. “You, Effie Canelli, are a living, breathing jinx! ”

The words slice through me so sharp they could draw blood if they wanted. I glance down at Enzo—at his waxy face frozen in shock—then back at Loretta.

“To be fair”—my voice sounds oddly steady— “he was about ninety. The odds weren’t exactly in his favor.”

Another sharp gasp from the crowd takes over.

Loretta’s eyes turn into red-hot flames as the veins bulge at her temples. “I put a POX on you, Effie Canelli!” Her shriek reaches a pitch that makes the wine glasses on nearby tables vibrate. And I swear, I just heard one crack. “A POX ON YOU AND ON YOUR HOUSE!”

The collective gasp that follows feels like all the oxygen just got sucked from the

room.

“YOU TAKE THAT BACK, YOU LAZZARI STRUMPET!” Nona Jo’s voice booms from somewhere to my right. She pushes forward as her tiny frame parts the crowd like Moses with the Red Sea. Her eyes blaze with the fury of a thousand denied grandmothers.

More gasps ripple through the room. The tension crackles like electricity before a lightning strike—or a bullet, take your pick. Calling a Lazzari woman a strumpet in this crowd is like lighting a match in a fireworks factory.

“I will NOT take it back!” Loretta’s mascara continues its downward journey, leaving muddy tracks in her wake. Her brothers, Rocco and Dante, materialize beside her, their faces torn between family loyalty and a clear desire to avoid a bloodbath. “She’s cursed! She killed my Enzo!”

“That’s enough, Loretta.” A hand suddenly clamps onto Loretta’s arm, and it’s none other than Scary Santino, Coop’s scary daddy himself.

His expression is somewhere between an annoyed father and an efficient crime boss.

“We’re leaving.” His voice leaves no room for argument, even though Loretta immediately provides one anyway.

“I won’t go! Not without Enzo!” she wails, her body going limp in protest as her family begins the awkward process of extraction.

Her legs drag across the floor, heels leaving fresh marks in the wood as she hurls curses my way.

Her final insult—something anatomically impossible involving a cannoli—hangs in

the air long after they've dragged her through the exit.

The crowd begins to murmur once more just as my Uncle Jimmy materializes beside me.

"Well done," he whispers with his breath hot against my ear. "I wasn't expecting it so fast."

Before I can sputter a defense, he shoves something thick and papery into the palm of my hand.

And I look down to see a fat roll of hundred-dollar bills, the texture of the money rough against my sweaty skin.

My heartbeat drums in my temples as Uncle Jimmy disappears back into the crowd, leaving me holding blood money for a murder I didn't commit.

Or did I?

The bills feel as if they weigh a thousand pounds as I stuff them into my purse, posthaste.

Across the room, Cooper barks orders into his phone with his shoulders rigid under his suit jacket. Potential crime scene. Coroner. Backup. The words float across the space between us as unwanted as can be.

Well, maybe Coop wanted it a little bit.

Cooper finishes his call and makes his way toward me.

"Are you okay?" he asks as he wraps his arms around me, pulling me against the

solid warmth of his chest.

“Define ‘okay,’” I mumble as the fabric of his shirt muffles my words. “I was just accused of being a walking death curse by your sister, who promptly put a pox on me. And let’s be real, I’ve probably had one on me all along.”

Cooper doesn’t protest the idea. And why would he? He’s a smart man.

I close my eyes and wish with everything in me that it was just the two of us. No bodies dropping at my feet. No warring families drawing battle lines across dance floors. No surprise weddings sprung like traps. It would be a lot simpler, and possibly a lot less deadly.

Possibly.

Regardless—someone killed Lorenzo Bianchi tonight. Maybe it was me, maybe it wasn’t, but I have a very hard time believing this was his time to go.

One thing is for sure—before Santa glides down my chimney, I’m going to find out who’s responsible, even if I have to chase my own shadow to the scene of the crime.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

The Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery smells like chocolate cake wrapped in butter and sugar—a stark contrast to last night’s cologne-and-death-scented disaster at the Velvet Fox Hotel.

Snow piles against the windows in fluffy drifts, diffusing the light inside to a soft, pearly glow that makes the Christmas decorations seem to shimmer with their own inner magic.

The bakery is bustling as Lottie entertains Noah, Everett, and Carlotta who are all nibbling on a stack of donuts at the counter.

The espresso machine hisses and gurgles in the background, a homey counterpoint to the Christmas music playing at a mercifully reasonable volume. My hands move on autopilot, arranging snowflake cookies in the display case while my brain replays last night’s horror show in vivid, technicolor detail.

“Stop making that face,” Lottie says, nudging me with her elbow as she slides a tray of gingerbread men into the case beside me. “You look like someone who just realized they forgot to defrost the Thanksgiving turkey at three p.m. on Turkey Thursday.”

“Sorry,” I mumble, straightening a cookie that doesn’t need straightening. “But it’s hard to be merry and bright when you’ve got a dead geriatric fiancé on your conscience.”

Lottie’s expression softens. “Don’t feel too bad about that whole people dropping dead at your feet thing. It’s happened to me a time or two as well.”

“A time or two?” Noah Fox’s voice carries from the counter where he’s mid-bite into what appears to be his third cinnamon roll of the morning. The homicide detective—Cooper’s colleague and Lottie’s most devoted admirer—gestures with his pastry, sending icing flying. “Try a dozen at least.”

“Thirteen and counting,” Judge Essex Everett Baxter—her official plus-one—corrects, his deep voice carrying the authority of a man who’s both sentenced criminals and judged baking competitions with equal conviction.

He sits beside Noah at the counter, immaculate in his tailored suit despite the early hour, with his dark hair perfectly styled, and cheekbones that should require a license to display in public.

Lottie’s “main squeeze,” as the locals call him, has every woman in Honey Hollow sighing when he walks by.

“You’re keeping count?” Lottie arches an eyebrow at him.

“Someone has to maintain accurate court records.” Everett winks her way before taking a sip of his black coffee.

“Hear that, Lottie Dottie?” Carlotta chuckles as she sits next to Everett, hovering over a plate full of crullers. “You’re a veritable corpse magnet and everyone knows it. Heck, half the sheriff’s department thinks you’re running some kind of death cult out of the bakery basement.”

“We don’t have a basement,” Lottie points out.

“Details, details.” Carlotta waves dismissively at the thought.

Fun fact: Despite being Lottie’s biological mother, who abandoned her as an infant,

Carlotta has somehow wheedled her way into both Lottie's home and business.

"Remember when they found that guy stuffed in the dumpster behind the bakery?" Noah reminisces, a dreamy look crossing his face that would be disturbing if I didn't understand the weird nostalgia crime inspires in law enforcement. "That was one of our first cases together."

"Nothing says romance like shared garbage corpses," I mutter.

"Or that Halloween festival double homicide," Everett adds.

"The Valentine's Day poisoning," Noah counters.

"The Easter egg hunt strangling," Carlotta contributes with glee.

"The Fourth of July—" Everett begins.

"Okay!" Lottie interrupts, a little too loud. "I get it. I attract trouble."

"Like honey attracts bears," Noah says with undisguised admiration, his eyes tracking Lottie's every movement as she wipes down the already spotless counter.

"Speaking of trouble..." Lottie turns to me with a raised brow. "How are you holding up after last night's fiasco? I can't believe you were front and center again when it happened. That's twice in one week! Not even I have managed to do that feat."

I'll admit, she does look rather impressed.

All eyes swivel my way and I resist the urge to duck behind the display case.

"I'm fine," I lie, as if I didn't spend half the night staring at my ceiling wondering if

I'd somehow perfected my assassination skills to include telepathy. "Just another day in the life of Effie Canelli, a reluctant hitwoman and apparent death magnet."

They all share a dull laugh despite the fact I meagerly outed myself. Of course, they don't think I'm being one bit serious.

"Did Cooper say anything about how the old coot bit the dust?" Carlotta probes with the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

Noah shifts uncomfortably on his stool. "It's an ongoing investigation."

"Which means they don't know anything yet," Everett translates while adjusting his silk tie. And boy, does that shade of navy bring out the bad boy in his eyes.

"Or they know and they're not telling," Carlotta suggests while shoving another cruller into her pie hole and I'm tempted to do the same. Lottie's chocolate on chocolate crullers really are the best thing ever.

Dreamy sigh.

"Since we have the lead homicide detective right here"—Lottie says, sliding a fresh cup of coffee toward Noah with a smile that would make stronger men confess to crimes they didn't commit— "maybe you could share a tiny tidbit of information? You know, just between friends?"

Noah melts under Lottie's attention like butter on a hot pan. "Well..."

"Noah," Everett warns and the threat in his voice manages to evoke another dreamy sigh from me.

"Are the two dead brothers—Nicholas and Lorenzo—somehow related?" Lottie asks,

leaning closer to Noah. “I mean, besides being actual brothers.”

Noah straightens his shoulders, trying to regain some professional composure. “We’re looking into all possibilities. Cooper and I are running toxicology screens, checking connections, the whole nine yards.”

“In other words, you really don’t know,” I translate.

“Yet,” Noah adds defensively. “We don’t know yet .”

Everett glances at his watch and stands. “And on that note, I’ve got a job to get to.” He comes over and drops a kiss on Lottie’s cheek. “Try not to find any more bodies before dinner, Lemon.”

“No promises,” Lottie shoots back.

“You either,” he says while pointing my way and I practically hop with the command.

“Yes, sir.” I’m quick to salute him just as Noah stuffs the last of his glazed donut into his mouth.

“I’d better get going, too,” he says, jumping to his feet. “Cooper isn’t going to be impressed if I’m late to the briefing,” he mumbles through a bite. “Thanks for the sugar rush, Lottie. I’ll call if I get any updates.”

They take off and the bell above the door jingles as they exit, leaving a momentary lull in the bakery’s morning bustle. Lottie heads off to help a customer while Carlotta wastes no time sliding into the stool Noah just vacated.

“So what’s the real story?” she asks. “You can pipe up now that the boys in blue have

gone their way.”

“What real story?” I ask, before popping a snowflake cookie into my mouth.

Mmm , so buttery and soft. Lottie really does know what she’s doing.

“Please,” Carlotta scoffs. “I’ve known Jimmy Canelli since he was stealing candy from corner stores. You think I don’t recognize a family hit when I see one?”

My blood turns to ice. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Okay, fine. We both know it wasn’t you. You’ve got the survival instincts of a lemming with a death wish.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I grumble, though I can’t exactly argue with her assessment of my assassination skills.

“If I were investigating, which I’m not saying I am, I’d be at square one.

The only lead I’ve got is that Holly Bellini mentioned Stella Martinelli might know something, but I don’t know where to find her. ”

Suze appears from the kitchen with flour dusting her arms and a streak of chocolate on her cheek. “Did I hear you mention Stella Martinelli?”

“You know her?” I ask, perking up.

“I don’t run in the same social circles as that woman,” Suze says that woman as if it means something. “But doesn’t she work at the Jolly Holly Tree Lot? You know, the Christmas tree farm on the edge of town? I think she volunteers there during the holidays.”

“Oh, wait a minute,” I say when the memory clicks into place—Stella at the bakery, ordering donuts to take to the tree lot. “That’s right!” I exclaim, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically for someone who’s just remembered where an elderly woman spends her free time.

Lottie hitches her head toward the door. “Go on. We’re overstaffed today anyway, and you look like you’re about to jump right out of your skin.”

“Thanks, Lot!” I’m already untying my apron, mind racing with questions I need to ask Stella Martinelli about two dead brothers and a possible poisoning, when I rush out the door and nearly collide with Niki, who has a blonde ball of fluff in her arms.

The happy little canine jumps right into my own arms with that bright red bow still secured around his neck.

“Whoa, where’s the fire?” Niki asks, steadying herself and me.

“No fire,” I say, scratching Watson behind the ears. “Just a potential lead. Do you want to help me interrogate a senior citizen at a Christmas tree lot?”

“Is the Pope Catholic? Do bears?—”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I interrupt, heading for the parking lot. “Come on, we’re going to get a tree and maybe a killer.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

The Jolly Holly Tree Lot looks about as cheery as can be for the holiday season—or what’s left of it.

Thousands of twinkle lights are strung between the evergreens and they transform the place into a multicolored wonderland.

The scent of fresh pine hangs heavy in the air, mingling with the sweetness of hot cocoa and cinnamon churros sold from a candy-cane-striped cart.

The sky is gray, the snow is light, and Christmas carols blast from the speakers as “Jingle Bell Rock” vibrates its cheery tune over the vicinity.

“The toys, the boys, the noise—this place feels just like Santa’s workshop,” Niki practically sings as we navigate through rows of Fraser firs and blue spruces, each tagged with a price that would make my credit card spontaneously combust.

“You say it like you’ve been there.”

“Oh, I have,” my saucy sister shoots back. “One time, Vinnie DeMartio took me to this old warehouse?—”

“And that’s where this story ends,” I’m quick to tell her.

“If we don’t find Stella soon, I might develop a pine allergy,” I mutter, scanning the crowd for our elderly person of interest. Watson trots beside us with his golden fur collecting the occasional snowflake, and his cute little nose working overtime with all the competing scents.

We've barely made it past the "Medium Trees for Medium Budgets" section when I hear the unmistakable sound of Aunt Cat's laugh—a high-pitched cackle that could crack ice—followed by Carlotta's smoky chuckle.

I turn to see them barreling toward us like two festively dressed missiles locked on a target.

"There you are!" Aunt Cat exclaims, her hot pink parka blinding against the white snow. She's accessorized with a fuzzy hat sporting actual jingle bells that announce her movements like a cat with a collar. "Running off without us? Now that's just rude, young lady."

"Not to mention dangerous," Carlotta reprimands while adjusting her leopard print earmuffs. "You never know when you might need backup. Or an alibi."

"I didn't realize a murder investigation was a group activity," I reply.

"Come on now, Effie. Everything is more fun with friends and family," Aunt Cat says cheerfully before her expression turns serious. "Speaking of family..." She reaches into her parka pocket and extracts a red envelope. "This came for you. From your uncle."

My stomach plummets faster than a kid sledding down an icy hill. The familiar envelope can only mean one thing—a new assignment from Uncle Jimmy.

I take it from her and can't help but notice that the paper feels heavier than it should, as if it's weighted with impending doom rather than just a name.

"So soon?" I lament, staring at the envelope of horror. The ink has barely dried on the payment for a hit I didn't even complete, and here's Uncle Jimmy, serving up seconds before I've digested the first course. I'm about to rip it open when a flash of

red and white lights catches my attention.

Not more than a few feet away is Stella Martinelli, helping a family secure a tree to their car.

She looks every bit as if Mrs. Claus herself got tired of North Pole administrative duties and decided to take a retail job.

Her silver-streaked hair peeks out from under a Santa hat, and she's wearing a red quilted jacket with white fur trim.

Fuzzy mittens and snow boots complete the ensemble, making her look like the quintessential grandma who's ready to serve up some hot cocoa rather than someone potentially involved in a double homicide.

"Target acquired," Niki whispers as she nudges me.

"Try not to make it sound like a missile strike," I whisper back, tucking the envelope into my purse for later. "Remember, we're just here to shop for a Christmas tree, not give Cooper another homicide to solve before Santa slides down the chimney."

Niki sniffs. "You mean give you another homicide to investigate before Santa slides down the chimney."

"I mean me," I say with a sigh.

"Ooh, speaking of which." Carlotta's gaze drifts toward a group of young men dressed as elves, loading trees onto a flatbed truck.

Their green tights leave little to the imagination, and their pointed hats add a certain festive flair to their biceps that suggest they moonlight as lumberjacks.

“I spy with my little eye something beginning with the letter H.”

“Hot elves!” Aunt Cat shouts as if she just got the answer right on a game show. “Hot dog!” she claps up a storm. “It looks like Santa’s workshop got an upgrade!”

“Ladies,” I’m quick to reprimand them with my tone. “We’re here to interrogate a suspect, not ogle the North Pole beefcake.” I glance that way and moan because they are so ogle-worthy—for other women, of course. I’ve got all the beefcake I need with Coop.

“Who says we can’t multitask?” Niki asks, already drifting toward the muscular holiday helpers.

Before I can protest, all three women have abandoned our mission in favor of what Aunt Cat declared as “spreading Christmas cheer.”

I sigh and pick up Watson. “It’s just you and me, kid,” I tell him, planting a quick kiss on his cold, wet nose. His tail wags in response and I catch it and kiss the tip, too. I can’t help it. This sweet boy has my entire heart wrapped up around his furry little paw.

Stella has just finished helping the family and is busy adjusting her Santa hat when I reach her. Her cheeks are rosy, she holds the scent of sugar and spice and everything nice, and there’s an ethereal glow about her in general that screams Christmas magic.

Even thinking that she may have had something to do with these murders should be enough to land me on the naughty list—not that I’m not there already.

“Excuse me,” I call out with a little extra friendly pep in my voice. “I was wondering if you could help me find a tree that won’t shed all its needles before Christmas actually arrives?”

Okay, so that line may have worked a month ago, but now that the big day is just around the corner, it feels more like a moot point.

Stella turns around, looking like the perfect picture of helpful retail cheer just before she squints my way. “Oh! You’re the young lady from the bakery—and from the Jingle Bell Jubilee.” She gives a few quick blinks. “Effie, right?”

“That’s me,” I confirm with a smile. “And this is my sweet pooch, Watson. We’re on a mission to find the perfect Christmas tree.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” Stella says, gesturing at the rows of trees stretching out behind her. “The Fraser firs are your best bet for needle retention. They’ll stay fresh through the new year if you water them properly.”

We make small talk about tree varieties and proper care. Stella assures me that she’s been working the Christmas tree circuit longer than I’ve been alive, and before that, she worked on the telemetry unit of the hospital. Eventually, I steer the conversation toward more relevant matters.

“Quite a holiday season so far,” I say casually. “First, the Jubilee disaster, and now I heard there was some excitement at the Velvet Fox last night as well.”

“Oh, yes.” Stella straightens the ornament display next to her with her mittens for a moment.

“It’s just been terrible. I don’t know about the Velvet Fox, but I just heard that Lorenzo Bianchi passed away last night, too!

Right after his brother. Must have been the stress from losing Nicholas. It’s all just such a shock.”

“That family has some seriously cursed Christmas karma,” I mutter under my breath.

Stella’s eyes widen at my comment. “What do you mean by that?”

I shrug, going for nonchalant. “Just seems like an unlucky coincidence. Two brothers dropping dead within days of each other? That’s like getting coal in your stocking two years running.”

“Yes. Quite... coincidental.” Stella moves to a table full of bushy wreaths and begins to straighten them as well. “I’m just so sorry for the family.”

“Did you know them well?” I probe. “Nicholas and Lorenzo?”

“Not really,” she says reflexively. “I mean, everyone knows the Bianchis, of course. Old money almost always equals big influence in the community. Nicholas was a regular donor to the hospital.” She glances over my shoulder and offers a gracious wave to a family striding by.

“Now I just volunteer here and run the caroling group.”

“That must be how you knew Nicholas from the Jubilee,” I say, pretending to examine a miniature tree. “You seemed upset with him that night.”

“Oh, that.” Stella waves dismissively. “It was just a disagreement about the upcoming fundraising auction. He wanted to lower the starting bids to attract more participants, but I felt it would devalue the items. Nothing serious. That’s usually my arena, so I was surprised to hear he was trying to steamroll his way into it.

” She frowns out at the bustling tree lot.

Watson squirms in my arms, apparently losing interest in our conversation. I readjust

my grip, using the moment to study Stella's face.

"It's a shame about their business troubles," I comment, throwing out a fishing line to see what I might catch.

"Business troubles?" Stella repeats and she sounds every bit neutral with her concern.

"With the toy company," I improvise, having absolutely no idea if the Bianchis had any trouble at all with their stores. "I heard there were some—financial irregularities."

"I wouldn't know anything about that," Stella says primly, though her fingers tighten around the wreath she's holding.

"Nicholas was always very private about his business affairs. But then, it wouldn't surprise me either.

The Bianchi brothers were notoriously greedy as can be. That's just general knowledge."

A family with three small children who can hardly be contained approach us looking for assistance, and Stella holds up a hand their way.

"I should get going," she says. "The lot's getting terribly busy.

" She taps a finger to her lips. "But you know, come to think of it, I did see something odd that night at the Jubilee. Did you happen to see a dark-haired gentleman who was upset with Nicholas? I only heard a snippet of their conversation, but I believe it had something to do with business. Perhaps he'll know about any financial woes the brothers were having. "

“Come to think of it, I did see Nick getting heated with a dark-haired man,” I say, as the memory comes back to me. “Do you know who he is?”

Stella nods. “Gabriel ‘Gabe’ Esposito. He owns Miracle on Main Street, the town’s year-round Christmas shop.

And well, the name tells you exactly where you can find him.

” She reaches into a basket hanging from her arm and extracts a candy cane, before offering it to me.

“One for you—and one for your sweet puppy, too.”

Watson gives a quick bark of appreciation as if he understood, and I know for a fact he did. Treats are basically his love language, and they just so happen to be mine, too.

I accept the candy canes, ignoring the irony of taking potentially poisoned candy from a woman I’m investigating for poisoning.

“Thanks for your help, Stella. Will I see you at the Mistletoe and Merriment Gala at the Evergreen Manor?”

“Oh, you bet. That’s the auction I was telling you about.” She hands me an extra candy cane as she pushes past me. “Merry Christmas,” she sings before hurrying off to assist the waiting family.

“So, there’s that,” I say, giving Watson another kiss to his furry little forehead before taking off. I hardly make it back to the entrance when Niki, Aunt Cat, and Carlotta descend upon me like cheap tinsel on an aluminum tree.

“Did you get anything useful?” Niki asks, her cheeks flushed either from the cold or

whatever cardio she got in with Santa's hot helpers.

"Maybe," I say. "What about you three? Learn anything interesting from the elven workforce?"

"Only that those tights leave nothing to the imagination." Carlotta gives a chef's kiss to her fingertips. "But I think we scared them off with our enthusiasm."

"Word is getting out about what we did to those wax boys." Aunt Cat gives a mournful nod.

"Their loss." Niki shrugs. "So, what did Grandma Christmas have to say?"

I fill them in quickly on my conversation with Stella, including her redirect to Gabe Esposito. "Could be nothing, could be something. At least it's another lead."

"Speaking of leads..." Carlotta says, eyeing my purse where the red envelope is tucked away. "Go on and open the envelope. The suspense is killing me."

"Me, too," Aunt Cat agrees.

Niki snorts. "You're both just anxious to see if your names are on the list."

"It's bound to happen one day," I say, pulling out the envelope in question. The paper feels slick between my fingers as I break the seal and unfurl the note inside, only to see the last name in the world I'd want to see printed on it.

Okay, so maybe the second to last, or third, or sixth.

"Loretta Semolina Lazzari?" Niki gasps, reading over my shoulder. "But that's Cooper's little sister!"

“Oh, my goodness,” I say, staring at the letters in the hope they’ll rearrange themselves.

Aunt Cat reaches into her pocket and produces a lighter before setting the edge of the paper on fire.

I drop the letter onto the snow and we watch as the flames make quick work of it, and Loretta’s name dissolves into ashes like the nightmare it is.

We watch in silence as the last embers die out, the evidence of Uncle Jimmy’s latest request disappearing like smoke. But the damage is already done. The name burns in my memory as clearly as if it were tattooed on my eyelids.

Loretta Semolina Lazzari.

Cooper’s sister.

My next target.

If I thought my relationship with Cooper was complicated before, it just entered a whole new realm of disaster.

One thing I know is true—the only thing dying here is any chance of a future with the man I love.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

Miracle on Main Street looks like Santa's workshop after a corporate takeover—sleek, commercial, and profitable, yet still packed with enough Christmas cheer to give even the Grinch a festive seizure.

The place is a year-round tribute to holiday capitalism, with aisles upon aisles of ornaments, tinsel, fake snow, and enough animatronic elves to staff a toy factory in the North Pole's industrial district.

Christmas carols blast through hidden speakers at bone-rattling volumes and the display of toy desserts is really making me crave a cookie.

Watson pulls at his leash, barking with excitement at a life-sized mechanical reindeer that bobs its head in rhythm to "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

My cute pooch's tail wags with enough force to power the North Pole itself as he bounces from display to display as if he were adding every toy in sight to his canine wish list.

He trots over to a tall plastic snowman and proceeds to lift a leg.

"Gah!" I give his leash a quick tug. "Would you stop? You're embarrassing yourself," I tell him as he attempts to mark his territory. "This is why we can't have nice things."

"At least he's enjoying himself," Niki says, although she's not exactly focused on dog-wrangling duties.

My sister has wandered into the nostalgic Christmas section and is currently holding a vintage-looking doll in one hand while trying on a sparkly red tutu with the other.

“Do you think this makes me look festive or just desperate for attention?”

“Both,” I reply, scanning the store for anyone who might be the elusive Gabe Esposito. “We’re here on a mission, remember? Find the disgruntled Christmas shop owner who might have murdered—or at least had a motive to murder—Nicholas and maybe even Enzo Bianchi.”

“I’m multitasking,” Niki insists, twirling in the tutu that’s now riding up to her boobs. “I can solve murders and look fabulous at the very same time.”

“Try not to pee on anything,” I say as I hunt down a saleswoman arranging a nativity scene where the Three Wise Men appear to be offering gifts from the store’s clearance section. Her name tag reads “Noel,” which seems almost too on-the-nose for a Christmas shop employee, but ’tis the season.

“Excuse me,” I say, lightening my voice an octave and offering a quick wave. It’s sad I have to try so hard to be friendly. “Is Gabe Esposito available? I have some questions about, uh, some custom ornaments.”

Noel’s candy cane earrings jingle as she shakes her head. “Sorry, he’s not in at the moment,” she says as she chews away on the gum in her mouth. “Gabe always cuts out early on Saturday nights. It’s sort of his thing.”

“Any idea where I might find him?” I press. “It’s kind of important—it’s sort of a custom ornament emergency, if you know what I mean.”

Noel glances over her shoulder as if checking for eavesdropping elves before leaning my way. Her breath smells like peppermint schnapps barely masked by the cinnamon

gum she's chewing. It's nice to know how she gets so holly and jolly.

She nods my way. "He likes to spend his free time and his money at some sleazy gentlemen's club in Leeds called Red?—"

"Red Satin?"

Her eyes widen. "You know it?"

"More intimately than I'd like to admit," I mutter, already turning to collect my sister and pooch. "Niki! Put down the nutcracker and grab Watson. We're heading to Leeds."

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I guess you could call Red Satin Gentlemen's Club my almost workplace.

Niki, Watson, and I hightail it to the armpit of Vermont in less than fifteen minutes. I credit the icy roads for expediting the effort.

Remember me telling you that just last year when I got laid off from my cushy tech job, I was so desperate to avoid moving back to our parents' house that I went crawling to the biggest crime lord I know—my dear Uncle Jimmy.

He gave me two options: dance at his strip club or hunt down his enemies. And seeing that I'm no fan of public nudity, I opted for murder.

My mortality rate might be nil so far, but Loretta Sleazzari just might change that ratio.

Yeah, this is the place where all of my stripping dreams would have come true if I had opted for what was behind red door number one.

Red Satin Gentlemen's Club sits at the end of a row of equally disreputable establishments with its neon sign flickering like a crimson beacon for the morally flexible.

Inside, there's far more crimson than should ever be legal—red walls, red carpet, and red lights, hence the red light district nickname it's garnered for itself, casting a bordello glow over the perverted proceedings.

The music is loud, the lighting is dim, and the scent of cheap cologne mingles with

spilled beer, debauchery, and the unmistakable aroma of world-renowned nachos being ferried to tables by women wearing nothing but strategically placed pasties and G-strings.

“Those nachos are legitimately delicious,” Niki practically drools as she eyes a passing tray. Watson gives a sharp woof as if he agreed, too. “Do you think Uncle Jimmy would be upset if we helped ourselves to a platter or two on the house?”

“Considering he still thinks I successfully offed Lorenzo Bianchi, I think we’ve got some nacho credit to spare.”

The club is packed with the usual Saturday night crowd—a sea of drunken men waving dollar bills at the small army of women dressed as a naughty Mrs. Claus—or rather undressed while twirling around poles to a bass-heavy remix of “Santa Baby.”

I take a few steps deeper inside with Watson trotting happily beside me, when something—or rather, someone—stops me dead in my tracks.

Watson barks up a storm. On second thought, he’s already drooling over the girls bouncing around on stage juggling what he must think are flesh-colored volleyballs. And boy, does he want to play. He really is such a boy.

“Isn’t that Cooper?” Niki says, pointing toward a corner booth.

“It sure is,” I growl as I spot my hot detective boyfriend seated with a brunette with some seriously offensive red highlights that look as if they were applied with a Sharpie. “Would you look at that hair? That’s who he chooses to cheat on me with?”

Niki squints at the woman. “She really should see Mom at Hairway to Heaven.”

My mother, who works part-time at my aunt’s hair salon, would have a field day

fixing whatever tragedy is happening on that woman's head. But hair disasters are the least of my concerns right now as the crowd parts slightly, giving me a clearer view of Cooper's companion.

"Holy cannoli, that's Loretta Sassafra!" I hiss, recognizing Cooper's sister—the very same Loretta whose name now burns a hole in my memory (and a slightly singed spot in the snow at the Jolly Holly Tree Lot).

Niki grabs my arm and attempts to pull me in their direction. "We should go say hello. This is too good to pass up."

I'm about to reluctantly follow when I spot another figure seated alone at a table near the stage—a heavysset man with dark hair and a genuine white beard that makes him look like Santa on his day off.

Gabriel Esposito, in the flesh, looking significantly less jolly than his Christmas shop persona would suggest. He's got the requisite platter of nachos in front of him, a finger length of something brown in a glass, and a prime view up Mrs. Claus's skirt.

"Change of plans," I say, redirecting Niki toward Gabe's table. "There's our target."

We weave through the crowd, dodging wandering hands and sloshing drinks until we reach Gabe's table. Without waiting for an invitation, I slide into the seat across from him with Niki following suit.

"Hey there, Hot Stuff," I say with a wink as Gabe looks up from his whiskey, shocked and definitely not thrilled by our sudden appearance.

But in three seconds flat, Watson has jumped into his arms as he struggles to get a better look at the women on stage and his tail manages to slap poor Gabe silly from utter excitement.

Gabe belts out a hearty, ho, ho, ho , and it sounds like a genuine cackle on his part as Watson licks his face.

“What are a couple of nice girls like you doing in a sleazy joint like this?” he asks once he’s recovered.

Niki snags a nacho from his plate. “Our uncle owns the place.”

Gabe’s face grows pale and he nearly tosses Watson out of his lap. “Your uncle? As in Jimmy ‘The Candy Man’ Canelli?”

Uncle Jimmy’s nickname—earned not from any Willy Wonka-like generosity but from his habit of “sweetening the deal” for business partners right before they mysteriously vanished—has always struck me as inappropriately whimsical for a man who once threatened to feed someone their own kneecaps.

“Yup,” Niki says, leaning in hard. “So you’d better think twice before lying to us about the questions we’re about to ask.”

“Good grief,” I groan, resisting the urge to slide under the table. “Why do I bring you along again?”

“Because I’m the pretty one,” Niki replies without missing a beat. “You’re the brains, I’m the beauty, and Watson is our muscle.”

I turn my attention back to Gabe, who’s looking increasingly like he regrets every life choice that led him to this moment.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” I say. “How well did you know Nicholas Bianchi?”

Gabe takes a fortifying swig of his whiskey. “He was a business rival, nothing more.

He was trying to put me out of business.”

I tip my head his way. “Care to elaborate?”

“Look, I’ve been running Miracle on Main Street for five years now, ever since I burned out in corporate marketing and decided to follow my Christmas dream.

” His tone suggests the dream has since turned into a nightmare.

“Everything was fine until Nicholas decided to open a pop-up Christmas store during the holidays—selling the same merchandise as me but cheaper because he could afford to take a loss.”

“That’s not very holly jolly of him,” Niki says as she steals another nacho—with just the right amount of orange goo on it, might I add.

“It gets worse,” Gabe continues, warming to his tale of Christmas treachery. “He was planning to open a permanent toy and Christmas store in Honey Hollow. He would have put me out of business within a month.”

“So, you had words with him at the Jubilee,” I say.

Gabe shifts uncomfortably. “We exchanged some heated opinions, yeah. But I didn’t kill him, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“And what about his brother?” I ask casually.

“Lorenzo?” Gabe snorts. “That old fossil was worse than Nicholas. At least Nicholas had the decency to tell me to my face he was going to destroy me. Lorenzo would just smile and pretend he wasn’t bankrolling the whole operation.”

“Sounds like you had motives for both brothers checking out early,” Niki observes while helping herself to yet another glob of orange goo.

“Hey, I didn’t shed any tears when I heard the news, but I didn’t help them along either.” Gabe’s eyes narrow. “If you’re looking for someone with a real grudge, talk to Holly Bellini. She and Nicholas had some kind of financial arrangement that went south.”

“Holly the event planner?” I ask, recalling the perfectionistic woman from the Jubilee.

“Yeah. And there was that older woman, too—the one who was always hovering around him at events. Sweet as sugar to your face but cold as ice when you turned around. Those two had a history with the guy, if you know what I mean. They’ll both be at the auction at the Evergreen tomorrow night, as will I. ”

Before I can press for more details, the music changes to a thumping remix of “Deck the Halls,” and the stage lights sweep across the club.

The current performers exit the stage and begin moving through the audience, selecting victims—I mean, participants—for what appears to be an interactive portion of the show.

“And now the real fun begins,” Gabe shouts with glee.

A woman in a Mrs. Claus outfit that’s been reduced to little more than a red bikini and a Santa hat zeroes in on our table.

Before I can protest, Watson is scooped up by one performer, Niki is pulled to her feet by another, and I’m grabbed by a third.

Gabe spontaneously hops out of his chair and chases a fourth woman who looks as if she's trying to evade him.

“Ladies and gentlemen”—the DJ announces over the speakers— “give it up for our brave volunteers!”

“This is not how I planned to spend my Saturday night,” I hiss to Niki as we're paraded toward the stage.

“Speak for yourself,” she replies with a grin, already playing to the crowd.

As we're maneuvered onto the raunchy runway, I crash directly into a solid wall of muscles and expensive cologne. I look up and lock eyes with none other than Cooper Knox, who appears equally surprised to find himself on stage.

“Fancy meeting you here,” I say, despite the fact that we're surrounded by half-naked Mrs. Clauses and an audience screaming take it off .

Cooper's expression darkens as he frowns, and I'll admit, it's a vexingly good look on him. “I can say the same.” His eyes darting to Watson, who's being paraded around like a furry little king by one of the dancers. “What exactly are you doing here?”

Before I can turn the question around and point it at him, glitter rains down from somewhere above us and Watson barks with unbridled joy. But it's what I see just past my happy-go-lucky puppy that has my blood running cold.

I get the feeling that explaining why I'm interrogating suspects at my uncle's strip club might be the least of my problems tonight.

Because across the room, at the VIP entrance, I spot Uncle Jimmy himself—and he's

heading straight for us with the determined look of a man who's just discovered someone's been playing detective instead of assassin.

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The bass thumps through the floorboards beneath my feet, vibrating up my legs as Cooper and I lock eyes amid the chaos of Santa's Naughty List Review .

Red lights sweep across his face, painting him in alternating shadows and crimson highlights that make him look both dangerous and absurdly attractive.

The smell of cheap beer, cheaper cologne, and nachos creates a heady perfume that's distinctly Red Satin—a scent I'd hoped to never associate with my hot boyfriend. But here we are.

I grab Cooper's arm and yank him toward the steps at the side of the stage just as Uncle Jimmy cuts through the crowd.

We hardly make it off the last step when Uncle Jimmy reaches us.

"Effie ," he booms, clapping me on the shoulder with enough force to make my knees buckle. "Nice to see my favorite niece taking the initiative." His eyes flick toward Cooper before sliding past him to where Loretta still sits at her table, now looking pointedly in any direction but ours.

"I see you lured your next beneficiary here." Uncle Jimmy's smile has all the warmth of a great white sizing up a seal. "Finish this project before the clock strikes midnight on Christmas and I'll make sure your stocking is full of some serious green."

He turns his attention to Cooper, extending a hand as if they're meeting at a church social rather than a strip club with an entire troop of half-naked Mrs. Clauses gyrating in the background.

“Detective Knox. Congrats on the almost nuptials. Better luck next time. I was really looking forward to that cake.”

Cooper’s hand engulfs Uncle Jimmy’s in what I suspect is a grip tight enough to crush walnuts, though my uncle doesn’t flinch.

“Thanks,” Cooper replies with a tone suggesting he’d rather eat glass than continue this conversation.

Uncle Jimmy gives us both a nod before melting back into the crowd and heading for the VIP section, leaving behind the scent of expensive cologne and impending doom.

“And I was really looking forward to what was supposed to happen before the cake,” I mutter with the taste of bitterness coating my tongue.

“Me, too.” He leans in. “Would you care to explain why Jimmy looked at my sister when he mentioned your next project?”

I watch the horror dawn across Cooper’s face as he connects the dots—one hitwoman plus one lucrative project due before Christmas equals a very dead Loretta Sorry-to-See-You-Go-so-Soon under the tree. The muscle in his jaw ticks like a time bomb.

I’m pretty sure that Cooper knows about my moonlighting activities after I saw my face in the middle of a murder board up in his office.

We haven’t had the awkward “so you murder people for a living” conversation yet, but we have since adopted a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding my burgeoning career as a would-be assassin.

It’s the kind of compromise that relationship counselors probably wouldn’t endorse, but it’s been working for us. Until now.

“I’m sorry,” I shout over the music, which has switched to a dubstep remix of “Little Drummer Boy.”

Cooper’s eyes widen to the point they might pop out of his skull. “You’re sorry? Please tell me you have no intention of wrapping up that little project before the fat man comes down the chimney.”

“Okay, I’ll wait until after,” I tease, although my attempt at humor clearly misses the mark as Cooper looks like he’s on the verge of a coronary event. “What? He did just offer to line my stocking with some serious cash.” I shrug, and Cooper’s frown deepens despite my financially sound argument.

He grabs my elbow and steers me toward an empty table in a relatively quieter corner of the club. A waitress materializes right on cue and deposits a heaping platter of nachos before disappearing back into the red-tinted darkness.

“You can relax. Loretta Sashimi is safe—for now.” I bite into a nacho loaded with cheese, jalapenos, and most likely a questionable health inspection score.

“You know I wouldn’t shoot her with so much as the camera on my phone.

What were you two doing here tonight, anyway?

And don’t say sibling bonding. I’m disturbed enough by what my eyes have seen tonight.

” I glance toward the stage where Niki is now twerking alongside a six-foot-four Mrs. Claus while Watson prances around them, barking with delirious joy.

Cooper sighs, running a hand through his hair in a way that makes his locks stick up adorably in the front. “I was getting information about Enzo. Loretta claims she had

nothing to do with his death, but considering she almost stood to inherit everything...”

I gasp hard. “Did she do it? Is she responsible for the double homicide?”

He frowns my way once again. I’m sensing a theme.

“I’m not quantifying that with an answer. Although, toxicology found the same substance in Enzo’s bloodstream,” he says, lowering his voice despite the fact that the music would drown out a space shuttle launch. “Pentobarbital. Same as Nicholas.”

I inch back in my seat. “Sounds as if we’ve got a serial killer on our hands.”

Cooper gives a solemn nod. “It wasn’t you, was it?”

“No, but let’s just say someone beat me to the punch last night,” I admit, then quickly add. “With Enzo, not Nicholas. Nicholas wasn’t on my... to-do list.”

“Sorry about that, I think,” Cooper says, tilting his head in the way he does when he’s trying to reconcile Detective Knox with Cooper Who Dates a Hitwoman.

“So what did Gabe have to say?” Cooper asks, masterfully changing the subject while demolishing a nacho loaded with guacamole.

I fill him in on my conversation with Mr. Esposito, including his allegations about Holly Bellini’s financial arrangement.

“And then there’s Stella Martinelli”—I continue—“who volunteers at the Jolly Holly Tree Lot. She swears she barely knew Nicholas, but I caught her arguing with him at the Jubilee. And when I pushed her on it, she claimed it was about fundraising auction bids.”

He nods. “Because nothing says passionate argument like disagreeing over minimum bids for a charity basket.” Cooper nods thoughtfully.

“They all have motives of sorts. Holly loses business if Nicholas pulls funding from her events. Gabe’s Christmas shop goes under if Nicholas opens a competing store.

And Stella... well, I’m not sure what her angle is yet, but arguing about charity auctions sounds minuscule.

” Cooper pushes the almost empty nacho platter to the side.

“Leave the rest of the investigation to me, okay? This is officially a double homicide, which means the sheriff’s department takes priority. ”

“Gladly.” I’m not sure if I’m telling the truth, but Cooper doesn’t need to know that. “Besides, tomorrow night is the big Christmas Eve Eve shindig at the Evergreen Manor.” I place my hand on his, my fingers tracing the veins on the back of his hand. “Cooper Knox, would you be my plus-one?”

“I’d be honored.”

“Great. I’ll wear my least murderous outfit, and you can leave your handcuffs at home.” I pause, reconsidering. “Actually, bring the handcuffs. Just for recreational purposes.”

Cooper’s lips curve into a wicked grin before he sobers up quickly. “Why would Jimmy want my sister out of the picture, Effie?”

I sigh, wishing I had a good answer. “I’ll get the dirty details, but first...” I lean across the table, closing the distance between us until our lips meet.

The kiss is hot enough to melt the polar ice caps, a sharp contrast to the Christmas-themed debauchery happening around us. Cooper tastes like nachos and promises that I'm not sure either of us can keep, but for this moment, I don't care.

When we finally come up for air, I spot Niki making her way toward us, Watson trotting at her heels with what appears to be a sequined pasty stuck to his fur.

"Time to go," I tell Cooper, who nods in agreement.

We collect Watson, detach the inappropriate souvenir from his golden coat, and make our way through the crowd toward the exit. The cold December air hits like a slap after the overheated club, but it's a welcome relief.

"Your place?" Cooper asks as we reach the parking lot.

"Thought you'd never ask." I grin up at him.

We hightail it out of there because I'm about to do my best impression of a ho, ho, ho. Well, almost my best impression.

As we drive away from Red Satin, I can't help but glance in the rearview mirror at the neon sign growing smaller in the distance.

Two brothers dead from the same poison, a lineup of suspects with solid motives, my uncle's hit assignment on Cooper's sister, and a looming Christmas Eve Eve party where all the players will converge.

I'd bet my last candy cane that someone is planning to add another body to their naughty list before Santa slides down the chimney—and this time, I might not be able to blame it on natural causes or someone else's handiwork.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

The Evergreen Manor radiates holiday spirit with the subtlety of a Times Square billboard. Think lots of crystal, lots of bling, and lots of holiday spirit coming straight from the credit cards ready to kick this auction up a notch.

The ballroom practically vibrates with holiday opulence, from the twenty-foot Douglas fir dripping with crystal ornaments and velvet bows to the forest of smaller trees flanking the dance floor, each decorated in a different color scheme.

Crystal chandeliers—fourteen in all—cast a warm, golden glow over everything and everyone, making even Honey Hollow’s most notorious gossips look angelic. That would be Suze. There’s even a snowman ice sculpture situated in the midst of all the dessert tables that’s at least four feet tall.

The smell of gingerbread, peppermint, and pine mingles with expensive perfumes, creating a sensory assault that screams Christmas is at hand.

“Carol of the Bells” blasts through the speakers and every surface not occupied by auction items sparkles with tinsel, holly, or miniature white lights. It’s as if a Christmas bomb detonated in the ballroom, then someone sprinkled diamond dust over the mess for good measure.

“Well, don’t you look hot-to-trot,” Carlotta coos, appearing at my side in a red sequined dress that makes her look like she’s auditioning for the role of Sexy Mrs. Claus: The Vegas Years .

The neckline plunges so dramatically it’s practically introducing itself to her navel.

“Nice to see you wearing something besides those elf pasties from the community center,” she teases.

“You clean up nice, Toots,” Aunt Cat agrees, sidling up on my other side.

Her silver lamé pantsuit reflects so much light she could probably be used as a backup generator if the power went out.

“Though I still say you should have gone with the plunging neckline. Detective Dreamy wouldn’t have known what hit him. ”

“I prefer keeping my assets under wraps in public,” I reply, smoothing down my emerald green cocktail dress that apparently is quite the spectacle. “Besides, the last time I showed that much cleavage, someone died face-first in it.”

Carlotta lifts her champagne glass my way. “Now that’s a compliment to the girls—a couple of lethal weapons if ever there were some.”

“Hear, hear,” I say.

Suze and Lily materialize from the crowd, both looking festive in their holiday best. Suze’s navy sequined dress makes her look like a starry night sky, while Lily’s red and white striped number gives strong candy cane vibes without crossing too much into costume territory.

“Have you tried Lottie’s mini gingerbread cheesecakes?” Lily asks, already halfway through one. “They’re criminal. I’ve eaten six, and I only got here twenty minutes ago.”

“Pace yourself,” Suze advises. “You’ve still got seven dessert stations to hit, and that’s not counting the Italian cookie table.”

The dessert spread along one wall showcases Lottie's finest creations from the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery with towering platters of holiday cookies, bite-sized pecan tarts, peppermint fudge squares, gingerbread houses too pretty to eat (although that's never stopped anyone before), and at least four different varieties of cheesecake—eggnog, gingerbread, peppermint swirl, and double chocolate—all decorated with a festive flair.

Just looking at it all adds five pounds to my hips.

Around the perimeter of the ballroom, auction tables display everything from vacation packages to jewelry to gift baskets the size of small cars.

Bidders mill about, sipping champagne and scribbling on sheets with escalating fervor.

It's a silent auction, but the competitive glares being exchanged over certain items are anything but quiet.

In the center of the action, Santa's throne—a gold monstrosity that looks like something out of *Game of Thrones* but with fewer skulls and more tinsel—sits occupied by none other than Gabriel Esposito, who appears to have found his true calling.

His white beard is fluffy as can be, and the line of children waiting to sit on his lap stretches halfway across the room.

The irony of the Christmas shop owner playing Santa after complaining about Nicholas Bianchi usurping his Santa role isn't lost on me.

I spot Lottie across the room with Noah and Everett flanking her like particularly attractive bookends.

Lottie's strapless crimson gown hugs her curves in a way that makes both men look as if they've forgotten how to breathe.

Of course, Noah and Everett look far too dapper for their britches, both in classic black tuxedos that have every woman in the room paying them the attention they deserve.

"Merry Christmas Eve Eve ," I sing as I come upon them.

"Eve," Suze adds.

"Eve Eve ," Lily corrects.

"Eve Eve Eve," Aunt Cat concludes with a solemn nod, like she's completing a sacred ritual.

Lottie laughs and manages to sound as warm as fresh-baked cookies. "Merry whatever-number-of-Eves-we're-at to you, too. Any updates on the Santa Slayings?"

"Is that what we're calling them now?" I ask.

"The Bianchi Brothers Bludgeoning has a better ring to it," Noah suggests.

"Except they weren't bludgeoned," Everett points out. "They were poisoned."

"The Pentobarbital Pair-Off doesn't have the same snap," Noah admits.

"I've got nothing," I confess, snagging a flute of champagne from a passing server. "Cooper is playing his cards close to his vest, and I've got my own... complications to deal with."

Like how to avoid assassinating my boyfriend's sister while still appeasing my homicidal uncle.

“Speaking of complications”—Lottie nods toward the dance floor— “I wouldn't mind busting a move.”

Sure enough, Noah and Everett exchange challenging looks, before each extending a hand toward Lottie.

“Dance with me?” they ask in unison.

“Maybe I'll just dance with both of you,” Lottie suggests with a mischievous smile, taking both their hands as they lead her toward the dance floor with expressions that suggest they've won the lottery but have to share the prize.

“That woman is playing with fire,” Suze observes.

“And having the time of her life doing it,” Lily adds admiringly.

The crowd shifts, and I spot Niki weaving through partygoers with the determined expression of someone on a mission. And that mission, apparently, is dragging Loretta Salamander directly to me.

“Look who I found hiding by the dessert table,” Niki announces, clearly pleased with herself.

My sister's outfit—a silver mini-dress with candy cane striped tights and jingle bell earrings—makes her look like an elf who decided to hit the club after her North Pole shift ended. “I thought you two might want to chat.”

I make a face at my insane sister before switching my attention to Cooper's equally

insane sister.

Loretta's dress can only be described as "weaponized holiday cheer"—a red sequined number with a neckline cut down to her navel, a slit up to her hip, and enough sparkle to cause a seizure.

Her red hair is teased higher than an '80s prom queen, and her makeup looks as if it was applied with the goal of using every product in the store.

She's not so big on subtlety, but then neither is my own sister.

"Loretta." I force a smile that probably looks more like a grimace. "Merry Christmas. How are you holding up?"

"As if you care," she sniffs, clutching her champagne flute like she's considering using it as a weapon. "I know you've got it out for me."

More than she realizes.

"I've got questions, not a vendetta," I clarify, although Uncle Jimmy might disagree. "I was wondering what other connections you might have had to Enzo or his brother."

Loretta looks affronted by the thought. "I'm not into threesomes, if that's what you're implying."

"I'm implying that you were somehow connected to them in a way that could, let's just say, make certain people very, very angry." Like my uncle, who presumably had reasons beyond just being a psychopath to put her on his hit list.

She gasps hard. "Listen here, you walking, talking bad luck charm." Loretta pauses

long enough to jab a scarlet fingernail in my direction. “Just because two men dropped dead around you, doesn’t mean I had anything to do with it. Enzo loved me. Nicholas approved of our relationship. End of story.”

“And coincidentally the end of their lives,” Niki mutters, and Loretta glares her way as if she were about to cause yet a third homicide in Honey Hollow before the big present-laden day.

Loretta sniffs. “The only person who wasn’t thrilled was that busybody from the tree lot who was always hovering around them,” she continues, tossing her hair with enough force to disturb nearby orbiting satellites.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to stuff my face with cannoli and forget this conversation ever happened. ”

She storms off toward the dessert table with the determined stride of a woman on a sugar mission.

“Those cannolis do look amazing,” Niki admits, already moving to follow her. “Don’t wait up, sis.”

I sigh as they both disappear into the crowd.

I crane my neck into the crowd and spot both Holly Bellini and Stella Martinelli mingling among the who’s who of Honey Hollow.

They’re both still on my suspect list, along with Gabe, but so far, everyone seems to have motive, means, and opportunity.

It’s like playing a bad game of Clue because all the cards say, “It could be anyone, anywhere, with anything.” Although the anything is most certainly the pheno-what’s-

it-called.

“You look like you could use a dance partner,” a familiar voice says behind me, sending a pleasant shiver up my spine.

I turn to find Cooper looking criminally handsome in a black tux that makes his shoulders seem even broader and his wavy brown hair even more touchable. Watson sits obediently at his side, sporting a tiny red bow tie collar that coordinates with Cooper’s.

The event invitation had specifically mentioned “pets welcome,” and it seems half of Honey Hollow brought their furry companions, all decked out in holiday finery.

“You clean up nice, Detective,” I say, leaning in for a kiss that tastes like peppermint and more of those naughty promises we made to one another just a few short hours ago.

“Last night was wonderful,” Cooper murmurs against my lips before pulling back slightly.

Last night.

The memory brings heat to my cheeks despite the fact that we mostly just made out like love-sick teenagers, ate pizza straight from the box, and watched three shoot-’em-up flicks in a row. If there was more, I’ll never tell.

“We should do it again sometime,” I suggest, linking my arm through his. “Preferably when we’re not investigating a double homicide and I’m not being pressured to add to the body count.”

Cooper winces. “About that. Have you figured out why Jimmy’s targeting Loretta?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it. My leading theory is that he’s just naturally homicidal and drew her name from a hat.”

“Very reassuring,” Cooper deadpans just as his phone buzzes. He checks the screen and his expression shifts. “I need to take this. Toxicology has more findings.”

“Go,” I say, waving him off. “Catch the bad guys. Save Christmas. Just try not to arrest any of my relatives in the process.”

“No promises,” he replies, already moving toward a quieter corner. “Stay out of trouble. And try not to kill any of my relatives in the process.”

“No promises,” I echo and wince at the thought, but luckily he’s already out of earshot.

Once Cooper disappears into the festive crowd, I scan the room for my next target.

And sure enough, there by the enormous Christmas tree at the front of the ballroom stands Holly Bellini, looking uncharacteristically subdued in a black dress with just a subtle touch of holiday sparkle.

Unlike at the Jubilee, where she radiated a calm efficiency, tonight she seems distracted with her gaze constantly shifting toward the entrance as if waiting for someone.

I straighten my shoulders, plaster on my most innocent smile, and make my way toward her, while snagging another champagne flute for courage.

Holly Bellini has some explaining to do about her falling-out with Nicholas Bianchi, and I intend to get answers—even if I have to spread a little Christmas fear to do it.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

I weave through the crowd toward Holly, pausing briefly at some of the auction tables that line my path.

The holiday spirit has apparently loosened purse strings across Honey Hollow, with silent auction bids skyrocketing to ridiculous heights.

The “Christmas in Aspen” package—complete with luxury cabin rental and private ski lessons—already has bids nearing five figures.

A gift basket featuring artisanal maple products shaped into Christmas figures (including a surprisingly detailed maple sugar Santa that looks exceptionally delicious) has sparked a bidding war between two elderly women who are now glaring at each other from opposite sides of the table.

I pass a jewelry display where a diamond snowflake pendant glitters under a spotlight, its price tag sufficient to fund a small country’s Christmas party.

Next to it sits a “Whiskey Wonderland” collection featuring bottles so rare they should come with their own security detail.

The “Ultimate Italian Christmas Feast” package—private chef, wine pairings, and imported delicacies—has Uncle Jimmy’s distinctive scrawl on the bid sheet.

No surprise there. The man loves his authentic lasagna almost as much as he loves ordering hits on people.

A “Christmas Morning Magic” basket catches my eye—packed with gourmet coffee,

Belgian waffles mix, and what appears to be a bottle of premium bourbon because nothing says holiday breakfast like spiked coffee while unwrapping presents.

The current high bidder is none other than Cooper, which sends a little flutter through my chest.

Does this mean he thinks we'll be spending Christmas morning together? That's either adorably optimistic or tragically misguided, given my current assignment from Uncle Jimmy.

I finally reach Holly Bellini, who stands beside the towering Christmas tree, her glass of champagne clutched like a lifeline.

Unlike her festive ensemble at the Jubilee, tonight she's opted for a sleek black cocktail dress with only a subtle sprinkling of silver beading at the neckline to acknowledge the holiday season.

Her auburn hair is swept into an elegant updo, but her usually perfect makeup can't quite hide the shadows under her eyes or the tension in her jaw.

"Merry Christmas Eve Eve ," I greet her, sidling up with a smile that I hope conceals my suspicions.

Holly startles slightly and causes some of her champagne to slosh over the rim of her glass.

"Oh! Effie, hello. I didn't see you there." Her gaze darts around the room as if she's mapping escape routes. "Lovely event, isn't it?"

"Very festive," I agree. "Though I imagine organizing it was quite the challenge after what happened at the Jubilee."

Her smile tightens. “We event planners are nothing if not adaptable. The show must go on, especially during the holidays.”

“Speaking of the Jubilee...” I say, diving right in. “I saw you serving drinks that night. You served us all a round of eggnog. You made sure Nick got a certain glass because you said he was lactose intolerant.”

Holly’s champagne glass freezes halfway to her lips. “I was just being considerate.”

“Very considerate.” I nod, taking a sip of my own champagne. “But I can’t help wondering if you had other motivations. You knew Nicholas was planning to withdraw his festival sponsorship, and if that happened, you would lose your reputation and future contracts if the festival flopped.”

Her eyes enlarge to the size of sugar cookies, the green in her irises practically glowing with panic. “Effie, I swear I didn’t...”

“You didn’t what? Poison him with pentobarbital?” I nod. “I think maybe you did. You certainly had reason to.”

Holly takes a sharp breath before glancing around as if to ensure no one can overhear us. The music ratchets up a notch, providing a convenient cover for our little murder chat.

“Yes, I hated him,” she admits, her voice barely audible above the music.

“He was going to cost me my career. Do you have any idea how hard I’ve worked to build my reputation in this town?”

Ten years of kissing up to every wealthy resident, coordinating every baby shower, anniversary party, and dog birthday.

Then Nicholas threatens to pull funding for all future events because I wouldn't let his snot-nosed great-nephew play the lead in the Christmas pageant! ”

I raise an eyebrow. “That’s what the argument was about? A pageant role?”

“The boy can’t act, can’t sing, and is terrified of crowds,” Holly hisses. “But Nicholas insisted he play Baby Jesus—a speaking role in our production, mind you. When I cast another child, he threatened to destroy me professionally.”

“Sounds like a motive for murder to me,” I comment, watching her expression like a hawk.

“Look, I didn’t send him to the big toy shop in the sky,” Holly shoots back with her professional composure cracking. “Although if I knew who did, I’d gladly shake their hand on a job well done.”

She downs the rest of her champagne in one impressive gulp.

“It’s not like I’d have access to medications like that.

Do I look like a doctor or a nurse to you?

” She sighs, adjusting her dress with a movement that suggests her need for control.

“Besides, I was visible to half the town during the entire event. When would I have had time to orchestrate his death? I was running around putting out fires—literal ones, after someone’s child set the tinsel ablaze. ”

Her explanation makes a frustrating amount of sense. Holly Bellini may have wanted Nicholas dead, but her opportunity window seems narrower than my chances of surviving Christmas without finding another body.

“Fine,” I concede. “But if not you, then who?”

Holly’s gaze drifts toward the dessert table. “I don’t know, but I’d start with the people who had access to the kind of drugs that could do the job.”

She checks her watch and makes a show of being startled by the time. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to check on the auction. The bidding closes in twenty minutes.” With a tight smile, Holly melts into the crowd, leaving me with an empty champagne flute and a head full of questions.

Wait, did she say nurse? Why does that sound familiar?

The realization hits me like a snowball to the face.

“Oh my word!” How could I have missed this?

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

I find Watson begging near the dessert table and reward him with a sugar cookie before finding a dark corner for the two of us to do a little internet research in private.

I look up old photos of every Honey Hollow Christmas gala going as far back as time itself and gasp at what I find. My mind races faster than reindeer on performance-enhancing carrots.

Watson squirms in my arms with his nose twitching as if he's picked up the scent of both Christmas cookies and cold-blooded murder.

"Easy, boy," I whisper. "We've got a killer to confront."

I weave through the crowd, passing a collection of extravagant gift baskets that could feed a small nation.

One features exotic coffee beans harvested by specially trained monkeys—because apparently, regular coffee picked by humans isn't fancy enough for Honey Hollow's elite.

Another offers "Twelve Days of Christmas Wines" with bottles whose prices make my credit card whimper from inside my clutch.

An ornate sleigh filled with hand-carved wooden ornaments catches my eye next—each one depicting a scene from Honey Hollow's history, including a suspiciously flattering rendition of Mayor Nash winning last year's chili cook-off.

The current bid would cover my rent for three months, proving once again that

nothing inspires financial irresponsibility quite like the Christmas spirit.

I'm about to sidestep a table featuring "Santa's Workshop Experience"—complete with a private North Pole tour and elf costume fitting that seems more punishment than prize—when a manicured hand clamps down on my arm.

I turn to find Loretta with her face flushed either from champagne, rage, or the effort of keeping that towering hairstyle upright in defiance of gravity.

"Fine! You want to know my connection to the Bianchi brothers?" she slurs her words just enough for me to know I'm about to get the truth.

"I'll tell you," she snarls, each word dripping with disdain like icicles melting under an interrogation spotlight.

"Nicholas had some former lover who was promised a portion of the Bianchi fortune years ago. He recently informed her he was changing his will to leave everything to his brother Enzo instead. And Enzo was going to leave everything to his wife—which was going to be me! Are you happy? I was the one who would have walked away with everything if it wasn't for you and your ridiculously dumb luck.

We were just at the tree lot hours before that ill-fated meeting with the Grim Reaper at the Velvet Fox Hotel.

We hired a photographer and reenacted the entire proposal.

I was going to use one of the pictures as our wedding invite, and yet again you ruined that for me, too. "

She barks the last words directly into my face, close enough that I can identify at least three different types of alcohol on her breath, before storming off in a cloud of

expensive perfume and entitlement.

I blink at the space where Hurricane Loretta just blew through. “Well,” I say to Watson, who looks equally stunned. “I guess we know who won’t be sending us a Christmas card this year.” Or a wedding invite, but that was sort of a given.

Watson’s only response is a confused head tilt that somehow perfectly captures my own mental state at the moment.

But with this new piece of the puzzle, I resume my search for my number one suspect.

And there she is. I spot Stella Martinelli across the ballroom, chatting with a small group of guests.

Her silver-streaked dark hair is styled in soft waves, and she’s wearing a festive red velvet dress with delicate white lace trim at the collar and cuffs—Mrs. Claus goes high fashion.

A glittering Christmas tree brooch adorns her lapel, twinkling under the chandeliers with each animated gesture she makes.

I watch as she excuses herself from the group and drifts toward a quieter corner of the ballroom, stopping at an auction table that’s currently unattended.

Perfect.

Watson and I trek over with my heels clicking against the polished floor like a bomb detonating with my every step.

“Hello, Stella,” I say, breathless, while adjusting Watson in my arms.

She turns with a startled gasp, one hand flying to clutch the pearl necklace at her throat. “Oh hello, Effie. You nearly scared the ghost right out of me.” Her laugh shrills through the air, sounding forced and all around artificial.

“Sorry about that,” I offer with a smile that dies upon initiating. “Enjoying the gala?”

“It’s lovely.” She nods, her gaze darting past me as if checking escape routes. “The Woman’s League has outdone themselves this year.”

“It’s certainly been illuminating,” I agree, thinking of all the pictures I just perused. “I’ve been learning all sorts of interesting things about Honey Hollow’s past.”

Her smile remains frozen in place. “History is so fascinating, isn’t it? Although I prefer to look forward, not back.”

I absently roll my shoulder and force myself to wince. “Speaking of looking back, I’ve been having this annoying shoulder pain lately. It feels like someone is jabbing candy canes right underneath my shoulder blade.”

“Ooh .” Stella’s expression shifts to professional concern, her professional persona sliding into place seamlessly. “Does it feel stiff in the morning? Do you have a limited range of motion?”

“Exactly.” I nod. “Like my arm is stuck in a chimney.”

“You’ll need a good muscle relaxer for that,” she says with authority.

“I had both shoulders freeze on me—one year on the left, another year on the right. It took six months to freeze and six to get back to normal for each if you can believe it. Come to find out, frozen shoulder is a symptom of menopause. And you look as if that’s the stage of life you’re about to enter into. ”

Why, that little witch!

I'm about to tell her what's what and who's going to prison, but I think better of it and blink a smile instead.

"I still get a stiff shoulder once in a while," she adds, demonstrating a stretch that looks more like a bizarre yoga move.

"That sounds like something a medical professional would say—like maybe a nurse," I suggest casually, watching her reaction.

Pride blooms across her face like a poinsettia. "Why, I am one. Or at least I used to be."

"That's right, you mentioned you were a retired nurse," I lie, knowing full well she never shared this detail. Although she did mention the telemetry unit. How in the world did I let that little detail slip?

I'm really losing my touch in my old age.

She gives a proud nod. "Forty-two years devoted to healing and helping others. Most of it at Honey Hollow General Hospital. In fact, I come from such a long line of medical professionals, there's a hospital satellite location that bears my family name.

There's nothing more rewarding than a life spent in service. "

"But you didn't help Nicholas, did you? Or Enzo, for that matter." I take a step closer, lowering my voice. "You knew Nick on an intimate level."

"No, I—" she tries to deny but falters under my steady gaze.

Loretta's revelation slams into place in my mind like the last piece of a murderous jigsaw puzzle. "You killed him," I breathe. "You killed them both! You were Nicholas's lover for decades. He promised you part of his fortune, then changed his will to leave everything to Enzo instead."

Stella's grandmotherly facade cracks, revealing something hard and bitter beneath. Okay, so some grandmothers are hard and bitter, but that's not the point.

She shakes her head my way. "Nicholas was going to expose our past financial... arrangements. Transactions that would have ruined my reputation, destroyed the respect I've built in this community."

"So you poisoned his eggnog with pentobarbital," I continue.

"Then when Enzo inherited everything that should have been yours, you did the same to him. The night he died, he was at the tree lot taking pictures with Loretta, and I bet that's where you slipped him the lethal mickey.

How were you getting your hands on that drug? "

Stella lifts her chin as if she was struck.

"You're right, Effie. I did it. And I did the world a favor.

Nicholas Bianchi was nothing but a lying, manipulative parasite, and the world is better without him and his greedy brother in it.

And as for the drugs, let's just say the black market has been alive and well for years—unlike the Bianchi brothers. "

"Why do I get the feeling you've killed before?"

Her eyes narrow and any pretense of warmth vanishes completely.

“Nicholas and I helped certain patients end their suffering over the years. We provided services for those who wanted a dignified exit—for a fee, of course. He handled the finances; I administered the drugs. Then suddenly he grows a conscience? Threatens to confess everything, and drag my name through the mud while he walks away clean with his ‘charitable donations’ reputation intact?”

She scoffs, and it sounds as cold as the December night outside.

“And Enzo? He was worse. Already planning to auction off the hospital satellite site that bears my family name to build luxury condos? Forty-two years of service to this community, and my legacy was going to be bulldozed to make room for overpriced housing. So yes, I eliminated the problem. Twice.”

Her expression shifts, calculation replacing confession. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I believe the North Pole is calling my name.”

Before I can react, Stella bolts like a reindeer on Red Bull, shoving past a server carrying a tray of eggnog (ironic, much?) and sending glasses flying in a festive explosion of dairy and nutmeg. And I bet not a drop of that is lactose-free.

“Stop! Christmas killer on the loose,” I shout, depositing Watson on the floor before taking off after her.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

Stella moves with surprising speed for a woman her age, dodging partygoers with the agility of someone who's spent decades navigating hospital hallways.

I chase after her with my heels skidding on the polished floor as I narrowly avoid colliding with a couple doing an enthusiastic fox trot to "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree."

"Sorry! Murder emergency," I call over my shoulder as I clip the edge of the silent auction table for the "Twelve Days of Christmas" themed spa package, sending miniature golden geese flying.

They skitter across the floor like feathered hockey pucks, taking down an unsuspecting Everett who tumbles into Noah, creating a domino effect of justice system officials sprawled beneath the mistletoe.

Stella cuts through the dance floor, using elderly couples as human shields. I follow, dodging between a pair of octogenarians attempting a tango and leaping over a fallen poinsettia like an Olympic hurdler.

"Someone stop that killer nurse," I yell, but most people just stare in confusion or assume we're part of some strange Christmas performance art. Worse yet, a flash mob of two.

Watson, refusing to be left out of the action, bounds after us, barking with enough enthusiasm to rival the "Jingle Bells" now blasting through the speakers. He weaves between legs and under tables, occasionally pausing to snatch an unattended cocktail weenie off a dropped appetizer plate.

Stella quickly sees that her escape route through the main doors is blocked by late arrivals and veers sharply toward the dessert tables.

She grabs a plate of gingerbread men and flings them at me like ninja throwing stars.

I duck and watch in horror as the cookie projectiles decapitate the snowman ice sculpture.

Its head rolls across the floor, knocking down several guests as efficient as a frozen bowling ball.

I'm gaining on her when Stella grabs a bowl of whipped cream and tosses it backward. The white cloud explodes in my face, temporarily blinding me with the sugary fluff.

I wipe my eyes clear just in time to see her heading for the exit, a true escape so tantalizingly close for the holiday homicide specialist.

But fate—and Lottie Lemon—have other plans.

Just as Stella makes her final dash for freedom, Lottie appears in the doorway, rolling an enormous gingerbread house on a cart—a masterpiece of spiced architecture that has taken us days to construct.

It's at least five feet tall, with intricate piping, candy windows, and a functioning doorbell that plays "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" when pressed.

"Special delivery for the—" Lottie begins before Stella crashes into the confectionery mansion at full speed.

The collision is spectacular—in the most disastrous way possible.

Gingerbread walls crumble like the Walls of Jericho, sending a cascade of candy shingles, gumdrop bushes, and peppermint fence posts raining down.

And Stella disappears under an avalanche of sugary debris, momentarily stunned by the impact.

With all the inertia going, I can't stop now and launch myself forward in a flying tackle that would make a football coach weep with pride.

We go down in a tangle of limbs and icing, rolling across the floor as an avalanche of powdered sugar snow falls over us.

I end up on top, pinning Stella beneath me as the fondant Santa that once adorned the gingerbread roof lands on my head like a festive crown.

"Got you," I pant, blowing a glob of royal icing off of my nose.

"Everybody freeze," Cooper shouts as he runs this way with his gun drawn and a look on his face that lets me know he can't quite figure out which way is up.

"She confessed," I shout up at him, still straddling the wriggling woman amid the gingerbread carnage. "She killed both Bianchi brothers! She poisoned them with pentobarbital because Nicholas was going to expose their euthanasia scheme and cut her out of his will!"

Cooper holsters his weapon and pulls out handcuffs instead. "Stella Martinelli, you're under arrest for the murders of Nicholas and Lorenzo Bianchi." His voice is steady despite the fact that I'm covered in icing and Stella has a gumdrop stuck to her forehead.

Security guards appear to help with the arrest, hauling a frosting-streaked Stella to her

feet while Cooper reads her rights.

She glares at me with the venom of someone who's just had decades of carefully laid plans—and a perfectly coordinated Christmas outfit—ruined by a woman wearing half a gingerbread house.

As they escort Stella out, Cooper pulls me in for a strong embrace—totally not caring about the frosting transferring to his impeccable tux. “Are you okay?” he asks, his eyes scanning my face for injuries rather than dessert debris.

“I am now,” I say, suddenly aware of the crowd watching us. I glance up and just my luck, spot a sprig of mistletoe dangling from the doorframe above. “Don’t look so puzzled,” I tell him, nodding upward. “You’re the detective around here. I’m sure you can figure it out.”

Cooper gives a wicked grin that makes my knees weaker than snow. “I believe I can,” he murmurs, leaning down to press his lips against mine in a kiss that tastes like sugar, spice, and the sweet victory of solving a double homicide without becoming the third victim.

As we break apart to applause from the onlookers, Watson trots up with what appears to be a gingerbread man’s leg in his mouth. He drops it at our feet like an offering and manages to look enormously pleased with himself in the process.

“Good boy, Watson.” Cooper gives him a quick scratch behind his ears. “I think you’ve earned yourself an extra Christmas treat this year.”

“We all have,” I agree, eyeing the remains of the gingerbread house scattered across the floor. “Although I think Lottie might ban me from the bakery for life after what I just did to her masterpiece.”

The crowd begins to disperse, returning to their champagne and auction bidding now that the excitement is over. Cooper's phone rings—no doubt the station calling about their high-profile Christmas killer.

The irony isn't lost on me. I came to this party worried about having to kill someone and instead, ended up stopping a killer.

Uncle Jimmy won't be all that thrilled that Loretta is still breathing, but that's a problem for another day—preferably one that doesn't involve any more homicidal medical professionals or death by dessert.

Maybe there's hope for a merry Christmas after all, assuming I can survive the holiday season without finding any more bodies under the tree.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

“Pass the baccalà before Aunt Cat mistakes it for a weapon,” Niki calls from across the table, eyeing our aunt who’s gesturing so wildly with her fork that the poor cod might get airborne.

“That was a simple misunderstanding,” Aunt Cat protests, finally setting down her fork. “How was I supposed to know Carlotta’s hairspray was flammable?”

“Everything about Carlotta is flammable,” Uncle Jimmy drawls, raising his wine glass in a mock toast to Carlotta, who responds with a gesture that definitely doesn’t belong at a Christmas dinner table.

My mother’s house in Grimstone Heights looks like Christmas and Italy had a collision at approximately ninety miles per hour, with no survivors.

Every surface is covered with either doilies, Capodimonte figurines of shepherds in various poses of ceramic surprise, and a whole lot of Christmas decorations that have been in the family since before electricity was invented.

The tree in the corner drips with tinsel and ornaments and has so many lights that I’m pretty sure it’s visible all the way to Honey Hollow.

The dining room table stretches to its absolute limits under the weight of the Feast of the Seven Fishes, the traditional Italian Christmas Eve extravaganza that my mother prepares with the precision of a military operation.

Platters of fried smelts, stuffed calamari, octopus salad, shrimp scampi, clams casino, mussels marinara, and the aforementioned baccalà cover every inch of tablecloth not

occupied by wine glasses, bread baskets, or arguing relatives.

The smell of garlic, olive oil, and seafood permeates the air so thoroughly that I'll probably still be detecting notes of anchovy in my hair three shampoos from now.

The sound of multiple conversations in varying degrees of volume creates a symphony of Italian-American holiday cheer that's simultaneously heartwarming and headache-inducing all at once.

And yet, somehow, we've achieved the Christmas miracle of gathering both the Canelli and Lazzari families around one table without a single gunshot. So far.

"I still can't believe you invited both families," I whisper to my mother, who's busy refilling wine glasses as if alcohol poisoning is the only thing that could prevent a mob war at her dining table. And she might be right.

"Family is family." She shrugs, topping off my glass with enough Chianti to drown my inhibitions. "Besides, your father and Santino were friends before all this turf war nonsense."

I glance down the table where my father, Big Tom, is engaged in animated conversation with Cooper's father, Scary Santino. They're discussing cement versus concrete with the passion most people reserve for religion or politics.

"It's not the material, it's the application," my father insists, hands gesturing expansively.

"The aggregate makes all the difference," Santino counters, his infamous scar crinkling as he smiles.

Next to them, Luke Lazzari—the infamous rival crime boss to my uncle's empire—is

somehow engaged in what appears to be a civil discussion with Jimmy “The Candy Man” Canelli about the merits of different cannoli fillings.

If the FBI could see this, they’d think they’d stumbled into an alternate universe. Come to think of it, so do I.

“Ricotta with chocolate chips, now that’s traditional,” Uncle Jimmy argues, pointing his fork for emphasis.

“Yeah, but custard with a hint of limoncello is more sophisticated,” Luke rebuts, looking more like someone’s kindly grandfather than a man who allegedly once had someone concrete-shoed for stealing his parking spot.

Cooper slides into the chair beside me, his warmth a welcome presence against the chaos. His hand finds mine under the table, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Your family gatherings make the precinct’s drunk tank on New Year’s Eve look organized,” he murmurs into my ear.

“Just wait until Aunt Cat starts with the Christmas carols,” I warn him. “Last year she did ‘Santa Baby’ as a dramatic interpretation. Three neighbors called the police thinking someone was being murdered.”

Cooper chuckles. “I like your family.”

“That might be a sign of early-onset dementia,” I reply, but I can’t help smiling back at him.

Watson snoozes beneath the Christmas tree as his golden fur collects fallen tinsel.

A mountain of presents awaits us, wrapped in paper ranging from tastefully elegant

(my sister Serafina's contributions) to looks-like-it-was-wrapped-by-raccoons-on-a-bender (definitely Nico's handiwork). And I can't wait to get to them all.

"Smart dog," Cooper observes, following my gaze. "Strategic position."

"He's been taking lessons from Nona Jo." I nod toward my grandmother, who has positioned herself at the head of the table where she can simultaneously monitor all conversations and have first access to every dish.

As if summoned by our attention, Nona Jo taps her glass with a spoon, the chiming sound somehow cutting through the dozen simultaneous conversations like a hot knife through burrata.

"Attenzione!" she commands, rising to her impressive height of four-foot-eleven. "I would like to propose a toast."

The table quiets, all eyes turning toward the matriarch who, despite her diminutive stature, commands respect in a way that military generals would envy.

Her black dress with its traditional lace collar stands in sharp contrast to her snow-white hair, styled in the same beehive she's worn since the Kennedy administration.

She raises her glass of vino and the deep red liquid catches the light from the chandelier overhead.

"To Effie and Cupertino," she begins, using Cooper's given name with the satisfaction of someone who knows it makes him squirm. "Two young people who have brought our families together at last."

"Through food, not firearms," my brother Nico calls out, earning him an elbow from Serafina.

“May the new year bring health, happiness, and many, many Italian babies,” Nona Jo continues, while for reasons unknown forgetting all about the holiday at hand. “At least five, I think. Start with twins to be efficient.”

Cooper waggles his brows my way. “Play your cards right and by this time next year, we could be drowning in triplets.”

“Now that sounds like a threat.”

“To Cooper and Effie!” Nona Jo concludes, raising her glass higher. “Merry Christmas to one and all!”

“Salute!” roars the table in unison, glasses clinking in a chaotic crash of crystal.

Everyone drinks deeply, then dives back into the feast with a renewed enthusiasm. The conversations resume at full volume, plates are passed, wine is spilled and mopped up with a little good-natured cursing, and the Christmas Eve celebration continues its cheerful descent into controlled chaos.

Hours later, after the last mussel has been consumed and enough wine has flowed to float a small battleship, we move to the dessert phase. Platters of struffoli dripping with honey, crisp pizzelle, rich cannoli, and my mother’s famous panettone appear as if conjured by Christmas magic.

“I can’t eat another bite,” I groan, even as I reach for another cannoli.

“That’s what you said after the fifth fish course,” Cooper points out, helping himself to a slice of panettone.

“It’s different,” I explain through a mouthful of sweet ricotta. “There’s a separate stomach for dessert. It’s science.”

After dessert come the presents—a free-for-all that resembles a contact sport more than it ever does a gift exchange. Paper flies, ribbons are weaponized, and Watson prances around collecting discarded bows on his collar until he resembles a canine Christmas decoration.

In the festive mayhem, I spot Uncle Jimmy slipping away toward the kitchen.

Perfect timing.

“Be right back,” I tell Cooper, who’s busy examining a hand-knitted sweater from my mother with admirable enthusiasm considering it features a portrait of Watson wearing a Santa hat.

I follow Uncle Jimmy into the kitchen, catching him as he’s refilling his wine glass once again.

“Hey, Uncle Jimmy,” I say with a sweet wave before my mood takes an abrupt U-turn. “Quick question—why in the world would you want Loretta Spaghetti on my hit list?”

He takes a leisurely sip of wine before answering. “I knew you wouldn’t pull the trigger, and I figured this might put me on her radar.” He shrugs with the confidence of a man who’s never questioned his own brilliance. “I think she’s cute.”

I suck in a quick breath.

My uncle, the notorious crime boss with a body count higher than my credit score, has a crush on Cooper’s sister? It’s like discovering Darth Vader has a thing for Princess Leia, except creepier and with more hair product involved.

“You put a hit out... as a flirting technique?”

“It worked, didn’t it?” He nods toward the doorway where Loretta has appeared, as if summoned by some cosmic force or possibly the scent of criminality mixed with cologne. And money. Lots and lots of money.

“ Jimmy ,” she purrs, sauntering into the kitchen in a dress so tight it defies both physics and good taste. “There you are. I was looking for something—strong.” The way she says “strong” makes it clear she’s not talking about the liquor selection.

“I can help with that,” Uncle Jimmy responds with a smirk that makes me want to douse my eyes with hand sanitizer.

Loretta giggles like a teenager discovering boy bands for the first time, and before I can process what’s happening, they’re retreating to a dark corner. And just like that, her hands are already wandering toward places that will give me nightmares until next Christmas.

“I guess Christmas really is a time for miracles,” I muse to myself, watching the most unlikely couple since Beauty and the Beast—except in this case, both parties are arguably beasts.

Cooper’s arms wrap around me from behind, his chin resting on my shoulder. “What’s the miracle?” he asks.

“Oh, that our families have exchanged gifts instead of bullets,” I reply, choosing to leave Loretta’s latest conquest out of the equation for now—and in perpetuity if I can help it. Some images are too disturbing to share, even with someone who investigates homicides for a living.

“Speaking of exchanging things,” Cooper murmurs, his voice dropping to a register that sends pleasant shivers down my spine. “Want to head back to your place and unwrap a few more gifts?”

“Is that a euphemism, Detective Knox?” I ask, casually strolling him back into the living room lest a homicide get in the way of that good time I think he just promised.

“That depends,” he replies as a smile curves on his lips. “Is it working?”

“Let me think,” I tap my temple as I pretend to ponder. “Leave this circus of food, family, and potential felonies to be alone with you? I think I can be persuaded.”

We say our goodbyes, collect Watson from beneath the tree where he’s drowsily guarding his new bone, and slip out into the cold December night.

The sky above is clear and the stars glitter like diamonds against black velvet. Snow crunches beneath our feet as we make our way to Cooper’s truck with Watson prancing ahead and leaving paw prints that look like nature’s Christmas decorations—and maybe a trail of yellow snow.

Cooper pulls me close before we reach the vehicle and our breath forms little cute clouds in the frosty air.

“Merry Christmas, Effie,” he says softly before his lips find mine in a kiss that warms me despite the winter chill.

We pull apart and I give his ribs a little tweak.

“Merry Christmas, Hot Stuff.” I’m about to make an indecent proposal when something in the sky catches my eye.

A moving light, too fast for a plane, streaks across the starry backdrop.

“What in the world?” I point upward, stunned. “Is that a shooting star?”

Cooper follows my gaze with his arm tightening around my waist. “Or Santa’s sleigh,” he suggests with a smile.

“Flying away from my family gathering as fast as possible? Smart man,” I quip. “I guess even immortal magical beings have their limits.”

The light disappears beyond the horizon, leaving only the quiet beauty of the winter night around us. I lean into Cooper’s warmth, thinking about the true gifts in my life—this man, our dog, and somehow, miraculously, the chaotic blend of both our families without bloodshed. For now.

Watson barks suddenly, breaking the spell of the moment with his tail wagging as he stares up at the roof of my parents’ house.

“What is it, boy?” Cooper asks, following the dog’s gaze.

We look up just in time to see a shadow move across the roofline—too large to be a cat, too nimble to be a burglar. For just a moment, I could swear I see the silhouette of what appears to be...

No. It couldn’t be. Could it?

In a town where hitmen celebrate Christmas with cops and rival crime families share cannoli recipes, perhaps anything is possible—even a little true holiday magic.

“Ho, ho, ho,” a voice chimes from the sky. “Merry Christmas to all—and to all a good night!”

Cooper and I exchange a look.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say. “I think there’s still time to get on the naughty list.”

Cooper whisks us away and we land on that list in no time.

Ho, ho, ho, indeed.

Merry Christmas!

Thank you so much for reading! C

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:49 pm

FROM THE KITCHEN OF EFFIE CANELLI

Struffoli (Italian Donut Holes)

Hey there! It's me, Effie Canelli. Have I got a holiday treat for you!

When I was growing up, my mother made these on the morning of every holiday or birthday.

And I couldn't wait to hop out of bed and have an all-you-can-eat buffet with these hot, honeyed donut holes.

They're pretty easy to make and the mess is worth the effort.

So, what are you waiting for? Get baking!

Ingredients :

For the dough :

2 cups all-purpose flour

1/4 cup granulated sugar

1/2 teaspoon baking powder

1/4 teaspoon salt

2 large eggs

2 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 tablespoon limoncello or orange juice (optional)

Zest of 1 lemon (optional)

For frying :

Vegetable oil (for frying)

For the syrup :

1/2 cup honey

1/4 cup sugar

1 tablespoon water

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

For decoration :

Colored sprinkles or nonpareils

Chopped candied orange peel (optional)

Instructions :

Make the Dough :

In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt.

Add the eggs, softened butter, vanilla extract, and limoncello or orange juice (if using), and lemon zest. Mix together until a dough begins to form.

Knead the dough on a lightly floured surface for about 5 minutes until smooth. If the dough is too sticky, add a little more flour.

Wrap the dough in plastic wrap and let it rest for about 30 minutes.

Shape the Struffoli :

After the dough has rested, divide it into small portions.

Roll each portion into a long rope, about 1/2-inch thick.

Cut the ropes into small pieces, about 1/2-inch long, to form little bite-sized balls.

Fry the Struffoli :

Heat vegetable oil in a large, deep-frying pan or pot to 350°F (175°C).

Fry the dough pieces in batches, being careful not to overcrowd the pan. Fry for about 2-3 minutes, or until golden brown and crispy.

Remove the fried dough with a slotted spoon and place them on paper towels to drain excess oil.

Make the Syrup :

In a small saucepan, combine the honey, sugar, and water. Heat over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the sugar has dissolved and the syrup is hot.

Remove from heat and stir in the vanilla extract.

Assemble the Struffoli :

In a large mixing bowl, gently toss the fried dough balls with the warm honey syrup until fully coated.

Transfer the struffoli to a serving platter and shape them into a mound or wreath shape.

Decorate :

Sprinkle the struffoli with colored sprinkles or nonpareils and chopped candied orange peel (if using) for a festive touch.

Let it Set :

Let the struffoli sit for about 30 minutes to allow the syrup to harden slightly.

Serve :

Serve the struffoli at room temperature. They will keep for several days in an airtight container.

Enjoy this traditional Italian Christmas treat! It's crispy, sweet, and full of holiday cheer.

Merry Christmas from Honey Hollow!